

THE DISCOVERY OF THE GANESHA STATUE AT BUKIT MAS SITE, LIMBANG SARAWAK: A DISCUSSION

Penemuan Patung Ganesha di Tapak Bukit Mas, Limbang Sarawak: Satu Perbincangan

Gregory Kiyai @ Keai¹

Visual Arts Department, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Malaya

¹*gregory.kiyai@um.edu.my*

Dihantar: 21 Feb 2024 / Diterima: 12 Mac 2024 / Terbit: 31 Disember 2024

Abstract

In 1922, a significant artifact was accidentally uncovered at Bukit Mas, Limbang: a statue of Ganesha, the Hindu deity depicted with an elephant head and a human body. This discovery is noteworthy, particularly given the limited historical research on Limbang. To address this, the research will employ a historical analysis method, previous scholarly studies, and historical records to contextualize the Ganesha statue within Limbang's historical narrative. This approach aims to initiate a detailed discussion about the statue's significance and its implications for our understanding of the region's past.

Keywords: Ganesha Statue, Bukit Mas, Limbang History, Hindu Deity,

Abstrak

Pada tahun 1922, sebuah artifak penting secara tidak sengaja ditemui di Bukit Mas, Limbang: sebuah patung Ganesha, dewa Hindu yang digambarkan dengan kepala gajah dan badan manusia. Penemuan ini penting, terutamanya memandangkan kajian sejarah mengenai Limbang yang terhad. Untuk menangani hal ini, penyelidikan ini akan menggunakan kaedah analisis sejarah, memeriksa sumber arkib, kajian akademik terdahulu, dan rekod sejarah untuk mengkontekstualisasikan patung Ganesha dalam naratif sejarah Limbang. Pendekatan ini bertujuan untuk memulakan perbincangan terperinci mengenai kepentingan patung tersebut dan implikasinya terhadap pemahaman kita tentang masa lalu kawasan tersebut.

Kata kunci: Patung Ganesha, Bukit Mas, Sejarah Limbang, Dewa Hindu,

Introduction

It's fascinating that Hinduism reached Borneo as early as the 5th century or possibly earlier. Evidence includes an epigraphical record from Kotei, which details Hindu rites performed by Brahmins, and a cave at Kombeng with various Brahmanical and Buddhist images, including a notable stone statue of Ganesa. Although this Ganesa statue, which features him with four hands and typical attributes, is traditionally dated to the 5th century based on the Kutei epigraphs, stylistic analysis suggests it is more likely from the 8th century (Wahyudi, Deny Yudo, Munandar, Agus Aris, and Setyani, Turita Indah, 2021).

The *Śhiva-Buddhist* phenomenon in the archipelago emerged notably around the 13th century AD, during the Singhasari Kingdom, as evidenced by the Sutasoma manuscript from the era of King Kertanegara. However, it is important to note that the Singhasari kings preceding Kertanegara were also recognized as adherents of both Śhiva and Buddhism. To understand this phenomenon fully, one must trace the origins back to the early days of the Singhasari Kingdom. The Śhiva-Buddhist concept continued through the Majapahit period and extended to the Balinese and Malay kingdoms until the decline of Majapahit in the 15th century. This enduring religious coalition is reflected in the architecture, decoration, and reliefs of temples, with four specific temples exemplifying this blend of religious traditions (Wahyudi, Deny Yudo, Munandar, Agus Aris, and Setyani, Turita Indah, 2021).

Early Hindu-Buddhist religious travelers utilized Malaysian waters as part of their voyages from China to India across the seas. After returning to China in the early 5th century CE, these journeys began in Sri Lanka. The ships sailed to the Andaman Islands, navigating with the monsoon winds, then proceeded through the Strait of Malacca towards Java or Borneo. They would wait for the monsoon winds before returning to China. By the 7th century CE, according to the Chinese traveler I-Ching, many Buddhist monks were traveling regularly between China and India. I-Ching started his journey in 672 CE to study Sanskrit, sailing to the Bujang Valley to board a royal vessel to India and study at Nalanda University (Sullivan, 1958). This study aims to explore the discovery of a Ganesha statue in northern Sarawak, specifically in Bukit Mas, Limbang, Sarawak.

