

# **BOOSTING THE SACRED, STIMULATING THE SECULAR: THE INTERMINGLED OF SACRED SITE AND SECULAR SPACE IN GROTTO DE MARIA AMBARAWA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**A**long with the raise of middle class, religious community demand lighter and non-time consuming pilgrimage practice without losing the sacredness of the site. The more convenient site attracts more religious community to perform the pilgrimage. Thus, the pilgrimage site strives to dress up with modern and pleasure facilities or features. More visitors mean more money would be circulated around the region. Within this framework, we could see mutual relationship between tourism and religion through pilgrimage site's existence. Yet the attractive and appealing features of pilgrimage site raise another issue on the boundaries between sacred and secular places as well as the ethics of visiting sacred spaces. The GMKA's case is clearly depicted the complex and intermingled relation between sacred and secular. The holy devotions to Virgin Mary share its place with the lovey dovey couple activity and tourist sightseeing. Furthermore the establishment of the highest Maria statue in Southeast Asia at GMKA highly escalates the number, and also the diverse backgrounds, of visitors to the site which brings out an issue of ethical behavior in sacred place, especially when the sacred place also becomes the central point of secular practices. Furthermore, this phenomenon raise another question, how far the limit of dressing up facilities and features of sacred space? Doesn't it reduce the core value of pilgrimage itself? Does the site become more secular, or at least become less sacred, by the hipped of pilgrimage site to dress up?

**Keywords:** secular pilgrimage, pious tourist, spectacle, ethics of sacred place, space and place

## **INTRODUCTION**

It's Sunday morning in Maria de Grotto, Kerep, Ambarawa. The dense Angsana trees' branches, the warm light of sunrise, side by side with the fresh air of tropical highland create a still and sublime atmosphere. Within this majestic moment, a group of people pay homage and devotion to Virgin Mary or Bunda Maria. They sat down in front of the Bunda Maria statue, bow their head, close their eyes, and pray in silent. Performing pilgrimage to pray for the Virgin Mary's intercession and being devoted to her are important in Catholics tradition and even it is encouraged. Meanwhile, less than 100 meters from the place where the praying is performed, bunch of teenager who come in couple do the mornings walk around the site and take selfie photos. If we take short steps to the park, there are many couples and families gather and enjoy the

morning breeze in Maria's cave park. Going west 300 meters to the parking lot, some people enjoy sightseeing and take photograph in front of 42 meters height of Bunda Maria statue.

The Sunday morning situation in Maria de Grotto Kerep Ambarawa or Goa Maria Kerep Ambarawa (GMKA) is an appealing illustration of the intermingled situation between sacred and secular spaces, especially within the discussion of religion and tourism issue. The holy devotions to Virgin Mary share its place with the lovey dovey couple activity and tourist sightseeing. Interestingly, this contradiction seems to be accepted as normal by the visitors, whether it's pilgrim, tourist, or both. The last category of visitor—tourist *cum* pilgrim, or in Turner's term "half tourist-half pilgrim" (Turner, 1978:20)—adds up to the unclear demarcation between sacred and secular practice. Furthermore, the blurring boundaries between religious and secular space may also provide another respond to the secularization prophecy and at the same time to the Cassanova's de-privatization or religion issue (Cassanova, 1994, p.65). Rather than bravely stated that religious appearance is still withstanding in public, the Maria de Grotto situation shows that the existence of religion in public might be quite strong nowadays, yet it is also intensely imbued with the secular nuance.

