

The UNPAR Department of Philosophy's Departmental study days at the devotional shrine of Nagara Padang, village of Rawabogo, Ciwidey, West Bandung

by Prof.Dr Wim van Binsbergen, Erasmus University Rotterdam, May 2010

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As part of their programme on aspects of Indonesian society, culture and spirituality, around 1st May, 2010, some 40 students of the Department of Philosophy, Universitas Parahyangan (Catholic University) Bandung, accompanied by nearly a dozen members of staff, spend a number of days at the village of Rawabogo, some 50 km South West of the city of Bandung. I know the site, having visited it intensively in 2007, at the beginning of the local fieldwork of my PhD candidate Stephanus Djunatan, M.A., one of the members of staff involved. Three years later I came back to Bandung in order to supervise the finalisation of the PhD thesis. Since my trip coincided with the study days, I took the opportunity of renewing my acquaintance with the village and its shrine, and see the students and staff in action. The following reflection has been written at the staff's request.



Fig. 1. The surroundings of Rawabogo village

While equipped with all such common yet breath-taking features as the surrounding mountainous landscape and terraced wet paddy fields, and the less common feature of a recently planted pine forest, the truly distinguishing feature¹ of Rawabogo is that it is the site of an extensive devotional shrine up in the mountains (c. 1600 m above sea level). The shrine's name is Nagara Padang – explained by the guardians, by scholars and by others in various ingenious and mystical ways, but probably with the original

¹ There are indications that the mountain shrine of Nagara Padang is not unique in Sunda culture but answers to a more general regional type, in which even transregional, possibly transcontinental megalithic themes resonate, but such an argument would require much further library research before it can be made conclusively. Meanwhile my suggestion is prompted by the following titles: Pleyte, C.M., 1905, 'Van den goenoeng Moenara', in: *Soendasche schetsen*, Pleyte, C.M., C. Kolff and Co, Bandoeng, pp 39-52; Pleyte, C.M., 1905, 'Het heiligdom te Godog', in: *Soendasche schetsen*, Pleyte, C.M., C. Kolff and Co, Bandoeng, pp 86-98; de Quant, A., 1899, 'Kosala, de heilige plaats der Badoej's van Karang', *Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 41, 588-590; Roxas-Lim, A., 1983, 'Caves and Bathing Places in Java as Evidence of Cultural Accomodation', *Asian Studies*, 21, 107-144, plates; van Tricht, B., 1932, 'Verdere mededeelingen aangaande de Badoejs en de steencultuur in West- Java', *Djawa*, 12, 176-185.

meaning, in the Sunda language of West Java,² of ‘Realm (*Nagara*) of Splendour (*Padang*)’, or ‘Realm of Rice-eating’ (as if it is some mythical Land of Cocaygne, of unending abundance). The shrine’s six guardians live down in the valley. The two principal ones (father and son) are informal community leaders in Rawabogo, where their personal dwellings also accommodate pilgrims who come to the shrine. The shrine itself belongs to an area gazetted as a National Park, and its official entrance gate can only be passed during office hours. Although pilgrims have been known to be taken up in their ordinary clothing, the ideal outfit for the pilgrim is a uniform, consisting of a loosely fitting black costume and a variegated grey headscarf (for the men), or a white top, dark *sarong* wrapper or trousers, and a variegated brown headscarf (for the women). Apparently the existence of the shrine has given rise to an entire industry dedicated to the renting and cleaning of such uniforms. The overall signature of the shrine’s cult is Islamic, and formal (if sometimes garbled) Islamic prayers and songs mark the beginning, the various successive stages, and the end, of the pilgrimage; appropriately also, the only building to be found at the shrine, just inside the entrance gate, is a small mosque.



Fig. 2. Duly uniformed students and staff listen to Islamic songs before setting out on the pilgrimage

Meanwhile, as in many forms of Indonesian popular religion, the devotional idiom proffered here is internally layered, and implicit Hindu, Buddhist, and local Sunda (apparently also including megalithic)³ elements may be identified in addition to the Islamic ones. In fact, the format and purpose of the shrine is perhaps best characterised by saying that it is a natural counterpart of Borobudur. The latter

² Hardjadibrata, R.R., 2003, *Sundanese English dictionary: Based on Soendanees-Nederlands woordenboek by F.S. Eringa*, Jakarta: Pustaka Jaya; Rigg, Jonathan, 2009, *A dictionary of the Sunda language of Java*, Bandung: Kiblat Buku Utama, first published 1862.