Ganesha in the Historiography of Southeast Asia

Hinduism spread throughout Maritime Southeast Asia, bringing with it cultural elements such as Ganesha. Statues of Ganesha, often found near Shiva sanctuaries, exhibit specific regional influences in the Hindu art of Java, Bali, and Borneo. As Hindus gradually migrated to Indochina, Ganesha appeared in modified forms in Burma, Cambodia, and Thailand. In this region, Hinduism and Buddhism coexisted, resulting in mutual influences seen in Ganesha's iconography. In Myanmar, a legend tells of the King of Brahmas, Arsi, who lost a wager to the King of *Devas, Śakra (Thagya Min)*. As agreed, *Śakra* decapitated Arsi but then placed an elephant's head on his body, transforming him into Ganesha (Rupwate, 1980).

In Thailand, Ganesha is referred to as *Phra Phikanet* or *Phra Phikanesuan*. He is revered as the deity of fortune, success, and the remover of obstacles, and is linked to the arts, education, and commerce. The Department of Fine Arts in Thailand features Ganesha in its emblem, and many leading television channels and production companies maintain shrines in his honor. Before starting the filming of movies or TV shows, it is customary to conduct Hindu rituals, offering prayers and tributes to Ganesha. There are numerous shrines to Ganesha across Thailand, with one of the most esteemed located at the Royal Brahmin Temple in central Bangkok near the Giant Swing, housing some of the oldest Ganesha images. Another significant image is a 10th-century bronze statue found in Phang-Na, inscribed in both Tamil and Thai. The Hindu temple Wat Phra Sri Umadevi in Silom also has a Ganesha statue that was brought from India in the late 19th century (Moro,2019).

In Indonesia, European scholars refer to Ganesha as the 'Indonesian God of Wisdom.' Bandung even features a Ganesha Street. A 1st-century AD Ganesha statue was discovered on the summit of Mount Raksa on Panaitan Island, part of Ujung Kulon National Park in West Java. Although there are no temples dedicated solely to Ganesha, he is commonly found in every Shiva shrine across the islands. An 11th-century Ganesha statue, shown in the picture below, was unearthed in eastern Java, Kediri, and is now housed at The Museum of Indian Art (Museum für Indische Kunst) in Berlin-Dahlem. Additionally, a 9th-century Ganesha statue is located in the western cella (room) of the Prambanan Hindu temple (Ong,2019) (refer fig.1).

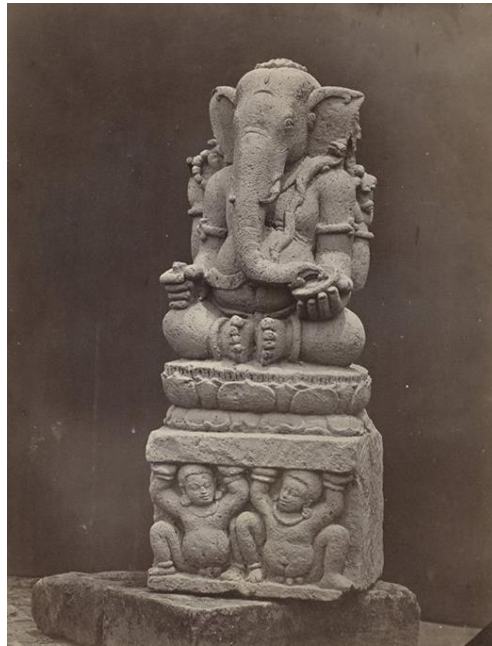


Figure 1: Ganesha Statue (Four armed Ganesha with a Pedestal, Decorated with Two Supporting Gana Figures, Dieng Plateau, Wonosobo District, Central Java Province, 10th century)

Source: Isidore van Kinsbergen (1864).

According to Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya in their book *A History of Malaysia* (2017), a beautiful Ganesha statue was accidentally discovered in 1985 during the construction of a building in Palembang, Indonesia. Although the exact age of the artifact couldn't be definitively determined, it is believed that Hinduism arrived in Palembang as early as the 8th century. Since the 1980s, Indonesian and French archaeological teams have been collaborating on excavations at the Palembang site, and between 1990 and 1991, they unearthed over 55,000 artifacts. This discovery added a new dimension to the historiography of the arrival of Hindu-Buddhism in Southeast Asia.