Meanwhile, along with the raise of middle class, religious community demand lighter and non-time consuming pilgrimage practice without losing the sacredness of the site (Doorn-Harder and De Jong, 2001, p.328). The more convenient site attracts more religious community to perform the pilgrimage. Thus, the pilgrimage site strives to dress up with modern and pleasure facilities or features. Later, responding to the upbeat intensity of pilgrimage practice, the local government enhances the infrastructures to the pilgrimage site in order to draw more visitors. More visitors mean more money would be circulated around the region. Within this framework, we could see mutual relationship between tourism and religion through pilgrimage site's existence. Yet the attractive and appealing features of pilgrimage site raise another issue on the boundaries between sacred and secular places as well as the ethics of visiting sacred spaces. The GMKA's case is clearly depicted the complex and intermingled relation between sacred and secular. As one of the first Maria's cave in Indonesia, the well-known GMKA already becomes prominent destinations for the Catholics pilgrimage along the year. However, the establishment of the highest Maria statue in Southeast Asia at GMKA highly escalates the number, and also the diverse backgrounds, of visitors to the site. It is unusual sight for Catholic pilgrimage site in Indonesia to be flooded by the tourist who comes for seeking pleasure and spectacle rather than devotion and spirituality. Moreover, as illustrated before, the diverse motives and religious background of the visitors bring out an issue of ethical behavior in sacred place, especially when the sacred place also becomes the central point of secular practices. Furthermore, this phenomenon raise another question, how far the limit of dressing up facilities and features of sacred space? Doesn't it reduce the core value of pilgrimage itself? Does the site become more secular, or at least become less sacred, by the hipped of pilgrimage site to dress up?

Focusing on the issue of sacred places, this paper tries to examine the nature, the form, and the meaning of Maria de Grotto Ambarawa pilgrimage site after the establishment of the Bunda Maria statue. Thus, I will discuss the physical and spatial changes that the site has undergone during the years,

especially after the mounting of Bunda Maria statue, sort of people who visit it, and the reasons or motives behind the visitation. Moreover, I shall attempt to draw out the religious dimension of this spectacle or, more accurately, show how the secular and the spiritual relate to each other. In doing so, I will perform ethnography research to the visitor of GMKA as well as elaborate the notions of some scholars related to the issues. Victor Turner's works on "*The Center is Out There: the Pilgrim Goal*" (1973) and John Urry's on *Tourist Gaze* (2003) becomes my point of departure in understanding the nature of pilgrimage and tourist practices. Their similarities on highlighting the idea of going from "familiar place" to "faraway place" as well as their differences in categorizing pilgrimage and tourist by its "gazing" or motivation illustrate the unclear and overlap demarcation of pilgrimage and tourism.

Furthermore, Thomas Bremer on *Sacred Spaces and Tourist Places* (2006) gives critical framework in understanding how some place may become destination for pilgrimage and tourism practices as well as both of them simultaneously emerge and negotiate the site as sacred and touristic place. His work corresponds to Peter Jan Margry's article on *Secular Pilgrimage: Contradiction in Term* (2008) that portrays the contradictory phenomenon of secular pilgrimage by focusing the attention on contemporary special locations and the memorial sites and graves of special individuals. Margry's work contributes in examining whether there are some religious dimension or religiously motivated in secular practice like tourism, or non-theological pilgrimage, to the secular people and whether it is appropriate to categorize these visitation as pilgrimages.

Discussing the particular issue of monument, spectacle, and tourist attraction in post-modern tourism, I will draw from Bruner's work, *Abraham Lincoln as Authentic Reproduction: A Critique of Postmodernism* (1994) that demonstrates how the tourist reinvents the tourist attraction, regardless its authenticity, based on their quest and experiences. Furthermore, Bruner argues that even though each individual construct their own meanings, there were general patterns in tourism activity. This finding helps us to analyze the various motives of GMAK visitor and how they perceive the existence of the Bunda Maria statue. Moreover, the *Society of Spectacle* (1967) by Guy Bedord would give critical analysis toward the existence of Maria Assumpta statue as superficiality of spectacle.

To set the scene, I begin with a brief summary of GMAK's dynamic change from the secular place into sacred place.

### **Goa Maria Kerep Ambarawa: from Secular to Sacred Place**

Established on 1954, GMKA is one of the earliest and forerunner of Grotto de Maria in Indonesia. Should be noted, unlike Grotto de Maria in Loudres which become the role model of another Grotto Maria around the globe, GMKA was built as celebration rather than based on vision. The creation of GMKA closely related to Encyclical of Pope Pius XII on 1953 which proclaims the year of 1954 as the Marian Year in order to commemorate 100 years of "Mary the Immaculate Conception" dogma. Inspired from that papal letter, Romo Bernardinus Soemarno SJ suggested to build devotion place to Bunda Maria and mobilized his students in Ambarawa Dormitory to collect the stone from Panjang river.