³ In 2010, a small *menhir* (slender elongated rock which human hands have placed in an upright position) could be found at the top plateau of the shrine, in front of the place where the sacrifices had been laid out in anticipation of the *slamatan* communal meal. As a large number of photographs indicate, this rock had not been there in 2007. An extensive literature deals with the megalithic aspects of Indonesian, and especially West Javanese, cultures, which are thus *potentially* implicated in what some comparative ethnologists, and archaeologists, have considered to be a near-global, seaborne network of megalithic cultural forms encompassing the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, parts of the Eastern Pacific, the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea, the Baltic Sea, etc.

devotional shrine in Central Java, with its dazzlingly lavish decoration in the form of Buddhist sculpture, is not in the first place a depiction of the Buddha's life but especially a protracted pious lesson, in sculpture, portraying a Buddhist pilgrim's progress through the phases of life and knowledge, towards ultimate illumination. Distantly comparable is procession through the Stations of the Cross, as depicted on the interior walls of most Roman Catholic Churches, both in commemoration of the Passion of Christ, and as devotional inspiration for the individual worshipper. At Nagara Padang, there are virtually no images shaped by human hands. Instead, salient aspects of the natural rocky landscape – a narrow passage, a set of cliffs, a steep ascent, a jutting rock etc., – have been named and thus made the objects of human pious projections; subsequently they have been joined into a coherent mental map of the spiritual realm of Nagara Padang.⁴



Fig. 3a-b. The Borobudur devotional shrine in Central Java



Fig. 4a-b. The menhir at the top of Nagara Padang

⁴ Such naming is not unique to Nagara Padang. On several occasions I have visited underground limestone caves of Belgium, the largest of which (e.g. at Han and Remouchamps) have been opened to the public under the tutelage of local guardians – mere civil servants without any spiritual connotations. While these guardians conduct the visitors through the darkness, from room to room, they call out the names they have given to the natural formations of stalactite and stalagmite (the result of thousands of years of dripping and evaporation of drops of water in which a small quantity of limestone is dissolved, leaving a microscopic sediment): ‘Look, ladies and gentlemen, here we see a ham, and there is the image of the Madonna’, etc.



Fig. 5a-b. Students trying on the uniforms



Fig. 6. Pilgrims (students, staff and villagers) setting out for the shrine, led by the junior guardian (front right)

At Nagara Padang, four overall stages may be distinguished in the pilgrim's progress:⁵

1. an Initial Phase, in which a sacred spring and the entrance gate convey a time-honoured and almost universal symbolism of birth and rebirth
2. the Phase of Childhood, bringing out such aspects of human growth in infancy and adolescence as are articulated by:
 - a. *Batu Palawangan Ibu*, 'The Rock of the Vaginal Passage';
 - b. *Batu Paibuan*, 'The Rock of the Motherhood';
 - c. *Batu Panyipuhan*, 'The Rock of the Formal Education'; and
 - d. *Batu Poponcoran* 'The Passage of Initiation to Adulthood'.

⁵ List based on: Djunatan, Stephanus, in press [2011], *The principle of affirmation: An ontological and epistemological ground for interculturality*, PhD thesis, Erasmus University Rotterdam.



Fig. 7a-b. Rebirth through a narrow rock crevice, a pilgrimage station that suggests that the ritual site of Nagara Padang originally goes back to prehistoric times

3. the Phase of Adulthood, bringing out such aspects of human growth in mature secular life as are articulated by:
 - a. *Batu Kaca Saadeg* ‘The Rocks of Self-awareness’;
 - b. *Batu Gedong Peteng* ‘The Rocks of the Dark Cave’;
 - c. *Batu Karaton* ‘The Rocks of the Palace’ (at this point the imagery of the palace and the royal administration becomes particularly prominent); and
 - d. *Batu Kuta rungu* ‘The Rocks of the Ear’, which is already geared to an ulterior concerns of wisdom beyond the exigencies of society, and leads on to
4. the Phase of the Sage, bringing out the culmination of human growth in wisdom as articulated by:
 - a. *Batu Masjid Agung* ‘The Rock of the Mosque of the Majesty’;
 - b. *Batu Bumi Agung* ‘The Rock of Glorious Earth’;
 - c. *Batu Kursi Gading* ‘The Rock of the Ivory Throne’;
 - d. *Pakuwon Eyang Prabu Silihwangi* ‘The Rock of Eyang Prabu Silihwangi’ (the semi-legendary king (12th century AD) who allegedly became a hermit and thus founded the shrine);
 - e. *Batu Lawang Tujuh* ‘The Rock of the Seven Doors’;
 - f. *Batu Padaringan* ‘The Rock of the Rice Barn’ (cf. the above explanation of the name of Nagara Padang), also known – by a more explicitly Islamic interpretation⁶ – as ‘the Array of the Twenty-Five Prophets’; and
 - g. *Puncak Manik* ‘The Rock of the Summit of the Light’.

