



Paintings on the Walls of the Stone Chamber at the Lembak City Site:

Reflections on the Relationship between Religion and Culture in the Megalithic Society of Pasemah, South Sumatra

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Abstract. The Pasemah megalithic site in South Sumatra is known for its diverse prehistoric stone heritage, including menhirs, menhir groups, tetraliths, dolmens, stone statues, stone chambers, and stone rings, etc. One of the unique features of this site is the paintings on the walls of the stone chambers, which are only found in the Pasemah area in Indonesia. The paintings depict human and animal figures that are rich in symbolic meaning. Using an archaeological approach that combines cultural and religious contexts, this study reveals the meaning behind these paintings. The paintings on the walls of the stone chambers are believed to be provisions for the spirits' journey to their final resting place, created as a tribute to deceased ancestors or leaders. In addition to serving as grave ornaments, these paintings reflect the belief system and religious practices of the Pasemah megalithic community, particularly their belief in life after death. The paintings are a medium of spiritual expression as well as a means of communication with the supernatural world. Thus, this art form affirms the important role of art as a bridge between religion and culture, while also adding to our understanding of the social and spiritual life of the Pasemah megalithic community in South Sumatra.

Keywords: Painting, Stone Chamber, Pasemah, Megalithic, Religion, Symbol, South Sumatra

1 Introduction

The Pasemah area is a plateau located in the interior of South Sumatra, precisely on the slopes of Mount Dempo (3,150 m above sea level) between the Barisan Mountains. These megalithic remains are spread across the southeastern slopes of Mount Dempo to the foot of the cone of Mount Dempo. Various forms of megalithic remains include stone tombs which are stone chambers found underground, stone statues, dolmens, menhirs, tetraliths, stone mortars or mortars, metal artifacts, beads, bronze statues, and so on. Archaeological remains with these forms are known as Megalithic cultural remains that make structures and buildings from large stones for specific purposes. This megalithic culture developed rapidly on the island of Sumatra and even in several regions in Indonesia such as Bali, South Sulawesi, Sumba Island, East Nusa Tenggara, Maluku almost throughout the archipelago. In previous research, megalithic remains in the Pasemah plateau have been reported by Ullman 1850, Tombrink 1870, Engerhard 1891, Westenenk 1922 dan Hoven 1927, Eerde 1929, Hoop 1935, zz(1); Tanudirjo, n.d.1993; Sukendar Haris 1990). (3).

A semiotic study of the new Pasemah statues was reported by Rr. Triwurjani in 2018 (Triwurjani 2018). Discussions by researchers during the colonial period, prior to the 1920s, focused on the periodicity of these megalithic remains, which originated from the Hindu period. It was only after 1929 that further developments confirmed that these remains belonged to megalithic culture. The uniqueness of the megalithic remains in Pasemah lies in the paintings on the walls of the stone chambers. These chambers have rooms and walls, doors, and roofs composed of slabs. The paintings on the stone walls depict various stylized images of human figures, flora, and fauna, often symbolically. These images are painted in various colors, including yellow, red, white, and black, derived from rock minerals. There is certainly a purpose to these depictions, their shape and placement, and the colors chosen and why they were applied to the stone walls. This is a very interesting topic to study, especially the relationship between religion and culture that influenced burial practices at that time.

The treatment of the bodies of deceased people reflects the social status of the buried body and also the social organization system of the community that supports it. ((1), (5)Ardike, et. al 2017). According to Binford, there are three aspects that can be learned from this burial system, including the shape of the grave, differences in grave equipment and grave provisions. ((6)Binford, 1972, pp 20-32).

The paintings on the walls of the stone chamber depict the forms of human figures, animals, flora which are presented in symbols such as buffaloes which are not depicted as a whole but only the horns or eyes and on the face only the nose, likewise with the

form of human figures only the head is depicted, or with a disproportionate size. ((7)Hoop, 1932; (8)T(9); (10), (11).



Fig. 1. Pasemah Plateau, Lahat Regency, South Sumatra Province. Source: Google Maps. 2025 10-10 2025

2 Method

This study is a qualitative study using descriptive analytical methods. The surviving stone tomb wall paintings are still visible. Some parts have been worn away, possibly due to age, weather, or climate. Many of the human figures, fauna, and flora have been worn away, making them difficult to see clearly. However, some are still clearly visible despite their wear. Furthermore, documentation from previous research can still be seen in photographs. and photographs and images in publications. Thus, the form of these images can still be largely traced for observation in research.

