



Colonial Traces and the Spirituality of Garis Nyawa: A Philosophical Study of Spatial Memory at Yogyakarta Station

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Abstrak

Stasiun Yogyakarta (Tugu) merepresentasikan palimpsest ruang yang menyimpan lapisan memori kolonial, kultural, dan spiritual yang saling bertumpang-tindih namun belum dikaji secara filosofis secara memadai. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis bagaimana praktik garis nyawa—ritual keselamatan berbasis kepercayaan Kejawen yang dilaksanakan oleh masinis kereta api di ruang stasiun—beroperasi sebagai strategi resistensi epistemik terhadap logika ruang kolonial yang melekat pada infrastruktur fisik bangunan stasiun era Belanda. Menggunakan pendekatan hermeneutika fenomenologis dan teori memori ruang (spatial memory), penelitian ini mengintegrasikan kerangka postkolonial Homi K. Bhabha dengan ontologi Jawa tentang kesatuan kosmos-manusia (manunggaling kawula Gusti). Metode penelitian bersifat kualitatif-interpretif dengan pengumpulan data melalui observasi etnografis, wawancara mendalam semi-terstruktur dengan masinis senior, dan analisis artefak arsitektur. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa garis nyawa bukan sekadar praktik supranatural, melainkan merupakan teknologi budaya (cultural technology) yang secara aktif mengonstruksi ruang resistensi dalam infrastruktur kolonial—membentuk apa yang penelitian ini konseptualisasikan sebagai "ruang ambang spiritual" (spiritual liminal space). Novelty penelitian ini terletak pada formulasi konsep ruang ambang spiritual sebagai kategori analitis baru yang menghubungkan filsafat ruang, teori postkolonial, dan ontologi lokal dalam satu kerangka interpretatif kohesif. Kontribusi teoretis artikel ini memperluas teori liminalitas Turner dengan dimensi spiritualitas kultural yang bersifat resisten, sekaligus menawarkan model baru memahami interaksi antara warisan kolonial dan praktik spiritual dalam ruang publik di konteks Asia Tenggara.

Kata kunci: Memori Ruang, Spiritualitas Kejawen, Warisan Kolonial, Liminalitas, Garis Nyawa, Hermeneutika Fenomenologis, Stasiun Yogyakarta

Abstract

Yogyakarta Station (Tugu) represents a spatial palimpsest harboring overlapping layers of colonial, cultural, and spiritual memory that remain insufficiently examined through a philosophical lens. This study analyzes how the garis nyawa practice a Kejawen-based safety ritual performed by train drivers within the station space operates as a strategy of epistemic resistance against the colonial spatial logic embedded in the physical infrastructure of the Dutch-era station building. Employing a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach and spatial memory theory, this study integrates Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial framework with the

Javanese ontology of cosmos–human unity (*manunggaling kawula Gusti*). A qualitative-interpretive method was applied, with data collected through ethnographic observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews with senior train drivers, and analysis of architectural artifacts. The findings show that *garis nyawa* is not merely a supernatural practice but constitutes a cultural technology that actively constructs a space of resistance within colonial infrastructure—forming what this study conceptualizes as a “spiritual liminal space.” The novelty of this research lies in formulating the concept of spiritual liminal space as a new analytical category that links the philosophy of space, postcolonial theory, and local ontology within a single, coherent interpretive framework. The theoretical contribution of this article extends Turner's theory of liminality with a resistant cultural-spiritual dimension, while offering a new model for understanding the interaction between colonial heritage and spiritual practice in public space within the Southeast Asian context.

Keywords: *Spatial Memory, Kejawen Spirituality, Colonial Heritage, Liminality, Garis Nyawa, Phenomenological Hermeneutics, Yogyakarta Station*

Introduction

Colonial infrastructure is never merely technical-functional; it is always a technology of power that modifies space, regulates mobility, and codifies social hierarchy within the materiality of concrete and steel (Foucault, 1975; Lefebvre, 1991). Yogyakarta Station, built by the Dutch colonial government in 1887 and substantially renovated in 1905, is one of the most significant colonial architectural artifacts in Java that remains in active operation today. Its existence preserves not only the historical memory of commodity distribution and military mobilization but also constitutes a space whose meaning continues to be contested between imperial heritage and the everyday life practices of contemporary Javanese society.

