

The Myth Of The Staircase and The Construction of Collective Memory: A Symbolic Study At The Royal Cemetery Of Imogiri, Bantul, D.I. Yogyakarta

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Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji mitos anak tangga di Makam Raja-Raja Imogiri sebagai sistem tanda yang berfungsi mengonstruksi dan mempertahankan memori kolektif komunitas Jawa. Penelitian terdahulu cenderung menempatkan Makam Imogiri semata-mata dalam kerangka pelestarian warisan budaya atau kajian arsitektur sakral, sehingga dimensi semiotik mitos sebagai medium konstruksi memori kolektif belum mendapat perhatian analitis yang memadai. Dengan mengintegrasikan teori mitologi semiotik Roland Barthes, konsep lieux de mémoire Pierre Nora, dan kerangka deskripsi tebal (thick description) Clifford Geertz, penelitian ini mengajukan argumen bahwa mitos anak tangga di Imogiri beroperasi sebagai sistem semiotik berlapis yang tidak sekadar merepresentasikan kepercayaan, melainkan secara aktif memformat ulang memori kolektif lintas generasi. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode etnografi interpretatif, mencakup observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam dengan juru kunci, peziarah, dan tokoh adat, serta analisis dokumen historis. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa mitos penghitungan anak tangga yang jumlahnya tidak pernah sama, narasi Tumenggung Endranata yang tubuhnya dikubur di anak tangga sebagai hukuman simbolik, dan makna tangga sebagai representasi 409 hari siklus gestasi manusia merupakan tiga lapisan sistem tanda yang saling memperkuat. Ketiga narasi ini tidak berdiri sendiri, melainkan bekerja secara sinergis untuk mengabsahkan hierarki kosmologis, melanggengkan norma kesetiaan kultural, dan mengintegrasikan peziarah ke dalam komunitas memori yang bersifat transhistoris. Kontribusi utama artikel ini adalah penawaran kerangka analisis "mitos sebagai teknologi memori kolektif" yang dapat diterapkan pada kajian situs sakral di kawasan Asia Tenggara.

Kata Kunci: Memori Kolektif, Mitos, Semiotik, Makam Imogiri, Situs Sakral, Kosmologi Jawa

Abstract

This article examines the myth of the staircase at the Royal Cemetery of Imogiri as a sign system that constructs and sustains the collective memory of the Javanese community. Prior scholarship has predominantly framed Imogiri within the discourse of cultural heritage preservation or sacred architecture, leaving its semiotic dimension as an active medium of collective memory construction analytically underexplored. By integrating Roland Barthes's semiological theory of myth, Pierre Nora's concept of lieux de mémoire, and Clifford Geertz's thick description, this study argues that the staircase myth at Imogiri operates as a multilayered semiotic system that does not merely represent belief but actively reformats collective memory across generations. The research employs a qualitative approach with interpretive ethnographic methods, encompassing participant observation, in-depth interviews with site guardians (juru

kunci), pilgrims, and traditional figures, and analysis of historical documents. Findings reveal that three interlocking mythic narratives—the uncountable stairs, the symbolic burial of the traitor Tumenggung Endranata within the staircase, and the 409 steps representing the human gestation cycle—constitute a mutually reinforcing sign system. These narratives function synergistically to legitimize cosmological hierarchy, perpetuate norms of cultural loyalty, and integrate pilgrims into a transhistorical community of memory. The study's principal contribution is the proposition of a "myth as collective memory technology" analytical framework applicable to the study of sacred sites across Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Collective Memory, Myth, Semiotics, Imogiri Cemetery, Sacred Sites, Javanese Cosmology

Introduction

The Royal Cemetery of Imogiri, situated in the hills of Bantul Regency, Special Region of Yogyakarta, constitutes one of the most symbolically significant royal burial sites in the Indonesian archipelago. Established during the reign of Sultan Agung Hanyokrokusumo (r. 1613–1645) as the final resting place for the rulers of Islamic Mataram and their descendants, the site operates not merely as a space of death but as an arena in which collective memory concerning power, cosmology, and cultural identity is constructed and continuously reproduced (Woodward, 2011). Access to the burial complex requires the ascent of hundreds of steep stone steps—popularly cited as numbering 409—which are not solely architectural elements but also the substrate upon which rich and layered mythological narratives proliferate.

