

## **PASEMAH SCULPTURES: MONUMENTS OF THE EXISTENCE AND WORSHIP OF ANCESTOR SPIRITS**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Pasemah is located in Sumatra Island. The region's geography is commonly mountainous, well known as Pasemah Plateau. There are lots of ancient megalith artifacts there, the medium of which is monolithic-andesitic rocks. The artifacts have been investigated since the era of East Indie and are proceeding till now, but the investigations have been archeological in nature. Thus far, there has been no an in-depth study of the artifacts by using a fine arts study like one that the author conducted in the present research. By library study and supplemented by field observation, it could be found out that the existence of the ancient monuments are connected to their surroundings. The megalith artifacts are visual arts works produced creatively in the time, particularly the statues the beginning of which is strongly supposed to serve as the monuments of existence and then turned to be the media of ancestor spirits worship.*

**KEYWORDS:** Pasemah, statue, megalithic, monument, spirit, ancestor.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The diversity of Nusantara cultures has remarkable potentials, due among others to its geographic condition which is made up of islands. Nusantara islands are located between two continents, two oceans, and passed through by equatorial line. To the far west of Nusantara there is a major island, Sumatra Island. And to the west of the island there is Bukit Barisan, stretching from north to south.

The southern Bukit Barisan includes roughly Jambi, Bengkulu, South Sumatra, Lampung, and Batanghari Sembilan Area. Lots of the ancient cultural remains in forms of large monolith stones, like megalithic remains, are found there. Based on research data and studies of

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prehistoric era that many scholars had conducted, it is indeed evidenced that numerous artifacts were found scattering widely in Nusantara islands. In fact, the data of ancient humans in Nusantara plays a crucial role, as suggested by F. Dahler (2011).

The Figure 1. above is Nusantara territory where there are actually found lots of ancient ancestor artifacts when human civilization had not been acquainted with a written language. In the era, humans commonly communicated to one another by oral and visual. Experts classify the era into four cultural periods. In For example, R. Soekmono (1976) suggests four stages of cultures, namely: “Old Stone Culture (Paleolithicum), Middle Stone Culture (Mesolithicum), New Stone Culture (Neolithicum), and Metal Culture.” The range of prehistoric period is much longer than that of historical period, and their occurrences in prehistoric ages and their transformations into historic era are not in coincidence one another in some areas.



**Figure 1. In this region, lots of prehistoric ancestor artifacts spreading in Nusantara are found.**

(Map Source: Google, December 7, 2016).

It could be surveyed that megalithic tradition was proceeding from generation to generation and only in some certain areas, and thus its existence has not been spreading evenly throughout the world and hence not qualified to be called as a megalithic culture. Meanwhile Old Stone, Middle Stone, New Stones, and Metal cultures commonly evenly spread to various hemispheres and thus mark a specific era. The existence of megalithic tradition preceded after human beings have been acquainted with and used metal tools, but human civilization has not then entered into a metal era. Instead, more precisely, it was between Neolithic age culture and Metal age.



**Figure 2. Map of Batanghari Sembilan Culture Region.**

(Source: The Author, 2005/2006).

Figure 2. shows the regions of Bengkulu, South Sumatra, and Lampung as the locations where the megalithic remains had been recovered are indeed called later as Batanghari Sembilan cultural region. It includes: Jambi, Bengkulu, South Sumatra, and Lampung. A prominent Dutch archeologist Van der Hooft, researching in Pasemah plateau, has defied the speculative opinions earlier which said that the megalithic artifacts in Pasemah were the remains of Hinduism culture.



**Figure 3. Pasemah Statue shows no Hinduism signs.**

(Source: The Author, 2005/2006)

Hoop is a pioneer with his research in Pasemah and convincingly argues that the artifacts are megalith because the statues showed no Hinduism signs, like one on Fig. 3. Since then, the artifacts have been frequently made as an object of discussion and research by experts. After independence, archeological studies in Pasemah region have been continued by National Archeology Center and Palembang Archeology Center.