Figure 2: The Ganesha Statue in The Bujang Valley

Source: Bujang Valley Museum Collection

The discovery of a Ganesha statue (refer fig.2) in the Bujang Valley represents a crucial archaeological find that highlights the influence of Hinduism in the region. Unearthed at the Bujang Valley site in Kedah, Malaysia, this statue supports the notion that the area was a key hub for trade and the spread of Hindu-Buddhist religion from the 7th to the 13th centuries AD. Carved from granite, the statue depicts Ganesha, the Hindu deity with an elephant's head, seated in a cross-legged position. Ganesha is a significant figure in Hinduism, symbolizing wisdom and prosperity. This finding underscores the strong historical connections between the Bujang Valley and India, revealing its role as an important center for religious and commercial activities (Sullivan, M. (1958).

Hindu-Buddhist Culture Could Make Its Way to Sarawak

The Southeast Asian archipelago (modern Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines) remains, as it has always been, a region of dispersed lands, subsistence agriculture, and culturally distinct communities. Lacking economic surplus and social cohesion, this area might have remained politically undeveloped indefinitely. However, by the 1st century A.D., major metropolitan centers in India and China had begun international trade, with sea routes passing through the archipelago. Likely in

response to the arrival of ships carrying sought-after goods such as ceramics, textiles, and metalwork, a series of small, trade-based kingdoms emerged. (Wang Gungwu, 1964: Gill, 1968).

i. Trade

The early influence of Hindu-Buddhist culture in Sarawak was due to the commercial activities of Chinese and Indian traders. Sarawak's strategic location and its attractive trade goods such as rattan, resin, and exotic forest products made it an appealing destination for traders who sailed to Sarawak while selling their goods like ceramics, silk, and perfumes. The intricate historical records of migration and cultural exchange in Sarawak also require consideration of the archaeological evidence of early settlements. Since 1952, the Sarawak Museum's excavations at various sites in the Sarawak delta and further north along the coast have uncovered several tons of Chinese and Siamese export ceramics from the 10th to the 15th centuries. The presence of these artifacts suggests that Sarawak had a sufficiently large population during this period to create a market for Chinese traders, who likely traded these goods for forest products collected by the local people (Harrison 1956). Additionally, various Indian artifacts, such as gold jewelry, a Gupta Buddha statue, and a figure of Ganesha, the Hindu elephant-god and protector of travelers indicate early trading interactions between India and Sarawak (Gill, 1968).

The Sarawak River delta benefits from a prominent landmark, Mount Santubong, with its limestone peak visible from miles out to sea. Artifacts from India and China found in the delta suggest that a number of small trading settlements flourished here between the 7th and 14th centuries. After this period, trade shifted north to Brunei Bay, aligning with Brunei's rise as an international trading hub. Other notable excavated sites in Sarawak include Song on the Rejang River and Miri on the northern coast, both of which feature Chinese ceramics from after the 14th century (B. Harrison 1956: Lamb, Alastair, 1977). Tanjong Kubor, Tanjong Tegok, Bongkisam, Muara Tebas, Bukit Bako, Sungei Ja'ong, Sungei Buah), along the Sarawak coast and inland (Song, Niah, Miri), and in the north near Brunei (Kota Batu) are trade routes in Sarawak based on the discovery of artifacts from China and India. (Perret and Sauffi, 2019).

ii. Politics

The second influence is from politics, as the early kingdoms of Sarawak and Borneo were once influenced by the Majapahit Empire before falling under the power of the Bruneian Sultanate. Between the 7th and 16th centuries, three successive kingdoms established commercial empires in the archipelago. Shrivijaya, with its capital near Palembang in southeastern Sumatra, ruled from the 7th to the 12th centuries. Majapahit, located along the Brantas River in central Java, held sway from the 13th to the 15th centuries. Finally, Malacca, situated on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula, dominated from the 15th to the 16th centuries. Shrivijaya, focusing primarily on trade through the Straits of Malacca, did not seem to extend its control over Borneo. In contrast, Majapahit and Malacca, along with Ming China at different times, required tribute from settlements along the Sarawak coast and Brunei Bay. A 14th-century Javanese poem, the *Nagarakretagama*, mentions Brunei, the coastal Melanau, and several locations further south in Sarawak as Borneo's regions or peoples that owed tribute to Majapahit (Gill, 1968).