Within this context, the phenomenon of *garis nyawa*—a ritual practice performed by train drivers prior to operating a locomotive, originating from the Kejawen belief system—presents a complex philosophical problem. This practice takes place in a space architecturally designed to represent colonial modern rationality, yet it is filled with a spiritual practice rooted in pre-colonial Javanese ontology. It is precisely this tension between two spatial logics that makes Yogyakarta Station a rich intellectual laboratory for examining the relationship between memory, power, and spirituality in public space.

Previous studies on Yogyakarta Station have tended to be dominated by historical-architectural approaches (Bogaerts, 2019; Prabowo, 2020) or socio-economic approaches (Santoso, 2021), leaving a significant research gap: no study has explicitly examined the philosophical dimension of spatial memory at this station, particularly in relation to spiritual practice as a form of epistemic resistance against colonial heritage. Furthermore, the literature on *garis nyawa* has thus far been confined to descriptive ethnographic studies (Mulder, 2005; Stange, 2018) without systematically connecting it to theories of space, postcolonialism, or the philosophy of memory.

This gap is not merely academic but carries fundamental epistemological implications: if spiritual practices within colonial space are treated solely as cultural residue destined to be displaced by modernity, we lose the analytical capacity to understand how postcolonial

communities actively negotiate, transform, and resist imperial heritage through everyday practice. This argument aligns with Bhabha's (1994) notions of "mimicry" and "hybridity" as subversive strategies, yet these have never been specifically applied to the context of a Javanese spirituality-based safety ritual within colonial infrastructure.

This article therefore pursues three analytical aims: first, to identify and deconstruct the layers of colonial memory embedded in the physical space of Yogyakarta Station; second, to analyze *garis nyawa* as a cultural technology that constructs a space of spiritual resistance; and third, to formulate the concept of "spiritual liminal space" as a new analytical category capable of explaining the dynamic interaction between colonial heritage and local spirituality. The novelty of this research lies in this conceptual contribution—an interpretive framework not yet available, whether in the philosophy of space, postcolonial studies, or studies of Javanese spirituality taken separately.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative-interpretive approach with a phenomenological-hermeneutic methodological orientation, as developed by Gadamer (1975) and adapted to spatial studies by Casey (1997). This methodological choice rests on the premise that spatial memory cannot be understood through external observation alone but requires deep interpretation of the meanings sedimented within the practices, artifacts, and narratives of the actors who inhabit that space. This approach is compatible with the research traditions of Pink (2015) in sensory ethnography methodology and Tilley (1994) in the phenomenology of landscape. The research design follows a single instrumental case study pattern (Stake, 1995), in which Yogyakarta Station is treated as a case selected not for its own uniqueness but for its capacity to illuminate broader theoretical issues concerning the relationship between memory, space, and spirituality in a postcolonial context. This distinguishes the present study from descriptive case studies: its aim is to generate theoretical propositions rather than a narrative of the case itself.

Data were collected through three complementary instruments. First, participatory ethnographic observation was conducted over six months (February–July 2024) across various zones of Yogyakarta Station, including platforms, waiting areas, the drivers' room, and administrative areas. Observation focused on mapping spatial practice in Lefebvre's (1991) sense—that is, the concrete ways in which space is used, given meaning, and contested by various actors. Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 senior train drivers (with a minimum of 15 years of work experience), 4 station operational supervisors, and 3 expert informants (an architectural historian, a Kejawen practitioner, and a cultural anthropologist). Informants were selected using purposive sampling, taking into account criteria of expertise, experience, and representativeness of perspective. Interviews lasted an average of 90 minutes, were recorded with informants' consent, and were transcribed verbatim. Third, architectural artifact analysis was conducted through systematic visual documentation of the building's architectural elements—including facade ornamentation, spatial layout, building materials, and symbolic markers—which were then interpreted through the framework of spatial semiotics (Eco, 1997) and colonial heritage theory (Smith, 2006).