3 Results And Discussion

Not all stone chambers have paintings on their walls. Therefore, the data used here are from those that do, particularly those in the Kota Raya Lembak site complex. Of the seven stone chambers found there, four have paintings. The data used in this study are paintings found on the walls of stone tombs that are still visible, as many of the paintings are worn and cannot be clearly seen. This is due to internal and external factors affecting the condition of the paintings. Internal factors, such as environmental conditions, weather, and prolonged exposure to the ground, cause the colors of the paintings

to wear and fade, making them difficult to recognize. External factors include vandalism. Some surviving images used in this study are paintings in the Batuu tomb complex at the Kota Raya Lembak site in Lahat Regency, South Sumatra Province. Stone tomb paintings are also found at the Tegur Wangi site, Talang Kacepol site, and Tanjung Ara site in Pagar Alam Municipality, South Sumatra.

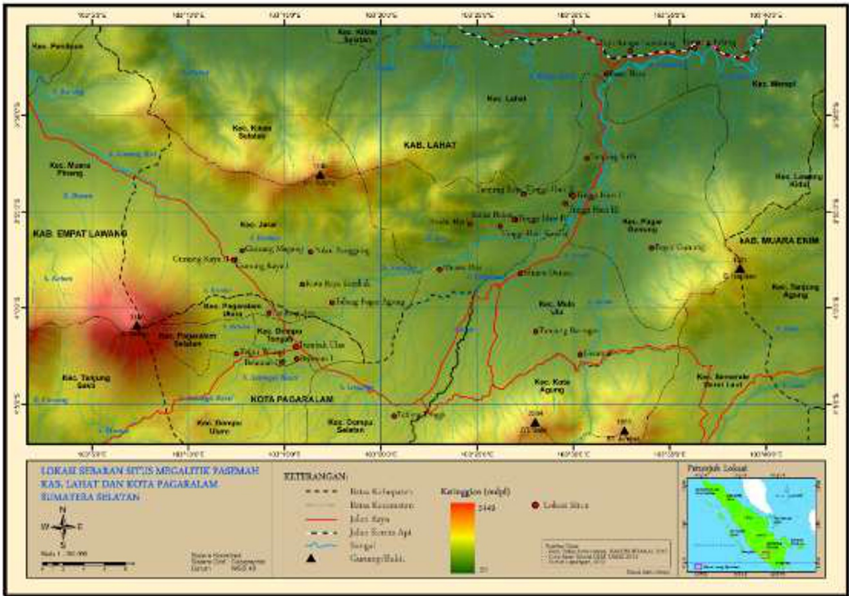


Fig. 2. Distribution of sites in Pasemah, South Sumatra (source: Rr. Triwujani 2015)

Gravestone paintings are also found at the Tegur Wangi site, the Talang Kacepol site, and the Tanjung Ara site in Pagar Alam City, South Sumatra. Therefore, only the gravestone paintings found in the Kota Raya Lembak site complex were taken as research samples. Even then, not all of the seven stone chambers contained paintings, as only four of them had paintings. This suggests a difference between those buried in stone chambers with paintings on their walls and those buried in stone chambers without. Certainly, only certain individuals and figures received honor or privilege in this burial ritual, as this ritual also sought blessings from the deceased, who were respected figures and could bring safety, such as protection from natural disasters and a successful harvest.

3.1 Paintings in Stone Chambers as Religious Expressions

The walls of the stone tombs that form the stone chambers are decorated with figurative and abstract paintings that suggest symbols. The stone chambers vary in size, but typically measure 1.5 x 2 x 1.5 m (length x width x height). Some motifs that are still

clearly visible include human figures, animals such as buffalo and dragons, and abstract geometric or plant patterns. Human figures are depicted complete with limbs, or the head and a small portion of the upper chest, but with hands, although disproportionate, but it is clear that the painting represents a specific figure. Therefore, these images point to a specific symbol, for example, some parts of a figure are clearly depicted, such as a frightening human face, horns, eyes, etc. In addition to human and animal motifs, there are also floral motifs. The buffalo decorative motif depicts large, artistically shaped horns, reminiscent of buffaloes and a certain power or social status. Likewise with other motifs, dragons and birds are not depicted in their entirety, but only the parts that are considered important, namely the face, eyes, flames, claws and tail.

Nearly all the images are colored in red, white, yellow, and black. The colors are derived from the Occer and other types of rock thought to originate from the surrounding area. These colors are characteristic of the Pasemah paintings. Three-dimensional (3D) photographs show each stone slab that makes up the stone structure decorated. However, the results are not entirely satisfactory because the 3D paintings are worn due to age and internal and external factors ((12)Kawano, Triwurjani, 2024). The results of documentation conducted by the National Archaeological Research Center in the 1980s by Haris Sukendar, it seems that through photographs it is still more visible, can complement the results of 3D photography.