In relation to megalithic concept, Wagner, like RP. Soejono (in Ayu Kusumawati and Haris Sukendar, 2003:7&25), argues that “megalithic concept does not really refer to only large stones, because small ones and even woods can be said as megalithic, as long they are based on its main objective and goal, that is, ancestor spirits” or a faith of ancestor spirit worship, which is in agreement with the theory of Animism and Magic from E.B. Taylor and J.G. Frazer (Daniel L. Pals, 2012). In addition, in Nusantara, as it is known, the existence of indigenous religion had been since a very long time, or since the beginning of prehistory. This is also in agreement with some experts, among others Rachmat Subagya (1981), Bagyo Prasetyo and Dwi Yani Yuniawati (2004), and Ketut Wiradnyana (2015).

A landscape of Bukit Barisan to the south of Sumatra Island is named Pasemah Plateau, more precisely in Lahat Regency and Pagaralam Municipality, South Sumatra Province, where most remains of the artifacts from Megalithic Tradition of prehistoric Nusantara were discovered, as the results of previous archeological researches. In fact, these artifacts are spreading in Bengkulu, South Sumatra, and Lampung. However, the remains are found mostly in South Sumatra area and thus it is reasonably hailed as a Center of Megalithic, as shown on Fig. 4. According to Ayu Kusumawati and Haris Sukendar (2003:16), “the area comes out as a center

of megalithic". This is in agreement with the research by Van der Hoop (1930-31), later translated and published by a title of *Megalithic Remains in South Sumatra*, 1932.



**Figure 4. DTT. Pasemah, Lahat – Pagaralam (center of megalithic).**

(Source: The Author, 2005/2006).

According to a library study of the results of earlier and current studies, it was found that Pasemah megaliths are predominated more by archeologists, such as Budi Wiyana (1996), Ayu Kusumawati and Haris Sukendar (2003), Kritantina Indriastuti (2011 & 2013), Bagyo Prasetyo (2015), etc. “*Arca menhir*” (menhir statues), according to Haris Sukendar (1983) or totem as found in some the spreading areas of megalith artifacts, are commonly static in shape and not yet complete as compared to Pasemah megalithic statues.

In a site study in 2005-2006 as a preliminary research, the author used a fine arts viewpoint when analyzing the artifacts the result of which is presented here, that is, Pasemah statues serve as the monuments of the existence as well as the media of ancestor spirit worship. The preliminary study of fine arts should be followed up, spread, and implemented, so as to be beneficial for the people around the cultural areas (read: sites) in particular and public in general. Its main purpose is to disclose and supplement the initial history of the presence and diversity of characteristic Nusantara visual arts.

## METHODOLOGY

In agreement with the results of literature study stating that lots of Pasemah megalithic remains are found in Bengkulu, South Sumatra (Lahat and Pagaralam), and Lampung, most of the remains are indeed discovered in Lahat and Pagaralam. The monumental megalith artifacts existing on Pasemah plateau can generally be found directly in the field because they still exist *in situ*.

In nearly every site in Pasemah there are megalithic statues. These statues with varied shapes and postures always appear together with other megalithic artifacts at a site, which are



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monumental works (visual works) of the past. Their existence, besides from being a monument of existence, serves as a medium of ancestor spirit worship, having an inseparable relationship with their natural environment. Thus, the present research used a field survey as its main method (directly recording), in addition to library study and interview with experts.

In a research of arts, an observatory method is of high importance, as suggested by Tjetjep Rohendi Rohidi (2011). A personal observation during the detailed field study of each Pasemah megalithic statue and field data records in forms of photographs and audio visual (Fig. 5.) are of high importance in enriching a sharp analytical process and the details of Pasemah visual works, particularly statue shapes and postures, and their relationship with their surrounding natural environment. Of course, the data from library study and interviews with the experts on the monuments in Pasemah should be taken into account.