Data analysis followed the procedure of the hermeneutic circle: moving from an initial understanding of the parts of the data toward an understanding of the whole, then returning to the parts with deeper understanding. Operationally, the analysis involved four stages: (1) open coding to identify emergent themes; (2) axial coding to map relations between themes; (3)

selective coding to formulate core analytical categories; and (4) theoretical interpretation linking the findings to the conceptual framework. To ensure reliability, this study applied source triangulation (data from various informants), method triangulation (observation, interviews, artifact analysis), and member checking by confirming interpretations with selected key informants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interpretive validity was further strengthened through thick description in Geertz's (1973) sense: an account that does not merely record events but explains the context of meaning behind them. Following the qualitative research ethics guidelines set out by Denzin and Lincoln (2018), this study observed the principles of informed consent, confidentiality of informant identity, and the power relations between researcher and research subjects. Given the sensitivity of the research object—spiritual practices that are partly personal in nature—the researcher adopted a position of critical reflexivity to prevent the exoticization or objectification of Kejawen practices. Informants' identities in this report are anonymized using alphanumeric codes.

Results and Discussion

An Archaeology of Power in Station Architecture: Sedimented Colonial Memory

Analysis of architectural artifacts shows that the Yogyakarta Station building holds a semiotic system that systematically codifies colonial hierarchy within the materiality of space. The building's Indische Empire-style facade—a blend of European neoclassical aesthetics with tropical elements—is not merely an artistic choice but a projection of imperial power intended to instill both awe and a sense of inferiority among the indigenous population (Colombijn & Lindblad, 1996). High roofs with natural ventilation, imported marble for the first-class waiting room, and the physical separation between platforms of different classes reflect how the Dutch East Indies managed mobility and social contact through segregative architecture (Kusno, 2000).

This finding goes beyond a mere historical observation: it reveals how colonial space operates as what Foucault (1975) calls a “disciplinary technology” that internalizes norms of power into the bodies and behavior of its users. In this context, the station's infrastructure regulates not only the physical movement of passengers but also their subjectivity—defining who is entitled to occupy which space, in what manner, and with what markers of identity. Observational data indicate that traces of this spatial segregation, although formally abolished, are still manifest in contemporary patterns of space use: certain areas remain informally “identified” as the domain of particular social groups, signaling how deeply the colonial spatial logic has been sedimented in collective consciousness.

More analytically significant is the finding that the station's transitional spaces—platforms, narrow passages between the tracks, waiting areas between ticket counters—hold the most complex layers of memory. An interview with informant M-03, a 61-year-old senior train driver, revealed: he and his colleagues commonly refer to a particular corner of the platform as a junction point, not merely a place but a kind of node where the past and present meet. This statement reflects what Nora (1989) conceptualizes as *lieux de mémoire*—sites where memory crystallizes and finds refuge—but with an added Javanese ontological dimension that extends beyond Nora's secular conception.

Garis Nyawa as a Cultural Technology of Resistance

Garis nyawa is a ritual practice performed by train drivers before operating a locomotive, involving a series of prayers, brief meditation, and occasionally the use of simple offerings at specific points in and around the locomotive. Ethnically, this practice is rooted in the Kejawen

belief system—a Javanese worldview that integrates Hindu-Buddhist, Islamic, and animist elements within a cosmology that views safety as a condition of harmony among humans, nature, and transcendent forces (Mulder, 2005; Stange, 2018). However accurate this description may be, it is insufficient to explain the philosophical function of the practice within the spatial context of the colonial station.

Analysis shows that *garis nyawa* operates simultaneously on three mutually reinforcing levels. At the first level—the ontological level—the practice affirms a Javanese cosmology in which the human subject is not understood as an autonomous individual separate from its environment (as constructed by colonial modernity), but rather as a point of intersection within a network of cosmic relations. In this perspective, the locomotive—a product of Western industrial technology—is integrated into the Javanese system of meaning through ritual, so that it is no longer merely a machine operating according to mechanical logic but becomes an entity possessing a “soul” that must be treated relationally. This reflects what De La Cadena (2015) calls “cosmopolitics”—the ways in which non-Western communities incorporate their ontologies into negotiations with modernity without liquidating them.