Among these narratives, three primary myths concerning the staircase constitute the focal point of this study. The first is the belief, widely circulated among pilgrims and custodians alike, that the number of steps is never the same on the ascent and descent, and that whoever succeeds in counting them correctly will have their wishes granted. The second is the narrative of Tumenggung Endranata—a Mataram official condemned to death for betraying Sultan Agung to the Dutch colonial forces, whose body was interred within the staircase itself—which functions as a moral admonition physically incorporated into the sacred landscape. The third is the symbolic reading of the number 409 as representing the days of the human gestation cycle, connecting the pilgrim's physical ascent with a cosmological journey toward spiritual rebirth. Together, these three narratives constitute what this study terms the "staircase mythological complex."

Previous scholarship on Imogiri has concentrated primarily on architectural and sacred spatial dimensions (Priyotomo, 2018), the cultural values embedded in pilgrimage practice (Muhaimin, 2006), and the site's function as a space of accommodation between Islam and pre-Islamic Javanese tradition (Woodward, 2011). However, no study has systematically analyzed the staircase myths as a semiotic system functioning to construct collective memory. This lacuna is epistemologically significant, given that myth in the context of sacred sites does not operate solely as an expression of religious belief but as an active mechanism in the formation of communal identity and the intergenerational transmission of values (Barthes, 1972; Nora, 1989). Furthermore, within the framework of contemporary collective memory studies, sacred sites are increasingly recognized as "memory technologies" that integrate physical space, mythological narrative, and ritual practice into a coherent system (Assmann, 2011; Connerton, 1989). Nevertheless, the application of this framework to Javanese sacred sites—with their distinctive cosmology synthesizing Hindu-Buddhist, Islamic, and local belief elements—remains

severely limited in international academic literature. This constitutes an important analytical space that warrants systematic inquiry, particularly in advancing non-Eurocentric perspectives in collective memory and cultural semiotics studies. Proceeding from this gap, the study poses the following primary research question: how does the staircase myth at the Royal Cemetery of Imogiri operate as a semiotic system in constructing and sustaining the collective memory of the Javanese community? More specifically, this research aims to: (1) identify the semiotic layers within the staircase mythological complex; (2) analyze the mechanism through which these myths format collective memory; and (3) propose a conceptual framework of "myth as collective memory technology" as a theoretical contribution to the study of sacred sites in Southeast Asia. The novelty of this study resides in its synthesis of Barthesian semiotics, Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, and Javanese cosmology within a coherent analytical framework for investigating sacred sites, as well as in its critical reading of myth as an active—rather than merely reflective—mechanism in the construction of collective memory.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with an interpretive ethnographic design, enabling in-depth inquiry into the meanings constructed by ritual communities within the specific context of a sacred site (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interpretive paradigm was selected on the ontological assumption that social reality—including myth and collective memory—is constructed and contextual, and therefore cannot be understood independently of the perspectives of the actors involved. Ethnographic design was chosen for its capacity to integrate long-term participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis within a coherent methodological framework. Fieldwork was conducted at the Royal Cemetery Complex of Imogiri, Imogiri District, Bantul Regency, Special Region of Yogyakarta, Indonesia, over a six-month period through periodic visits including on the customarily designated pilgrimage days. Research participants were determined through purposive and snowball sampling, yielding an informant group comprising: (1) four juru kunci (hereditary custodians) who carry inherited traditional knowledge of the site; (2) twelve pilgrims from diverse social and geographical backgrounds; (3) three traditional figures or *abdi dalem* possessing institutional knowledge of ritual protocols and meanings; and (4) two local cultural scholars serving as triangulation sources.