**Figure 5. Video recording of statue details at Tinggi Hari I, Pasemah.**

(Source: The Author, 2005/2006).

In the course of the field study, facts were obtained that, as monumental works, each Pasemah statue has its own distinct landscape. By directly reading fully in site, both megalithic statue subjects and the views indicate inseparable relationship between their existence and their surrounding natural environment, serving as an analytical knife as displayed on Fig. 6. below. When the author surveyed thoroughly the natural landscape around Geramat and Tegur Wangi sites, it was found that the existence of megalith artifacts was inseparable from that of the hills and mountains as well as water sources like rivers.



**Figure 6. Site of Geramat and Tegur Wangi in Lahat Regency & Pagaram.**

(Source: The Author, 2005/2006).

Some points obtained from the survey method of the megalithic sites in Pasemah plateau are related to the front and orientation of each statue artifact, sketches of sites, indicating the importance of the condition of their surrounding natural landscape. Observing the patterns or positions and relations of placement of each megalith artifact, it is evident that the statue artifacts are commonly to be the center point in a site. And there is no repetition in shapes, particularly in the postures of Pasemah megalithic statues. The following figure is an example of the result of field study:



**Figure 7. Tegur Wangi-Pagaralam and Pagun-Lahat sites.**

(Source: The Author, 2005/2006).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The four periods of prehistoric cultural era based on the library study described the position of megalithic tradition in the four stages of early human civilization as shown on Diagram 1. Based on the results of a field study, by visiting the existing sites one by one, it was found that not every site has statue artifacts. Instead, each Pasemah site has some types of megalithic artifacts. Megalithic Pasemah site has a pattern of being always correlating with its surrounding natural environment condition, particularly in relation to the existence of a hill or mount, and can also be together with a water source in form of river or *tebat* (small lake).



**Diagram 1. Megalithic Tradition in World's Early Civilization.**

(Source: The Author, 2015).

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From a library study and a survey in both Lahat and Pagaralam on the sites in Pasemah region, as shown on Fig. 8. it was found that their topographic characters were generally wavy with hills, mountains, valleys, and rivers, being the preferences of prehistoric humans in the times. The author obtained convincing data that the characteristics of megalithic statues as found in Pasemah were not found in other contemporary areas, in Nusantara and even in the world generally.

In Pasemah plateau, the megalithic statues with objects of either humans or animals, their bodies have been carved completely and variously. It means that there was no repetition at all as that in totems or “*menhir* statue” as disclosed by Haris Sukendar (1983) in Ayu and Haris Sukendar (2003). Pasemah statues always visually vary in volumes and shapes, and have dynamic postures because they have commonly showed the objects with apparently moving gestures.



**Figure 8. Wavy Topography in Pasemah Region.**

(Source: The Author, 2005/2006).

When the author conducted a site survey to collect data of visual ancient artifacts, it turned out that some changes were found between the time of Van der Hoop (1931) and Budi Wiyana (1996), the author (2005-2006), Samsudin et al. (2013), and Bagyo Prasetyo & Nurhadi Rangkuti (2015), e.g., changes in the names of sites, due to some changes in the names of villages where the sites were located. In addition, Lahat Regency is now politically and administratively already divided into two regencies, namely Lahat Regency and Pagaralam Municipality, and Pagaralam Municipality renamed itself to be Bumi Besemah instead of Pasemah.