At the second level—the epistemological level—*garis nyawa* rejects the Cartesian dichotomy between subject and object, between the sacred and the profane, which forms the foundation of modern colonial logic. By treating the station space as spiritually charged—not merely as technical infrastructure—train drivers actively construct an alternative epistemology that does not recognize the supremacy of Western instrumental rationality. This is what Santos (2016) identifies as a practice of “Southern epistemology”—the production of knowledge from a perspective long excluded by the modern epistemological canon. This finding directly addresses the theoretical question of how postcolonial communities maintain their epistemic autonomy amid the dominance of colonial heritage. At the third level—the political level—*garis nyawa* constitutes an act of micro-resistance in Scott's (1985) sense of “weapons of the weak.” By performing *Kejawen* rituals at the heart of Dutch colonial infrastructure, train drivers symbolically claim ownership of that space—not in a legal-formal sense, but in terms of meaning and value. This is what Bhabha (1994) calls “subversive mimicry”: postcolonial actors who outwardly appear to use colonial infrastructure (operating a Dutch locomotive) while inwardly transforming its meaning through a practice that cannot be co-opted by colonial logic. This argument shows that *garis nyawa* is not merely a passive cultural survival but an active, politically charged act.

Spiritual Liminal Space: Formulating a New Concept

The synthesis of the above findings reveals the need for a new concept capable of precisely articulating what occurs at Yogyakarta Station: the convergence of colonial memory, spiritual practice, and cultural resistance within a single physical space. This study proposes the concept of “spiritual liminal space” as an analytical category to capture this phenomenon. The concept of spiritual liminal space builds upon—while also moving beyond—two major theoretical traditions. First, Turner's (1969) concept of liminality, which defines the liminal as an “in-between” condition—a transitional phase in which a subject has left its former status but has not yet entered a new one. Turner applied this concept to initiation rituals among African societies, but its scope is limited to subject-ritual analysis and is inadequate for analyzing permanent spaces that structurally occupy a liminal position. Second, Bhabha's (1994) concept of “third space,” which describes a hybrid space in which the encounter between colonial and postcolonial cultures produces a new cultural formation that cannot be reduced to either pole. Although this concept is relevant for understanding cultural hybridity, it does not accommodate

the spiritual-ontological dimension of such negotiation. Spiritual liminal space, as formulated in this study, has three distinctive characteristics: (1) it is permanent rather than transitional—it does not lead toward resolution or synthesis but sustains productive tension continuously; (2) it functions as an arena of ontological reproduction, in which a cosmology threatened by colonial modernization is instead reinforced and perpetuated through ritual practice; and (3) it operates as an embodied mechanism of resistance, in which the body of the train driver performing the ritual becomes the site where colonial heritage and local ontology meet. This third characteristic in particular distinguishes spiritual liminal space from both Turner's concept of liminality and Bhabha's third space, neither of which adequately addresses the bodily and affective dimensions of cultural resistance.

Ethnographic data consistently support this conceptual formulation. Informant M-07, a driver with 23 years of experience, described his experience by stating that when performing *garis nyawa* there, he does not feel as though he is in a Dutch station but rather on Javanese soil that he is safeguarding. This narrative intuitively articulates the core of spiritual liminal space: the transformation of the meaning of colonial space through spiritual practice, rather than a rejection of its physical materiality. Meanwhile, informant M-11 added that the practice is not merely about physical safety but about harmony, asserting that without harmony there is no true safety. This statement reflects the ontological dimension of the practice: safety within the *Kejawen* worldview is a condition of cosmic harmony, not merely the minimization of technical risk—a formulation radically different from the conception of risk in modern safety management based on instrumental rationality.