In *Negarakertagama*, Prapanca recorded the existence of several kingdoms in northern Borneo. These kingdoms included Sawaku, Kalka, Samadong, Saribas, and Melano (Yamin, 1974). The toponymic aspects of these names suggest similarities with some modern names in Sarawak: Kalka corresponds to Kalaka, Samadong to Samarahan, Sawaku to Sarawak, and Melano to the Melanau people in Sarawak. Additionally, there is a place called Tanjung Melano in Lundu. Whether this refers to Melano as a race or a location, it clearly indicates a historical connection between Sarawak and other regions in the Malay World (Mansor, 2019).

Ganesha Statue in Bukit Mas, Limbang

The Limbang Division is situated in the northeastern part of Sarawak, bordered by Brunei to the west, Brunei Bay to the north, Sabah, Kalimantan to the east, and the Baram District (Miri Division) to the south. The Temburong District in Brunei is located centrally within this area, making Limbang Division centrally positioned. It is the fifth of Sarawak's eleven divisions. The Limbang Division includes two districts: Limbang and Lawas, as well as three sub-districts: Nanga Medamit, Sundar, and Trusan, with a total area of 7,790 square kilometers. The

division has a population of 88,400 people, comprising Malays, Kedayan, Chinese, Iban, Bisaya, Lun Bawang, and various other ethnic groups (The digital portal for the Limbang Division Administration).

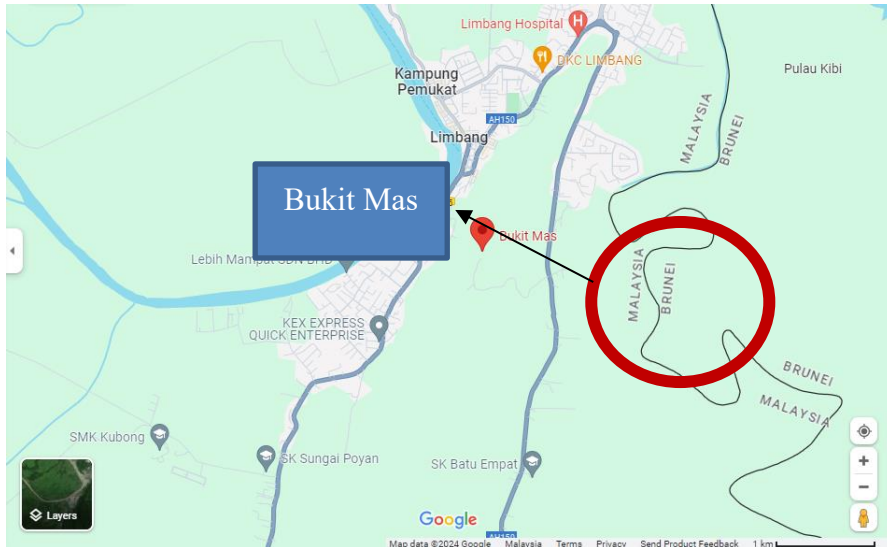


Figure 3: Bukit Mas Maps
(Source: Google maps)

Bukit Mas, situated in the town of Limbang in Northern Sarawak, is a prominent 210-meter high limestone outcrop covered in jungle that overlooks the town (refer fig.3). This site holds fascinating historical and heritage significance for Limbang. Bukit Mas has revealed two notable discoveries, although no ceramics were found. The first was a collection of 25 gold objects uncovered after a landslide in 1899, and the second, a stone Ganesha (elephant-headed Hindu god), which will be the focus of this discussion. These discoveries are thought to exhibit Javanese influence and were likely crafted in Java, with the gold objects dating from 1200 to 1500 CE and the Ganesha statue from the 13th to 14th centuries. No other artifacts have been found at Bukit Mas, and there is no evidence suggesting that the site was inhabited or used as a religious shrine (Harrison, 1969 and Druce,2020).



**Figure 4: Early Discovery of The Ganesha Statue
at Bukit Mas, Limbang**

Source: Mr. F.F. Boulton (1922).