⁶ The Prophet Muḥammad is reputed (Hadith 21257, in response to a question posed by Abu Dharr) to have said that there have been 124,000 prophets; only 25 of these, however, have been mentioned by name in the Holy Qur’ān, and the Twenty-Five Prophets is an established Islamic concept.



Fig. 8a-b. Villagers carry offerings and musical instruments up the mountain; note the central egg on the carrier in the left-hand photograph, reminiscent of the wide-spread cosmogonic theme of the world egg

The shrine guardian instructs the pilgrims on their pilgrimage, which is to be a way to wisdom. Such instructions begins in the valley, but is especially dished out from station to station, in the course of the pious peregrination through the shrine area – where each named station is marked by the guardian’s specific attention, through small offerings (incense, flowers), prayer, and instruction.



Fig. 9a-b. The shrine guardian engaged in pious instruction, and in ritual marking a specific station of the pilgrimage

For the individual pilgrim, the summit of the pilgrimage experience is probably when, at station 4f, he or she is taken to the highest top and there has to balance himself dangerously and in total submission (and trust towards the guardian) on a jutting

ledge, as the highest point between Heaven and Earth. However, having completed the pilgrimage with only a handful of people in 2007, in our ordinary clothes, the recent experience made me aware of aspects that had so far escaped me. The 2010 pilgrimage in the course of the Departmental study days was massive, involving not only dozens of students and their lecturers, all in pilgrim's uniform, but also a few dozen villagers from Rawabogo: elders, musicians / singers carrying their musical instrument, and others who carried the elaborately prepared food, fruits and flowers for the *slamatan* (sacrificial meal) that we were to have at the extended plateau near the top. It is here, rather than in the culmination at the *Rock of the Summit of the Light*, where our pilgrimage reached its actual culmination, adding one extra, collective, phase to the near-ecstatic individual experience.



Fig. 10. Silent prayer before the *slamatan*



Fig. 11. The shrine of Sidi Mhammad, N.W. Tunisia, 2002

My earliest field research as a student of popular religion was (1968) on shrine cults in the context of popular Islam in the highlands of North-western Tunisia.⁷ In this context I familiarised myself with the scholarly literature on the comparative study of shrine cults and pilgrimage, making some contributions to that field myself.