Data were collected through three principal and mutually complementary techniques. First, participant observation was conducted to understand pilgrimage practice from the actor's perspective, including documenting how pilgrims interact with the staircase, verbal expressions and utterances during the ascent, and minor rituals accompanying the journey. Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to elicit mythic narratives, personal interpretations, and institutional knowledge. All interviews were recorded with the informed consent of participants and transcribed verbatim. Third, historical document analysis encompassed examination of written sources on Imogiri's history, court records, and relevant academic literature. Data were analyzed using semiotic analysis integrated with interpretive thematic analysis. The analytical procedure followed three stages. The first stage was denotative analysis: identification of the physical elements and narratives under examination. The second stage was connotative analysis: tracing the layers of meaning attached to these elements within Javanese cultural context. The third stage was mythological analysis in the Barthesian sense: identifying the ways in which myth absolutizes and naturalizes meanings that are in fact historical and cultural. Analysis was conducted in layers using a researcher-developed sign matrix, subsequently verified through member checking with key informants and peer

debriefing with specialists in semiotics and Javanese studies. Validity and reliability were secured through triangulation of sources, methods, and theories, and through a documented audit trail.

Results and Discussion

Three Layers of the Staircase Mythological Complex

Analysis of field data reveals that the staircase mythological complex at Imogiri is structured in three narrative layers operating synergistically. The first layer is the myth of uncountability—the belief that anyone who attempts to count the steps will invariably obtain a different total on the ascent and descent, and that success in counting them correctly portends the fulfillment of one's wishes. The second layer is the myth of Endranata's punishment—the narrative of a royal official interred within the steps as a sanction for political betrayal. The third layer is the myth of gestation—the symbolic reading of 409 steps as representing 409 days in the human gestation cycle, marking the journey toward spiritual perfection.

A significant finding from field observation is that these three layers are not conveyed separately or hierarchically by informants but are circulated together in a single flowing discourse. A juru kunci, for instance, would narrate the uncountability myth, then organically transition to the Endranata narrative as an explanation of why the staircase is "living" and responsive, before connecting both to the gestation meaning as a framework for spiritual meaning-making. This narrative flow exemplifies what Geertz identified as a web of meaning—a cultural text comprehensible only in its totality.

The Myth of Uncountability: The Episteme of Mystery and the Legitimation of Power

The myth of the uncountable staircase constitutes a canonical instance of second-order semiotic operation in the Barthesian sense. At the denotative level, the claim that "the number of steps differs on ascent and descent" is an empirical statement open to verification—or falsification. At the mythological level, however, this statement is elevated into a signifier for a far more complex signified: that the space of Imogiri lies beyond ordinary rationality, that it obeys a different logic accessible only to those possessing sufficient spiritual depth. This process—the transformation of an empirical claim into a cosmological statement—is precisely what Barthes (1972) identifies as the mechanism of ideological naturalization. What is analytically significant is that this myth simultaneously functions as a mechanism of exclusion and inclusion within the community of memory. The inability to count the steps correctly is interpreted not as cognitive failure but as confirmation of the site's sacredness—thereby reinforcing respect for the site and, implicitly, for the royal power hierarchy it represents. One pilgrim informant reported that his failure to count was not a source of shame but rather "proof that this is indeed no ordinary place."

Within the dimension of collective memory, the myth of uncountability operates as what Nora identifies as the symbolic dimension of a lieu de mémoire. It renders the staircase a space filled with transhistorical memory—not only concerning the entombed kings but concerning the relationship between humankind and the transcendent, continuously renegotiated in every act of pilgrimage. The myth thus does not represent a pre-existing memory but actively produces the condition of possibility for collective memory to be continually formed and renewed.

The Myth of Endranata's Punishment: The Traitor's Body as a Moral Monument

The narrative of Tumenggung Endranata presents a different yet complementary dimension of the staircase mythological complex. According to narratives recounted

consistently by the juru kunci, Endranata was a Mataram official who supplied the Dutch colonial forces with intelligence on Sultan Agung's troop movements. He was subsequently condemned to death by decapitation, and his body was interred in three separate locations: his head at the entrance gateway, his torso within the staircase itself, and his legs at the base of the complex. His tomb, distinguished by a discoloration visible against the surrounding steps, functions as a conspicuous visual marker.