**Table 1. List of the Sites of Pasemah and Their Current Environment**

No.	Sites	Current Site Environment	Remarks
1.	Belumai I, Belumai II, and Belumai III	Water, wet field Dry field Dry field	Research location Research location Research location
2.	Benua Keling	Hill, dry field	-
3.	Beringin Jaya	Village	-
4.	Bukit Selayar	Water, hill	Research location
5.	Geramat	Water, wet field	Research location
6.	Gunung Megang	Water, wet field, village	-
7.	Karang Dalam	Village, hill	Research location
8.	Kotaraya Lembak	Water, dry field	-
9.	Kunduran	Water, village	-
10.	Muara Betung	Water, hill, village	-
11.	Muara Danau	Dry field	Research location
12.	Muara Dua	Hill	-
13.	Pagaralam Pagun	Village, wet field	Research location
14.	Sinjar Bulan	Water, dry field, village	-
15.	Tanjung Ara	Wet field, village	Research location
16.	Tanjung Menang	Village	-
17.	Tanjung Sirih	Forest, hill, bushes, dry field	Research location
18.	Tanjung Telang	Dry field, hill, bushes, school	Research location
19.	Tebat Sibentur	Forest, bushes, dry field	Research location
20.	Tebing Tinggi	Water, wet field, dry field	Research location
21.	Tegur Wangi	Water, dry field	Research location
22.	Tinggi Hari I, Tinggi Hari II, and Tinggi Hari III	Hill, dry field, forest Hill, dry field, forest Hill, dry field, forest	Research location Research location Research location

(Source: Balar Palembang, 1996, and the author, 2006).

The twenty two Pasemah megalithic sites in Table 1. above have now been divided into two parts, one part in administrative jurisdiction of Pagaralam Municipality (Belumai, Benua Keling, Beringinjaya, Bukit Selayar, Gunung Magang, Kotaraya Lambak, Tanjung Ara, Tegur Wangi) and another in administrative jurisdiction of Lahat Regency. Thus, when the author collected the research data he should developed coordination with the two local governments, though for the present research he consistently referred to a single character of cultural products, i.e., Pasemah plateau megalithic remains. Based on the data obtained by both library study and field study, it was found that the types of megalithic visual works in Pasemah were: statue, painting, relief, and decorative motif.

Especially for statues, besides from being the center point of the existing sites, they also serve as important and main monuments, as the marker of the existence with strong influence on a region in the time, and then turned into a media of ancestor spirit worship. Statues as fine arts works were created by a characteristic local concept, i.e., “ancestors” or “*puyang*” so that should be visualized (long before Greek esthetic concept dominated across the world) and placed as a primacy in the region. Therefore, in terms of shapes, Pasemah megalithic statues are distinctive and of overt loyalty, as shown by several examples below:



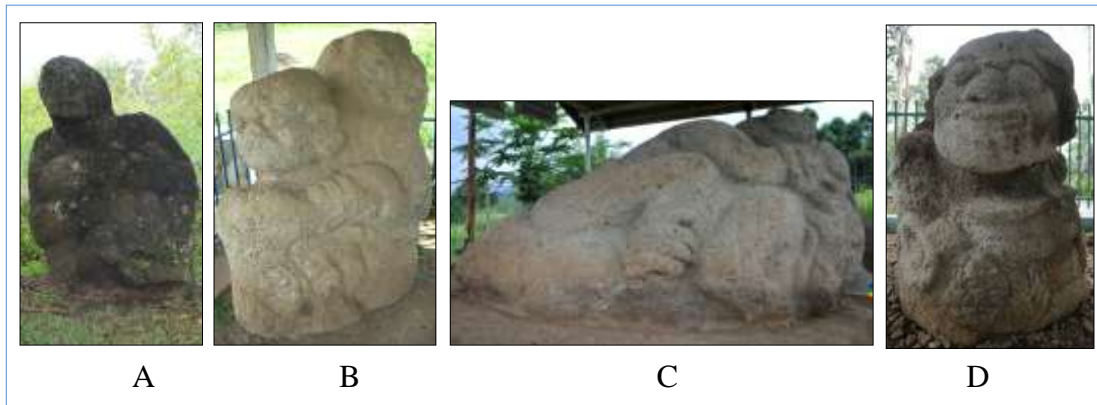


Figure 9. Statue in Muara Danau (A), statue in Tegur Wangi (B), statue in Belumai I (C), and statue in Belumai III (D), (Source: The Author 2016).