In 1921, during excavation work at Bukit Mas in Limbang, near the residence of Mr. F.F. Boulton, a significant archaeological find was unearthed, a stone sculpture of Ganesha, the elephant-headed deity revered for his wisdom (refer fig.4). At that time, Boulton served as the Limbang Resident and subsequently sent the statue to the Sarawak Museum in Kuching for preservation. The Ganesha statue stands 24 inches tall and 12 inches wide. This image and statue of Ganesha are said to be similar to those found at Mount Kombeng in Southeast Borneo. Experts suggest that this Ganesha statue originated from India and may have been present in Limbang around the 6th or 7th century CE. Based on visual observation, this Ganesha statue resembles other types of Ganesha statues from India. The features that identify this form include (i) an elephant-shaped head, (ii) three eyes, (iii) four arms, (iv) a round belly, and (v) a snake serving as the sacred thread (Moulton, 1922).

The stone sculpture of Ganesha from Bukit Mas is believed to have direct Hindu origins, with varying scholarly opinions on its dating. According to Professor Dr. N.J. Krom of Leiden University, the statue dates back to the 6th or 7th century. Sir John Marshall, the Director-General of Archaeology of India, suggests that it may be somewhat earlier than the 13th century. In contrast, Professor Sastri from India

proposes that the statue is likely from the 13th to 14th century and notes its possible Javanese influence. These differing assessments highlight the complexities of dating and the cultural exchanges reflected in the artwork (Moulton, 1922).

The impact of Hindu-Buddhist traditions on northern Borneo is evident through the discovery of various Buddhist artifacts in Santubong, Sarawak. Additionally, the unearthing of a Ganesha statue in Limbang, Sarawak, sheds light on the religious exchanges between the Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms of Indonesia and the region. These findings illustrate the significant cultural and religious interactions that influenced northern Borneo during this period (Mansor, 2019). The major Indo-Malay kingdoms of Sri Vijaya, Javaka, and Majapahit established contact with the coastal communities of Borneo. This is supported by archaeological findings from the Sarawak Museum, which unearthed significant Indian relics such as a sixth or seventh-century Ganesh statue at Limbang and a ninth-century Buddha statue at Santubong, located at the mouth of the Sarawak River. However, there is scant evidence to suggest that this influence extended beyond the coastal regions. The geographical position of Borneo on the periphery of these empires, coupled with the potential threat of piracy, likely limited the extent of their influence. Nonetheless, it is plausible that some Malay settlements existed along the island's coastal fringes during this period (Kechot, Aman, & Shahidi, 2017).

Ganesha Statue in Sarawak Museum Collection

This Ganesha statue is now exhibited in the archaeology section of the Borneo Culture Museum to educate the public about Sarawak's history before Malaysia was formed. Historical artifacts play a crucial role in bridging the gap between past and present, offering a tangible connection to bygone eras. One notable example of this educational function is the Ganesha statue currently exhibited in the archaeology section of the Borneo Culture Museum. This artifact not only enriches the museum's collection but also serves as a vital educational tool, providing visitors with insights into Sarawak's history prior to the formation of Malaysia.



Figure 5: Ganesha Statue

Source: Sarawak Museum Collection

The Ganesha statue, a representation of the Hindu deity Ganesha, is a significant artifact that highlights the cultural influences present in Sarawak long before Malaysia's establishment. As a symbol of wisdom and learning, Ganesha's presence in Sarawak underscores the region's historical connections with Hinduism, which spread through trade and cultural exchange. By displaying this statue, the Borneo Culture Museum offers a unique opportunity for visitors to explore and understand the rich tapestry of Sarawak's historical and cultural heritage.

The importance of such exhibits lies not only in their aesthetic value but also in their educational potential. Museums serve as custodians of cultural memory, preserving artifacts that narrate the stories of different eras. By situating the Ganesha statue in the archaeology section, the Borneo Culture Museum places it within a broader context of historical exploration. This strategic placement allows visitors to see the statue as part of a larger narrative about the region's ancient past, thereby enhancing their comprehension of historical developments and cultural interactions.

Furthermore, the exhibit aims to educate the public about Sarawak's history before the formation of Malaysia. This period, often overshadowed by more recent events, holds valuable lessons about the region's development and the diverse influences that shaped its identity.

Through educational programs and interpretive displays, the museum helps visitors grasp the significance of artifacts like the Ganesa statue, providing a deeper understanding of how past civilizations and cultural exchanges have influenced contemporary Sarawak.