From a semiotic perspective, the body of Endranata interred within the staircase constitutes a sign with a distinctive characteristic: it is a sign immanent within a structure through which every pilgrim must pass. Each time a person ascends the steps, they literally walk over the traitor's tomb—an action carrying a dual symbolic charge. On one hand, it represents an eternal punishment continuously executed by every pilgrim, largely without their full conscious awareness. On the other hand, it operates as a moral warning embedded in the body through repetitive practice: that betrayal of the royal hierarchy carries consequences that transcend physical death. Theoretically, the Endranata myth can be read as an instance of what Assmann (2011) identifies as counter-memory integrated into the cultural memory canon. In contrast to the heroic narratives associated with the kings buried above, the Endranata narrative represents the negative pole of the same value system: loyalty, hierarchy, and integrity toward royal authority. By positioning both within the same spatial complex, Imogiri produces a comprehensive normative system—offering a positive model for emulation alongside a negative model to be avoided. This is a mechanism of identity construction through contrast, rendered effective precisely because it is embedded in a shared physical experience.

The Myth of Gestation: The Staircase as Cosmological Metaphor

The symbolic reading of 409 steps as representing the days of the human gestation cycle constitutes the most explicitly cosmological layer of the mythological complex. The number 409 refers to the traditional Javanese calculation of pregnancy duration within a calendar system that integrates solar and lunar reckonings. In the interpretation circulated among informants, each step represents one day of the journey from non-being to being, from the lower realm to the realm of life—and, in parallel, from the profane world to the sacredness of the royal tomb. This gestation metaphor carries profound semiotic implications. By framing the ascent within the metaphor of birth, the narrative integrates the pilgrim into a cosmological cycle that transcends both historical and personal dimensions. The pilgrim does not merely visit a royal tomb; they re-enact a fundamental ontogenetic journey—from potentiality to actuality, from the profane to the sacred. Within the Javanese cosmological framework that understands the microcosm as a reflection of the macrocosm, the individual pilgrim's journey becomes participation in a larger universal order. The resonance between this gestation myth and the concept of *axis mundi* in comparative religion is striking. Eliade (1959) identified the *axis mundi*—the vertical axis connecting three cosmic levels: the celestial, the terrestrial, and the chthonic—as one of the most universal categories of religious experience. The Imogiri staircase, which literally ascends from the base to the hilltop where the royal tombs are located, constitutes an architectural realization of this concept within the specific idiom of Javanese cosmology. What is distinctive about the Imogiri context is the way the gestation myth adds a temporal layer to the spatial dimension of the *axis mundi*: the upward journey is not only movement through space but also a repetition of a fundamental temporal journey—from birth to maturity, from life through death toward renewed life.

The Synergistic Mechanism: Myth as Collective Memory Technology

The three mythological layers analyzed above do not operate independently but in a synergistic relation that mutually reinforces each and, collectively, constitutes what this study conceptualizes as "collective memory technology." In this framework, technology is understood not in a mechanical sense but in its broader meaning: a set of organized procedures, instruments, and practices that produce specific social effects—in this case, the construction and reproduction of collective memory. This synergistic mechanism operates on three distinct levels. At the cognitive level, the three myths provide a complete interpretive schema: the uncountability myth generates an epistemological orientation (how one comes to know in this place), the Endranata myth provides a moral schema (what is punished and what is valued), and the gestation myth offers a cosmological framework (how the journey is meaningful within a larger order). At the affective level, the three myths together create a rich emotional experience: the sense of mystery and humility from the uncountability myth, the blend of awe and moral vigilance from the Endranata narrative, and the sense of transcendent meaning and connection from the gestation myth. At the level of practice, all three myths are stored within and reproduced through the same physical act: the ascent of the staircase.