### III.I Monuments of Existence in Pasemah

Some crucial points can prove that Pasemah megalithic statues are monuments carved as a marker of the existence of a reign over a region in Pasemah Land. The many Pasemah megalithic monuments or statues spread in Pasemah Plateau (now encompassing three provinces), none of which have repetition in posture and shape, all being differing from one another as shown, for example, on Fig. 10. above. Some Pasemah megalithic statues are also carved as a man carrying a sword over his shoulders or to the right of his waist, certainly symbolizing that he is a knight. It is also common for Pasemah megalithic statues to be carved sitting on a heroic animal such as elephant or buffalo, or hugging an elephant, or even sitting lapping a tiger, etc. Of course, they all intend to show that the man is a bravery leader.

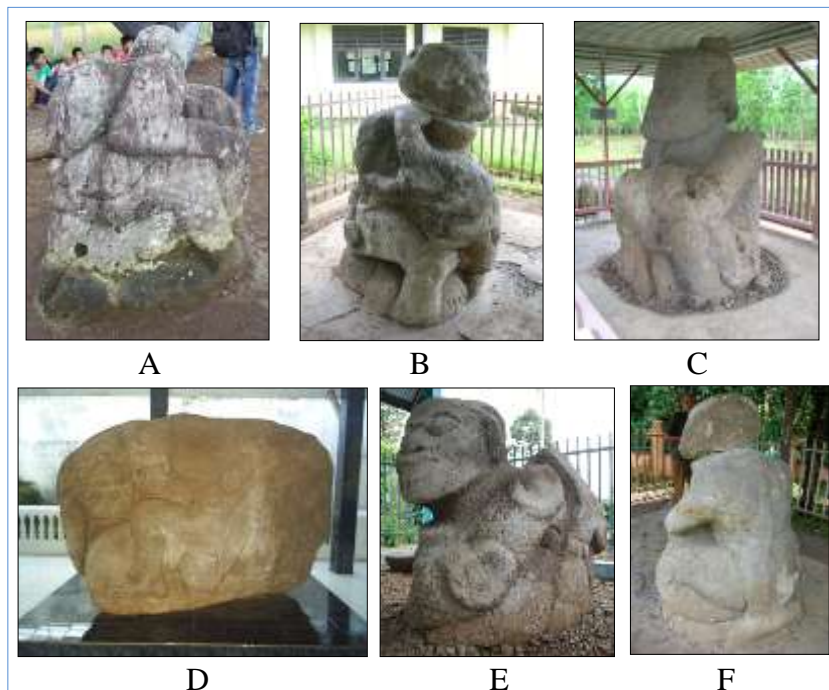
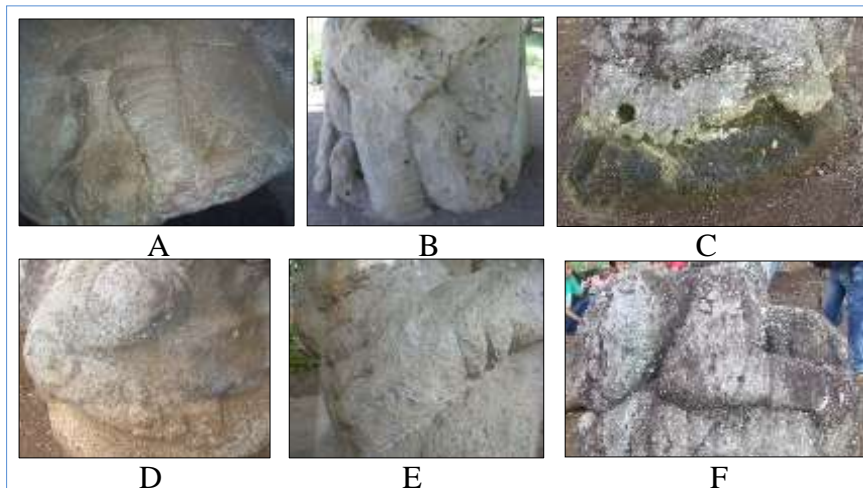


Figure 10. Riding a buffalo (A), Hugging an elephant (B), Lapping a tiger (C), sword to the left of waist (D and E), carrying a sword (F), (Source: The Author, 2016).