Religious expression in the art of painting with stone as a medium, where humans and animals are often depicted together, such as the body resembling a human figure, but the head has horns, like the horns of a buffalo. This type of art was often used by societies that were highly dependent on nature and did not yet know writing, often referred to as prehistoric art. ((13). This religious art developed during the megalithic period in Asemah as a form of ritual, honoring ancestors, and continued to develop into paintings in such a way as to preserve and accompany the journey of departed spirits so that they would arrive safely at their destination. This religious art developed during the megalithic period in Pasemah. Art was offered as an expression of respect for the spirits of those considered to have high status, so that they were honored by having their graves decorated with 'beautiful' paintings on the walls as provisions for their journey. This respect for ancestral spirits continues to be practiced and even still exists today, albeit in different forms. The religious ritual performed by painting on the walls of stone tombs as companions on the journey of the spirit is a death ritual.

Table 1. Some of wall paintings of stone tombs in Kota Raya Lembak, Jarai, Lahat, South Sumatra

Num.	Location	Form	Information	Technic
1.	Chambers stone number 1	-Bird -Tendrils -Buffalo -Human figure -Geometric pattern		Brush Colors: red, white, yellow, black



bird



Antropomorfik

(source:
Triwurjani, 2018)

2.	Chamber number 2	stone	-Geometric -Tendrils	Only two images remain visible. They feature geometric and vine patterns. Their exact shape is unknown. The remaining walls are simply worn, indiscernible images.	Brush Colors: red, white, yellow, black
					
	geometric				
					
	geometric				
	(source: Triwurjani, 2018)				
3.	Chambers number 3	stone	-Tendrils -Human figure carrying a drum -Human figure	Two human-like figures carry drums. The figures are depicted with tails, large, bulging eyes on their backs and faces, and fangs.	Brush Colors: red, white, yellow, black
					
	Tendrils				
					
	Human figure				
					
	Human figure				
	(source: Triwurjani, 2018)				

4.	Chambers number 7	Stone	-Dragon	The dragon is opening its mouth, its eyes are round and big.	Brush Colors: red, white, yel- low, black
					
	(source: Triwurjani, 2018)				

3.2 Tomb Building

The architecture of stone graves is an arrangement of stones made from large slabs which are deliberately trimmed, and arranged in such a way as to form a plane and are covered, and in certain parts there are stones as support or reinforcement made from other, smaller stones. The painting is painted on pieces of monolith stone in a way that has been done while the composition is taking place. All are depicted in large pieces of stone after trimming, which are arranged in such a way as what we know as stone chambers or stone tombs.



Fig. 3. Example of a stone chamber at Tegurwangi. Source: Private, Triwurjani, 2017.

3.3 The Relationship Between Religion and Burial Procedures

The analysis of the shape and location of the rock paintings on the graves provides evidence of a relationship between religion and humans and nature in the Pasemah highlands of South Sumatra. The creation of underground stone chambers using monoliths indirectly continues the ways in which humans utilize the environment in caves as a form of art. At the time of these megalithic structures, society was already familiar with metal objects. This period is also known as the Polymetallic Period, where society already possessed certain skills in specialized areas, such as blacksmithing, metalworking, and pottery making. Etc. ((14)Soejono, 2008:). This period was also known as the

Megalithic Age, where the people who supported this culture believed in an afterlife. The spirits of the deceased needed to be provided with provisions for their journey to their resting place in sacred places, highlands, mountains, or other places.etc. ((15)(14)Soeyono, 2008), (16)Frazer 2008)). The souls of the deceased require a safe journey to reach the afterlife. The souls are believed to reside in high places, mountain-tops, or secluded areas, often constructed underground, like tombs or stone chambers in Pasemah. Therefore, the souls' journey needs to be protected and ensured safely, thus creating paintings that accompany the souls' journey. Expressions of megalithic beliefs suggest that nature possesses supernatural powers; it can save human souls from various obstacles that could hinder their journey. Therefore, paintings such as human figures, fauna, and flora, as well as decorations with geometric motifs, represent elements of the natural environment that are considered to have power, expressed in the paintings. For example, depictions of human figures with heads decorated with circles and faces depicted with bulging eyes that give a frightening impression are depictions of the spirits themselves as a tribute to ancestors or deceased figures.