The integration of these three levels produces what collective memory literature identifies as simultaneously "embodied memory" and "meaningful memory": a memory not merely remembered in the mind but lived in the body and comprehended within a framework of meaning that transcends individual experience. This is the optimal condition for the long-term durability of collective memory. Each generation of pilgrims ascending the steps of Imogiri not only inherits mythological narrative but actively reproduces it through an identical bodily act—creating the memory continuity that Connerton (1989) terms "commemorative ceremonies" in its most fundamental dimension. From a comparative perspective, the "myth as collective memory technology" framework proposed here carries relevance beyond the Imogiri context. Studies of sacred sites across diverse traditions—from ancient trees at Iranian sacred sites to the cosmological architecture of Mesoamerica—reveal an analogous pattern: myth, physical space, and ritual practice converge to create resilient collective memory systems. What is distinctive about the Javanese context is the way all three elements are integrated within a single architectural artifact—the staircase—of extraordinary symbolic density.

Contemporary Dynamics: The Challenge of Mythic Transmission

The study also identifies contemporary dynamics relevant to understanding the transmission and transformation of myth under conditions of modernity. Younger generations of pilgrims, who frequently access information about Imogiri through digital platforms, tend to possess more fragmentary knowledge of the staircase myths. They are acquainted with the uncountability myth as a form of "viral challenge"—some attempt to count while recording videos—yet are less familiar with the deeper layers of the Endranata and gestation myths. This phenomenon presents a theoretically meaningful tension. On one hand, the staircase myth demonstrates high adaptive capacity—it has entered digital circulation and reaches a broader audience. On the other hand, this digitization process appears to shallow its semiotic depth, reducing the multilayered sign system to a mere "unique fact" fit for social media sharing. This is a form of what Nora (1989) identifies as modernity's threat to *milieux de mémoire*: when the organic environment in which memory lives spontaneously is replaced by thinner, more distributed representations. The responses of the *juru kunci* to these dynamics vary but are consistent in one respect: they emphasize the indispensability of direct physical experience—the act of actually ascending the staircase—as the condition for deep comprehension of the

myth. This reinforces Connerton's theoretical argument about the primacy of embodied practice in the formation of collective memory: digital representation, however accurate, cannot substitute for the physical experience that constitutes the primary medium of memory transmission at this site.

Conclusion

This study has advanced and substantiated the argument that the staircase mythological complex at the Royal Cemetery of Imogiri operates as a multilayered semiotic system that actively constructs and sustains the collective memory of the Javanese community. Through the analytical integration of Barthesian semiotics, Nora's lieux de mémoire, the Halbwachs-Connerton-Assmann collective memory tradition, and Javanese cosmology, the study has demonstrated that the three mythological layers—uncountability, Endranata's punishment, and gestation—do not merely represent pre-existing belief but actively produce the condition of possibility for collective memory to be continually formed, renewed, and internalized through ritual practice.

The study's principal theoretical contribution is the conceptualization of "myth as collective memory technology"—a framework that repositions myth not as a passive residue of pre-modern belief but as an active system operating on three synergistic levels: cognitive, affective, and practical. This framework carries implications beyond the Imogiri study: it offers an alternative analytical perspective for the broader study of sacred sites, particularly in Southeast Asia, where the relationship between myth, space, and memory possesses characteristics not always adequately captured by theoretical frameworks developed in Western contexts. The study's practical contribution is directly relevant to cultural heritage conservation policy. The recognition that mythic transmission depends on direct physical experience—on the act of ascending the staircase itself—carries significant implications for conservation strategy: digitization and documentation efforts must be complemented by programs facilitating deep physical and narrative engagement, not merely informational access. This study recommends that heritage education programs at Imogiri explicitly integrate mythological narrative into pilgrimage guides, so that the deeper layers of meaning may continue to be transmitted to future generations. Several limitations of this study warrant acknowledgment. The geographic and temporal scope—confined to a single site and a specific period—constrains the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the gender dimension of mythic experience and transmission has not been adequately explored in this study. Future research might extend the analysis to other royal burial sites in Java—such as the Senopati Tomb at Kotagede—to test the applicability of the proposed analytical framework, and might further examine the gender dimension in the construction of collective memory at such sites.

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