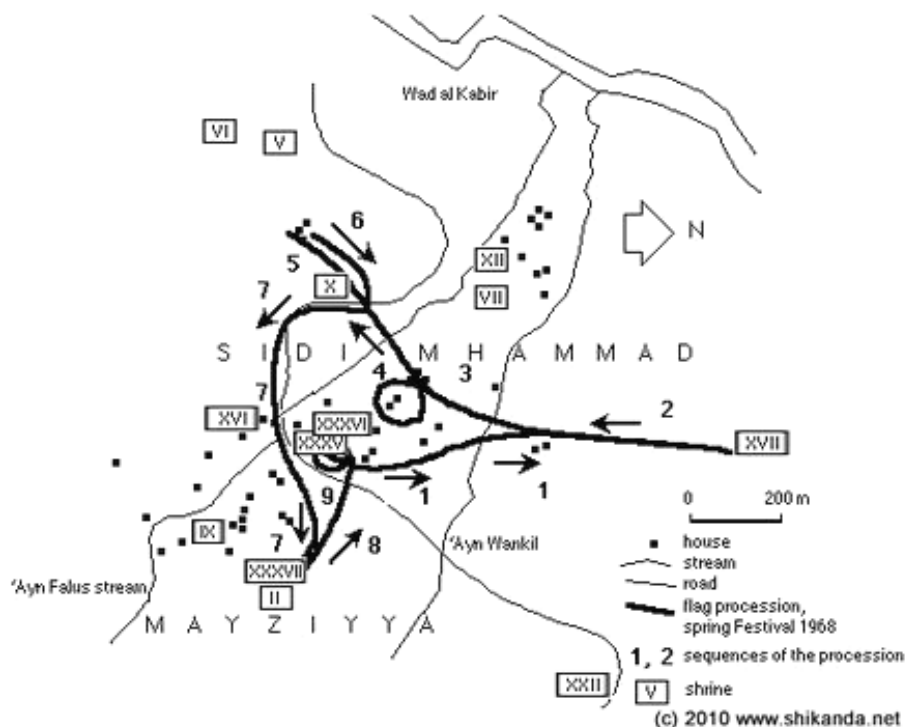


Fig. 12. The path of pilgrimage at the shrine of Sidi Mhammad, N.W. Tunisia, 1968

Against this background, the details of the pilgrimage at Nagara Padang bring out many of the common traits that such specialists as Victor Turner, Richard Werbner, Michael Sallnow, and John Eade⁸ have discerned in pilgrimage worldwide:

⁷ Cf. *Historic Berber culture: Wim van Binsbergen's webpage on Khumiriyya (N.W. Tunisia, North Africa), late 18th - mid-20th century* (<http://shikanda.net/Berber/index.htm>), which offers hyperlinked texts of the many scholarly and literary texts I wrote on this topic.

⁸ Seminal literature on shrines and pilgrimages includes: Turner, V.W., 1969, *The Ritual Process*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Turner, V.W. & Turner, E., 1978, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell; Turner V.W., 1982, *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage*, New Delhi, Concept Publishing Company; Eade, J., & M.J. Sallnow, eds., 1991, *Contesting the sacred: The anthropology of Christian pilgrimage*, London/ New York: Routledge; Eickelman, D.F., 1976, *Moroccan Islam: Tradition and society in a pilgrimage center*, Austin: University of Texas Press; Werbner, R. P., ed., 1977, *Regional Cults*, London: Academic Press, ASA Monograph no. 1; Sallnow, M., 1981, 'Communitas reconsidered: The sociology of Andean pilgrimage', *Man* (N.S.), 16: 163-82; Sallnow, M.J., 1987, *Pilgrims of the Andes: Regional cults in Cusco*, Washington/London: Smithsonian Institution Press; Dubisch, J., 1995, *In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Alcock, S.E., & R. Osborn, eds., 1994, *Placing the Gods: Sanctuaries and sacred space in ancient Greece*, London: Oxford University Press; Farnell, L.R., 1907, *The cults of the Greek states, I-IV*, Oxford: Clarendon; Tyson, David, 1997, 'Shrine pilgrimage in Turkmenistan as a means to understand Islam among the Turkmen', *Central Asia Monitor - on-line supplement* (no.1, 1997); Lymer, Kenneth, 2004, 'Rags and rock art: the landscapes of holy site pilgrimage in the Republic of Kazakhstan', *World Archaeology*, 36, 1: 158-172; Ranger, T.O., 1987, 'Taking hold of the land: Holy places and pilgrimages in twentieth century Zimbabwe', *Past and Present*, 117: 158-194; Nthoi, L.S., 2006, *Contesting Sacred Space: A*

- the concept of a Centre-Out-There, which invites the pilgrim to leave his everyday state behind and enter the sacred state of the pilgrim – in order to set out on a physical journey along a well-defined path in the real landscape, as well as a spiritual, inner journey of transformation and illumination;
- in the process, all social and even biological distinctions and differences between pilgrims become temporarily irrelevant (hence the uniforms) and are wiped out (so that a merging can take place between widely different status categories such as those of students and lecturers; between widely different spheres of life such as those of the poorly educated *desa* dwellers and those of the students from the big city; and even, within the limits of locally defined decency, the socially imposed rigid separation of the genders is temporarily relaxed);
- instead of such differences, the pilgrims establish among themselves a sense of *communitas*: Victor Turner's term for greatly enhanced sociability to the point of the dissolution and merging of individual existences.