Besides from being the markers of existence as displayed on Fig. III.1.1 above, the statues representing the (prominent) figures are also generally carved with some attributes, such as anklets which vary in numbers between three, five, seven, and nine. The number of anklets that decorate the legs of the prominent figures is closely related to the existence of rivers or streams in the area, and the numbers of carved anklets are the marker of that of rivers or streams which belong to the jurisdiction of the figures. In addition to the carved anklets on Pasemah megalithic statues that serve as the monument of a figure's existence, an attribute of bracelets is also commonly carved, as displayed on 11. below:



**Figure 11. Attributes of 7, 9, 5 anklets (A, B, C), bracelets (D, E, F).**

(Source: The Author 2016).

There are still some characteristics that serve as the marker of a prominent figure's existence, in addition to ones described above. In general, Pasemah megalithic statues are carved or use head covering attributes. Read: Hat = *tanjak* or *blangkon* in Nusantara or known in military as barrette. Unfortunately, lots of the heads of Pasemah megalithic statues have now been broken or lost, and those still existing have badly been worn out.

### III.2 Ancestor Spirit Worship Media

Since the beginning of the discovery of megalithic artifacts in some different areas in Nusantara, including Pasemah, the early researchers had suggested and concluded that the artifacts, including megalithic statues, served as the ancient communities' medium of worshipping ancestor spirits. However, during carrying out a survey and staying at the research locations, the author eventually found an answer as well as proved that the artifacts were indeed created as a medium in ancestor spirit worship rituals. In Pasemah, ancestors are called "*puyang*".

The author proved it by studying the front and orientation of each megalithic artifact that exists in each megalithic site in Pasemah. After scrutinizing by visiting those sites selected as the research location, roughly 20 sites of the megalithic sites spreading on Pasemah plateau, the author found a common trend or repetition of the positioning of artifacts and between artifacts and thus called them "front and orientation" and "relational" pattern. They are all closely related to the mystical beliefs of local communities in the times.

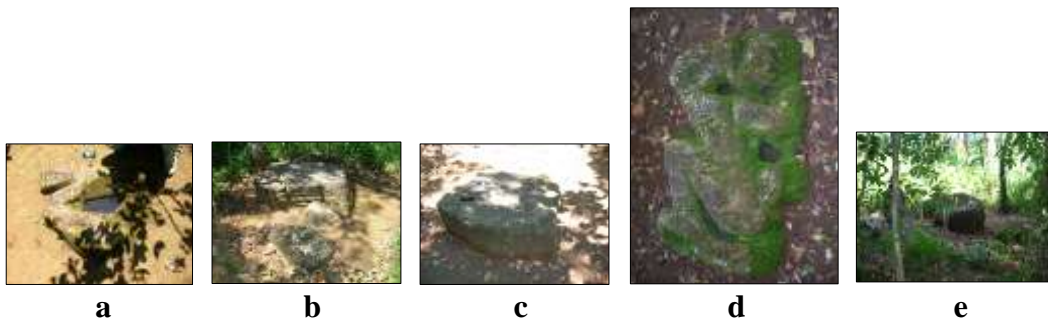
In each site the author visited, the existing megalithic artifacts commonly looked toward (oriented to) nearest source of water or river or hill or mountain. Surveyed more carefully, it appeared that Pasemah megalithic artifacts were indeed always oriented to a hill or mountain existing in the area. It confirms that their existence served as a media the local communities believed, in agreement with a mystical concept in ancestor (*puyang*) spirit worship. The front and orientation of the megalithic artifacts were toward either a source of water or a mountain, because according to a mystical belief the locations are sacral places and believed as the locations where their *puyang* were staying (Fig. 12.).



