The Two alun-alun of Malang (1930–1960)

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Introduction

Arguably the most prominent characteristic of a typical town in Java is the presence of an alun-alun or town square. In general an alun-alun is a large open space; ordinary citizens often think of it as a field in the centre of the town. In some cities the alun-alun takes the form of a square studded with shady trees. An alun-alun is usually imagined as the core of the Javanese town, in part because it typically forms the ‘heart’ of a whole network of streets. But more significantly, the alun-alun carries symbolic significance because, traditionally, it was located directly in front of the palace (kraton), or regional kabupaten, the traditional seats of Javanese power. The traditional model on which all such alun-alun drew and in terms of which they were imagined was the Kraton of Yogyakarta. This was located on an imaginary line, which connected the Southern Ocean, the southern alun-alun, the palace itself, the northern alun-alun, and Mount Merapi on a north–south axis.

In the traditional configuration, on one side of an alun-alun would stand the royal audience hall (siti hinggil) or the residence of the Regent (kabupaten). If we were to compare the palace or the residence of the bupati to a private house, the alun-alun would be its front and sometimes also its back yard. The discussion of the role of the alun-alun in the development of Javanese cities is, therefore, very important, because it formed the centre from which the development of a town was initiated.

People’s views of the alun-alun are many and various. Traditionally a banyan tree planted on the alun-alun was associated with mystical powers, as for instance the two banyan trees exactly in the centre of the alun-alun in Yogyakarta and Surakarta. When one of the banyan trees in the middle of the alun-alun of Yogyakarta collapsed in 1989, many people grew anxious and interpreted the falling of the tree as an ominous sign. Shortly afterwards the ruler of Yogyakarta, Sri Sultan Hamengkubuwono IX, died and his death reinforced the belief of many people in the magical properties of the tree.

Among modern people, whose historical appreciation of the Javanese town may not be very strong, an alun-alun may simply be understood as a public space which can be used as a playground, as a place for dating, practising sports, selling things, even for herding cattle or as a place for conducting ceremonies on such special days, such as the celebration of Indonesian
Independence. For Muslim citizens, it can also be the large space needed to hold Eid prayers, such as those observed at the end of the Ramadan.

A glimpse back in history shows that the alun-alun is definitely not just an empty space, which can be used for various profane activities. At certain periods in the past, it has been a potent symbol pregnant with meaning. The most general and powerful significance associated with the alun-alun has been as a formal space closely related to official (royal) ceremonies, a function which it developed during the periods of traditional kingdoms. There is also evidence that the alun-alun has had spiritual meaning. This connection with royal spiritual power is drawn from the physical proximity of the alun-alun to the residence of a ruler. Even in the Muslim state of Mataram – in contravention of the strict monotheism of Islam – the alun-alun was one of the elements used in the cult of the glorification of the king (Moertono 1985:84).

The alun-alun has also been a meeting ground for a ruler and his subjects. It is on the alun-alun that all the king’s guests had to wait before being admitted into his presence (seba). Therefore, the alun-alun is also called the paseban. The common people, who are the kawula or citizens of the kingdom, also think of the alun-alun as being the symbol of democracy because at this place they can stage a protest against the bureaucratic apparatus of the kingdom or even against the ruler himself. Such protests took the form of a pepe: that is, the practice of lying or sitting in the full sun until their ruler approached them.

Because it was a space imbued with special significance in terms of the concept of Javanese power, alun-alun attracted the attention of the Dutch colonial government when it sought to establish its authority in Java. This newcomer also wanted to use the alun-alun as a representation of its recently won power in Javanese territory. It therefore signified its ascent to power by symbolically appropriating this public space and building the accommodation for the Dutch Resident or Assistent-Resident on the alun-alun opposite the palace or the Regent’s residence. The most obvious example of this is in Yogyakarta, where the house of the Dutch Resident (nowadays known as Loji Kebon) and the outward and visible sign of the Dutch military presence, Fort Vredenburg (or Loji Besar), were built exactly opposite the palace. The erection of these colonial buildings on the alun-alun could be interpreted as a symbolic conquest of the alun-alun area (Surjomihardjo 2000:21). With the encroachment of these new symbols of power around the alun-alun, the power of Javanese traditional leaders began to wane, or even in some instances to disappear completely.

During the colonial period, the weakening of the authority of traditional power-holders inevitably affected the people’s interpretation of the alun-alun. It was no longer regarded with respect as an official space belonging to the