Fig. 13a-b. Offerings (distinctly reminiscent of Hinduism) at the top plateau, just before the *slamatan*

Pilgrimage Study of the Mwali Cult of Southern Africa, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc.; van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 1985, 'The cult of saints in North-Western Tunisia: An analysis of contemporary pilgrimage structures', in: E. A. Gellner, ed., *Islamic dilemmas: Reformers, nationalists and industrialization: The Southern shore of the Mediterranean*, Berlin, New York, Amsterdam: Mouton, pp. 199-239. [http://www.shikanda.net/african_religion/cultof.htm] ; van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 1976, 'Shrines, cults and society in North and Central Africa: A comparative analysis', paper read at the Association of Social Anthropologists of Great Britain and the Commonwealth (ASA) Annual Conference on Regional Cults and Oracles, Manchester, 35 pp. [<http://www.shikanda.net/Berber/social.htm>]



Fig. 14. The final greeting ceremony

The sacrificial meal is the near-universal expression of sociability, where eating together ('commensality') is a central occasion to bring out fundamental equality (everyone sits together with everyone else, and the portions – dished out in sets of four – are meticulously prepared so as to be equal); moreover, the act of eating also reminds the pilgrims of such equality and identity as is implied in the fact that they all possess a human body with by and large the same needs and limitations. Of all human activities, language is the one that is most based on the sustained articulation of complex difference (the differences between phonemes, and those between other parts of speech); therefore, the silent prayer before the group sets out for the pilgrimage, and the silent prayer before the final sacrificial meal, are also eminent manifestations of *communitas*.



Fig. 15. Shreds torn from human clothes tied to a branch near the top

So is the music which the village's musical specialists perform before, during and after the *slamatan*: admittedly, not all pilgrims participate in the music (as they might have done if it were communal singing), and the exquisite traditional Sunda music performed on this occasion (a specimen of which I will soon post at YouTube) is certainly not what most student pilgrims would daily play on their MP3 players, yet it casts a lubricating atmosphere of non-verbality over what remains (or what, during and after the meal, re-emerges) of the pilgrims' diversity. This is the case, even though in this case most students chose to emphatically deny the musicians their attention, and went on chatting and joking as if they were a privileged aristocratic audience disdainfully entertained by low-class musical entertainers.



Fig. 16. The musicians taking a break

The final celebration of *communitas* occurred when, after the meal and the music, all pilgrims were lined up in a circle, which subsequently, via a hairpin bend, doubled into itself and rolled itself off into a spiral, in such a way that each pilgrim would come directly face to face with each other pilgrim, pronouncing greetings and blessings, shaking both hands, and bringing both hands back to one's shoulders in a comprehensive gesture of incorporation and affirmation. After that culmination of *communitas*, the group of pilgrims breaks up and everyone stumbles down individually, and without any further pious admonitions, along the unexpectedly narrow and steep path down the mountain slopes back to the entrance gate, and so further back to the lodge, where the pilgrim's uniform is rapidly shed, and where – in this case – preparation for the festive final evening of the study days is resumed in full swing.⁹

⁹ This is not the place to dwell on, and seek explanation for, the many parallels between the pilgrimage rites in the mountains of Northwestern Tunisia, and those at Nagara Padang – separated by more than 10,000 kms, and enacted in greatly different language contexts (the Austronesian linguistic macrophylum of Bahasa Indonesia and Sunda, against the Afroasiatic linguistic macrophylum of Arabic/Semitic, and Berber). These parallels range from the broad overall structure of the pilgrimage as described above for Nagara Padang (but which would also literally apply in the North African case!), to such details as the tying of shreds of textile from human clothing to trees at the shrine, the veneration of a sacred spring and sacred rocks, the collective meal, and certain diffuse megalithic connotations attaching to the shrine. My personal explanation for such uncanny parallels all across the Old World



Fig. 17. The junior shrine guardian in his living room

The UNPAR staff and students may have been largely unaware of this systematic, comparative background to their pilgrimage experience. Moreover, many students, especially during the later stages of the pilgrimage, were somewhat distracted and were allowed to retreat into enhanced attention for each other and for their mobile telephones and cameras. Yet this near-universal structure of pilgrimage cannot have failed to leave its mental and emotional imprint on all participants. Their temporary *communitas* with the villagers during the pilgrimage, was tested and renewed in the following evening, when students and villagers performed alternately before several hundreds of people. Then roars of appreciative laughter from the predominantly *desa* audience in response to the students' sketches brought out the fact that the mutual accommodation between these two life worlds was not merely an illusion – not just an