**Figure 12. Front and Orientation of Pasemah megalithic artifacts.**  
(Source: The Author, 2006).

In nearly every Pasemah megalithic site it was also indicated an existence of relational patterns between the existing artifacts, where megalithic statues were positioned as the centre point relative to other megalithic artifacts, and related to the performance of ancestor spirit worship ritual in the times. By naked eyes we could see that the positions of statues in a site were indeed not positioned at the centre between the accompanying megalithic artifacts.





**Figure 13. Relational patterns and the positions of statues relative to other artifacts in Tanjung Sirih, as one of the Pasemah megalithic sites.**

(Source: The Author, 2006).

By closely observing the patterns of front, orientation, and relations of Pasemah megalithic statues as described above and also shown on Figs. 12., 13., and 14., it is evident that worshipping ancestor spirits was a crucial reason for the prehistoric communities for constructing the megalithic monuments, as a medium connecting to the worship of ancestor spirits that they believed, and thus their existence should comply with patterns with a mystical concept.



**Figure 14. Relational patterns and the positions of statues relative to other artifacts in Geramat, Pasemah – Lahat Regency.**

(Source: The Author, 2006).

The present fine arts research of Pasemah megalithic statues is the first study of its kind, and it can of course be made as a foundation of further fine arts researches in particular as well as that of those researches with different viewpoints. Considering that Pasemah megalithic statues are the constructions or monuments that representing their devotees in the times and integral to their surroundings, they may be made an object of study from architectural domain, or may also be



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made as a study of the relationships between humans with their environment, such as sacral and propane sites. Moreover, seen visually, particularly the attributes carved on each megalithic statues, it can also be studied how people's strata and economy, in addition to the role of tools and technology in the times, for example.

For further utilization and development in the future, Pasemah megalithic sites may be made as a museum as well as an open nature research laboratory, and thus they may come to be a comprehensive tourism world potential, which will certainly be beneficial for its local community and general public. The existence of the statues, and their relations with other megalithic artefacts at a site, depicts that in ancient times it was a place where the devotees performed certain rituals (worship of ancestor spirits or "*puyang*"). The fine arts in form of statues were the centre point when expressing mantras (*sastra*), producing sounds with specific rhythm (music), body movements (dance) following the sounds, and also mantra. The participants in a specific ritual play equally specific roles (theatre). To reveal all these, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary art studies are needed.

## CONCLUSION

From the present research it could be drawn some conclusions in relation to fine arts, particularly Pasemah megalithic statues as follows:

1. The existence of Pasemah megalithic statues serves as an important and major monument or marker of the existence of those prominent figures with reign and influence over a territory in the time.
2. Pasemah megalithic statues as the monument of the existence of prominent figures are always visually carved as a knight.
3. Pasemah megalithic statues as a fine arts work from prehistoric eras were created by a locally characteristic concept, namely "ancestors" or "*puyang*", not by later emerging Greek aesthetics.
4. Pasemah megalithic statues are also a media in ceremonies or rituals of ancestor spirit worship.
5. According to *puyang* concept, Pasemah megalithic statues are always dynamic and no repetition, both in shapes and in postures.
6. Pasemah megalithic statues as a monument of ancestor worship media were carved and positioned with the front and orientation toward any water source or river and hill or mountain around them.
7. Pasemah megalithic statues as a worship media were also carved and positioned by the patterns that were in relation or in companion with other megalithic artefacts.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

Pasemah megalithic statues as a worship media were the center point in any ritual closely related to activities and roles, such as: mantras, movements, sounds, and plays existing in the time. Based on the points of research conclusion above, in the future the Pasemah megalithic statues may base and inspire the works of fine arts, especially for creating monumental outdoor works including architectural works which should not ignore the negative impacts of monuments to



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their surroundings and thus they will be valuable and beneficial to the survival and life of all creatures, integral to global preservation.

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