Conclusion

The discovery of the Ganesha statue in Limbang, Sarawak, represents a pivotal moment in understanding the early history of Sarawak. This statue is not merely a valuable piece of art but also a key to understanding cultural exchanges and the evolution of societies in the region. Examining this find provides crucial insights into Sarawak's historical connections with other cultures and its early societal development.

The Ganesha statue, which depicts the Hindu deity with an elephant head and human body, indicates the influence of Hindu culture in Sarawak during ancient times. Finding this statue in Limbang suggests that there was significant cultural interaction between Sarawak and India, likely through trade routes or religious dissemination. This discovery is important evidence that Sarawak was part of cultural exchanges with major civilizations long ago. Additionally, the statue enhances our understanding of the origins and early development of Sarawak's communities. It reflects the interactions between local populations and foreign cultures that shaped their lifestyles and beliefs. The statue also offers insights into trade activities and religious influences in the region, showcasing Sarawak's role in Southeast Asia's trade and cultural networks.

Historically, the Ganesha statue is a precious artifact that illuminates the art and religious practices of the time. Researching the statue provides valuable information about the religious and cultural practices of past societies, filling gaps in our knowledge about Sarawak's early history. The discovery also highlights Sarawak's broader historical and cultural significance. It shows that Sarawak was actively involved in cultural exchanges and played a role in regional trade networks across Southeast Asia. The Ganesha statue is a testament to how Sarawak served as a crossroads for various traditions and beliefs.

In summary, the Ganesha statue's discovery in Limbang is significant not just for its artistic value but also for the insights it offers into early Sarawak's history and culture. It sheds light on cultural

interactions and societal development in ancient times, as well as Sarawak's place within a larger historical and cultural framework. Continued research on this find will further deepen our understanding of Sarawak's historical connections and its role in the broader world.

List of Reference

Journal and Book

- Andaya, B. W., & Andaya, L. Y. (2017). *A history of Malaysia*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Chang, F. P. (2006). History of Sarawak from 6th century (Buddhist and Hindu influence) to 19th century when Sarawak was under the rule of Brunei Sultanate. Paper presented at Sarawakiana, Sarawak State Library. 12 April 2006.
- Druce, S. C. (2020). The 900 to 1300 CE Asian trade boom and the rise and decline of commerce in Brunei and other northwest coast Borneo polities. *The Brunei Museum Journal*. 1(1): 9-13.
- Gill, S. H. S. (1968). *Selected aspects of Sarawak art*. Columbia University.
- Harrison, T. (1949). Gold and Indian influences in West Borneo. *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. 22(4): 33–110.
- Harrison, T. (1969). The golden hoard of Limbang. *Brunei Museum Journal*. 1(1): 57-71.
- Lamb, A. (1977). Tom Harrison and Indian influence in early Southeast Asia. *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. 50(1): 8–13.
- Mansor, S. (2019). Sayap Garuda in Sarawak and Sabah after the Second World War until the 1950s. *Indonesian Historical Studies*. 3(2): 107-115.
- Moro, P. A. (2019). Religion and the transmission of Thai musical heritage in Thailand and the United States. In *Music, education, and religion: Intersections and entanglements*.
- Moulton, J. C. (1922). Hindu image from Sarawak. *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. (85): 210-211.
- Ong, N. S. (2019). The unfolding of the play: Javanese social structure in the reliefs of Borobudur and Loro Jonggrang. *Doctoral Dissertation*. National University of Singapore.
- Perret, D., & bin Sauffi, M. S. (2019). The Sungai Jaong and Bongkisam Archaeological Project, Sarawak, Malaysia. *Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient*. 105:331-342.

Gregory Kiyai @ Keai

- Rupwate, D. D. (1980). The Lokamanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak's *Srimadbhagavadgita-rahasya* in the light of the saintly tradition of Maharashtra (Doctoral dissertation).
- Sullivan, M. (1958). Excavations in Kedah and Province Wellesley, 1957. *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. 31(1):188-219.
- Wahyudi, D. Y., Munandar, A. A., & Setyani, T. I. (2021). The Śhiva-Buddhist concept in the temple of Singhasari-Majapahit periods. *International Review of Humanities Studies*. 6(2): 19. <https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/irhs/vol6/iss2/19>
- Wang, G. (1964). *Malaysia: A survey*. F.A. Praeger.
- Yamin, M. (1974). *Gajah Mada*. Jakarta: Balai Pustaka.