Meanwhile, the animal symbols of birds (owls) as birds that are active in the dark night with sharp eyes, and buffaloes symbolized by horns, and dragons depicted with eyes and tongues of 'fire' indicate the supernatural power of nature that is used to accompany the journey in and to the spirit realm. Flora are depicted with tendrils as vines up to the sky or to heaven. Likewise, geometric shapes as symbols of forms found in nature, such as curved, round, lines, combinations of diagonal, straight and parallel lines, etc. which are all forms of dependence and recognition of nature. (17)Robb, 2020: 454-480)

The burial ritual involves the use of large stones arranged in a specific way, the walls decorated with specific colors, and the top covered with a large stone slab and covered with soil. Observations indicate that not all stone chambers have paintings. This also symbolizes that only certain individuals were buried in stone tombs with decorated walls. The person buried there was an important and special figure, possibly a leader or tribal chieftain at the time. This ritual of the journey of the soul effects the close relationship between humans, nature, and their ancestors.

In addition to natural elements such as human figures, flora and fauna used, the colors involved in the painting also come from natural elements such as minerals, ocer (a red iron-containing substance) which produces only red, yellow, black, white with variations of brown and gray. It is not yet known whether there are other colors used from other minerals, or whether these colors are preferred and can indirectly become the characteristic of the color patterns of the Pasemah stone grave paintings.

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Besides natural elements, there are also drums depicted in stone tombs. The drums are depicted being held by two human figures. Like other forms of painting, the drums are also symbolic: status symbols, communication symbols, and connections with the

outside world. Known as sacred objects, the drums are made of bronze and originate from the Dongson culture of northern Vietnam. ((18)Heekeren, 1958). The nekara is originally a bronze percussion instrument, widely distributed in Southeast Asia. A researcher named Heger has classified the distribution of nekara in Southeast Asia, and the nekara that entered Indonesia is the Heger I type, where the striking surface and the bottom/foot have more or less the same size. Uniquely, the depiction of nekara in paintings and on reliefs found on stone monoliths of stone tombs in Air Puar and on Selayar Hill, Tegawangi Pagar Alam site, also shows the Heger I type).

The nekara is a percussion instrument made of bronze, widely found in Southeast Asia. A researcher named Heger has classified the distribution of nekara in Southeast Asia, and the nekara that entered Indonesia are Heger I type, where the striking surface and the base/foot are approximately the same size. Uniquely, depictions of nekara in paintings and reliefs found on stone monoliths in Air Puar and on Selayar Hill at the Tegawangi Pagar Alam site also indicate Heger I type. The presence of nekara images on stone tomb walls certainly indicates that the person buried there was someone special or important, considering that nekara are sacred objects, ceremonial instruments, and not just anyone can play them; only the leader of the ceremony or a designated person can play them. ((1); (14)Soejono, 2008).

Abstract paintings and drum paintings serve as ritual media and artistic expressions of respect for ancestors, indirectly marking or identifying their existence, such as where their ancestors came from or who they are. The drum, as a ceremonial instrument, is considered sacred, and its origins lie in the Dongson culture, brought by Austronesian speakers. The drum also demonstrates a connection with Austronesian-speaking peoples. The drum originates from the Dongson culture, which originated in Vietnam and Vietnam.

Besides being an artistic expression, the stone chamber paintings also serve as a medium for cross-generational communication. The symbols depicted there reflect the Pasemah people's worldview regarding the existence of ancestors as guardians of the balance between the human and spirit worlds. This reverence is expressed through visually depicted rituals, allowing each painting to play a role as part of a complex cultural narrative. This analysis provides insight into how prehistoric art served as a tool for maintaining cultural identity and facilitating social relations within communities.

The limited observational data available at the Pasemah site also demonstrates the importance of using modern technology for preservation and analysis. Techniques such as multispectral imaging, 3D laser scanning, and digital image processing can be used to identify elements that are worn or invisible to the naked eye. These approaches can not only reveal eroded layers of painting but also aid in the documentation and virtual reconstruction process that can be used for further research. Using these technologies, researchers can fill in information gaps caused by physical damage without altering or destroying the original artifacts.

4 Conclusion

Ultimately, the fragmented physical condition of the paintings demonstrates the need for a multidisciplinary approach to the study and preservation of this site. Furthermore, the combination of archaeology, art, technology, and conservation allows for a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the condition of the Pasemah site. Furthermore, involving local communities in preservation efforts can raise awareness of the importance of this cultural heritage as part of their identity. Thus, although the existing images represent a limited sample of the totality of paintings that once existed, their analysis still makes a significant contribution to understanding the relationship between religion and culture in the Pasemah community at that time.

The Pasemah rock paintings provide a clear picture of the close relationship between religion and culture in ancient societies. Nature was not only a source of life but also a haven for ancestral spirits and supernatural powers. The depictions of flora, fauna, and other natural elements demonstrate that the Pasemah people possessed a profound understanding of the cycle of life and death. Reverence for ancestors and belief in an afterlife were also held by megalithic societies.

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