(and many more could be listed, from outside the realm of shrine cults), is that of the Extended Pelasgian Hypothesis, to be set out in my various monographs now in the press. Despite these underlying communalities, the overall conscious ('emic') conceptualisation of the shrine by the local actors is rather different however: in Nagara Padang we see a heterogeneous combination of nature, megalithic, initiatory, Great Mother / Earth, kingship, agricultural and Qur'anic references whose sole unifying factor is the inclusion in the guardian's pious discourse and in the unified pilgrimage trajectory; in North Africa there is a similar heterogeneity of references, but these have been more effectively brought under the unifying common denominator of popular Islamic saint veneration, which in the eyes of the local actors is all-explanatory. At Nagara Padang, it is not saint veneration that bestows sanctity upon the shrine. Admittedly, there is an implicit notion of Indonesia's legendary Seven Walis (Saints) having appropriated and purified the shrine area for Islam, but (contrary to the saintly tombs in North African popular Islam, and elsewhere) there is no explicit physical sign here of such Islamisation, apart from the mosque at the entrance gate, and the claim that, at one point of the pilgrimage trajectory, a particular indenture on a rock slab represents the Muslim *kopiah* cap. In addition to the prism-shaped saintly graves, other similarly shaped objects tend to play an important role in the saint veneration as found in the popular Islam of Western Asia and North Africa: sacred chests or boxes (*zenduq*) containing sacred flags, incense and candles. In this respect it is remarkable that one of the few apparently man-made objects at the Nagara Padang shrine is a large (c. 2,5 m.) prismatic block, about which however I could not gather the guardian's explanation.

ephemeral artefact of the pilgrimage situation, nor left behind on the top of the mountain.



Fig. 18. Enigmatic large prismatic block (covered with secular graffiti) at one of the final stations of the pilgrimage



Fig. 19a-b. Students performing before the villagers, and their audience

As a total stranger to nearly all participants in this pilgrimage, I was greatly privileged to be allowed into the *communitas* that the pilgrimage brought about, to partake of the food and the blessing, to enjoy the music, and to see how many students were fascinated and moved at least at certain points in the process. I cannot judge to what extent the experience touched the hearts of the UNPAR participants. I hardly had the opportunity to speak with the students. After the pilgrimage I spoke at great length with the members of staff and there – during our meals and at the pilgrims’ hostel – encountered the lingering sense of *communitas* that had characterised our journey up the mountain, but (perhaps not by accident) we spoke of other topics than the pilgrimage and the popular religion that sets its scene. Even at the top, during the sacrificial meal, *communitas* was not total – as is clear from the fact that, whereas the standard number of people eating together should be four, one group could only muster three members, and when these had nearly finished eating, one of the other pilgrims approached them and in one sentence re-imposed difference and destroyed *communitas*: ‘Look who are seated here together’, he said, ‘orang dajak, orang cina, orang belanda’ – a *Dajak*, a *Chinese*, and a *Dutchman*...



Fig. 20. Less than total komunitas



Fig. 21. No study days without a formal certificate

I have seen the students greet the local elders and villagers with considerable respect (although some remained standing, condescendingly stooping towards the seated elder), and their stage jokes obviously registered with the audience during the concluding festive evening. Yet I have seen little evidence of an actual *encounter* between students and villagers, in the sense of acting together on a common task, engaging in conversation, or attentively listening to each other's music. No doubt, as much as possible was brought about of a meeting between what are in many respects the extreme opposites of Javanese culture today. The students were brought, albeit only for a very limited period, in close proximity with the life of the *desa* and with its popular spirituality, in a format where it was very clear that their lecturers (their academic role models) took these rural and traditional forms very seriously and accorded them great respect.



Fig. 22. Learning in and from the *desa*

To counterbalance the urban culture of digital gadgets, fashion and consumerism to which life in Bandung inevitably exposes the students, this must have been a very valuable experience to the students, for which the Department of Philosophy and UNPAR as a whole deserve great praise. A week after our return from Nagara Padang I was privileged to address the staff of the Philosophy Department on: ‘The crisis of meaning under conditions of globalisation, urbanisation and commoditification, and the reconsideration of traditional wisdom approaches as a possible way out’ (click <http://shikanda.net/topicalities/topicali.htm> for details, under May 2010). The respectful approach to local popular religion in undergraduate teaching, based – as in this case – on the staff’s detailed participatory research and prolonged, trustful relations with the local community, is one of the ways in which we can partake of traditional wisdom. Through such wisdom we may be able to re-source our lives and our communities, and to reconstruct them after the devastating crisis of meaning brought about by modernity.



Fig. 23. Greeting the senior shrine guardian in front of his house

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