Theoretical Implications: Moving Beyond Bhabha and Turner

The theoretical contribution of this study can be formulated in three interrelated propositions. The first proposition holds that Turner's theory of liminality needs to be expanded with a dimension of resistant spirituality. Turner conceptualizes liminality as a temporary transitional phase that always tends toward reintegration into the social structure. However, the findings of this study show that there is a form of liminality that is permanent and deliberate—a condition in which a community actively maintains a liminal position as a strategy for preserving ontological identity and autonomy. This proposition has significant implications for the study of ritual in postcolonial contexts: ritual functions not merely as a mechanism of social integration (Durkheim, 1912) but also as a technology of resistance that preserves ontological difference.

The second proposition holds that Bhabha's postcolonial theory needs to be complemented by an analysis of the spiritual-ontological dimension. Bhabha's concept of hybridity successfully explains how the postcolonial subject creates a new identity through negotiation with colonial identity. However, by situating his analysis primarily at the discursive and semiotic level, Bhabha tends to overlook the ways in which resistance also operates at the ontological level—through practices that preserve worldviews and cosmologies that cannot be understood within the colonial-modern epistemological framework. This study suggests that a comprehensive theory of postcolonial resistance must integrate this ontological dimension, as also argued by Mignolo (2011) in his concept of the “decolonial option.” By adding this spiritual dimension, we gain a richer understanding of how postcolonial communities maintain their epistemic sovereignty. The third proposition holds that spatial memory at colonial heritage sites cannot be understood solely through conventional heritage studies approaches, which tend to view historical space as a passive object of conservation. The findings of this study show that spatial memory is active, negotiated, and continuously reconstructed through everyday practice.

This aligns with Smith's (2006) argument regarding “authorized heritage discourse” as an ideological construction, yet moves beyond Smith by demonstrating that counter-discourse against the dominant heritage narrative can be spiritual in nature—a dimension nearly absent from the mainstream heritage studies literature, which remains dominated by a secular Western paradigm.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Yogyakarta Station is a palimpsest space in which layers of colonial, cultural, and spiritual memory overlap and negotiate with one another dynamically. Through a philosophical analysis of the *garis nyawa* practice, this study reveals that the ritual is not merely a residue of traditional belief but a cultural technology that actively constructs a space of epistemic and ontological resistance against the colonial logic sedimented within the station's physical infrastructure. The principal novelty of this research is the formulation of the concept of “spiritual liminal space” as a new analytical category that integrates the philosophy of space, postcolonial theory, and local Javanese ontology. Unlike Turner's transitional concept of liminality and Bhabha's third space, which is more focused on discursive hybridity, spiritual liminal space captures the dimensions of permanence, ontological reproduction, and embodied resistance that distinctively characterize colonial heritage sites that continue to be inhabited and re-signified by postcolonial communities.

The theoretical contribution of this study operates on two levels. At the micro level, this study extends and critiques Turner's theory of liminality by showing that spiritual liminality can be permanent and function as a mechanism of resistance, rather than merely a transitional phase toward reintegration. At the macro level, this study contributes to the development of a paradigm for colonial heritage studies that integrates spirituality as an essential analytical variable—a necessary step for understanding heritage dynamics in the Southeast Asian context, where spirituality and public life cannot be separated in the way they are within secular Western modernity. Practically, the findings of this study carry important implications for cultural heritage management policy: meaningful preservation of colonial heritage sites cannot be achieved through architectural conservation alone but must also recognize and accommodate the spiritual and cultural practices that serve as the primary medium through which communities sustain meaningful relationships with such spaces. Neglecting this dimension not only reduces our understanding of cultural heritage but also risks perpetuating the colonial logic that separates humans from their space.

The limitation of this study lies in its focus on a single site and on the community of train drivers as the principal actors. Further research is recommended to explore similar phenomena at colonial-era railway stations in other Indonesian cities, as well as to broaden the scope of subjects to include the wider community of station users. Comparative exploration with colonial heritage sites in other Southeast Asian countries—such as colonial-era railway stations in Vietnam, the Philippines, or Malaysia—would also be highly productive for testing whether the concept of spiritual liminal space has cross-contextual relevance or is distinctly Javanese.

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