Far from mythical vision and Virgin Mary sighting, the place where the Grotto de Maria located was chosen by the initiative of Romo Koersen SJ. Once upon a day in 1953, Romo Koersen SJ walked down with the Catholics priests around the Bruderan Kerep garden and suddenly he stopped. Not for so long, he said to others that they need to build the grotto Maria here. Then, one of the Catholic priests took a bamboo, made the cross from it, and put it in the land where the Romo Koersen SJ pointed out.

GMKA was built together for almost a year by the student from Teacher School of Kolese Santo Yusuf, Santa Maria Ambarawa, Bruderan and Susteran monastery Ambarawa. Romo L Koersen SJ and Romo Haeken SJ as the architects try to replicate the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes, France by using surrounding materials and simple techniques. The artificial cave was built facing to the east and surrounded by the dense tree. The replica of Mary statue in Lourdes style was put on one of the niche as the center of this designated sacred place. On 15 August 1954, Grotto de Maria Kerep, Ambarawa, was blessed and inaugurated by the archbishop of Semarang Mgr. A. Soegijapranata SJ. Interestingly, the water for the blessing ceremony was taken from Lourdes itself. After that event, the land where GMKA was established no longer an ordinary place. Yet, it became the sacred place that justified by particular ceremony and rituals.

Moreover, the connection between Grotto de Maria in Kerep and Lourdes becomes stronger by the miraculous occurrence which was experienced by Ms. Bedjo Ludiro, a Catholic parish Juwana Pati. This story is very popular and circulates around the pilgrims who visit GMKA. As the story told, the wife of Bedjo Ludiro suffered from paralysis and various treatments have been done but no result. Once, they make a pilgrimage to the Grotto de Maria, Lourdes, to ask for healing from God through Mary. God heard their prayers and Ms. Bedjo Ludiro was fully recovered. Hence, in order to show his gratefulness to the Virgin Mary who become intercession to God, Bedjo Ludiro wanted to renovate and beautify Grotto de Maria Kerep, Ambarawa. He desired to make the cave to be as identical as the Grotto de Maria Lourdes. Those good intentions were accepted and welcomed by the manager of GMKA.

The renovation not only marks the attempt to replicate the “original” sacred place but also to solidify the linkage between the “original” and the “replica” of sacred place. Within the context of the modern tourism phenomena, the site authenticity becomes important feature to seek. MacCannell proposed the idea of staged authenticity to explain how the tourism site/manager creates an impression of authenticity for the people and how the people respond or feel about it (MacCannell, 1973:598). Thus, given the historical establishment of GMAK that have no strong spiritual legitimation, in the early period of its establishment we could see how the Grotto de Maria Kerep need to create linkage or relation as much as possible with Grotto de Maria Lourdes in order to build an impression of authenticity. However, rather than seeking the authenticity, we may read this phenomenon as the attempt of linking authenticity. Examining the phenomena of local sacred place that imitate the global sacred place in Islamic World, Guillot and Chambert-Loir highlight the attempt to create “imperfect substitution” of holy land by reproducing the landscape, building, or taking certain part of the holy place and implanting it to the new local sacred place (2007, p. 11). Yet, this

new sacred place doesn't replace the actual holy place. It serves as a way to make the sacred places closer to the people. We could see this motive on Bedjo Ludiro's attempt to renovate GMKA to be as identical as the image of Lourdes.

However, it doesn't mean that GMAK as sacred place is less sacred than the "authentic" one or the pilgrim might feel less authentic if they perform the ritual in Grotto de Maria Kerep. In fact, many people feel that GMKA has certain spiritual quality that befit with their beliefs and needs. "I always come here to find inner peace (*ayem* [jw.]) and many of my friends have their wish come true after pray here," said Susilo, a 36 years old, construction labor who visit the Grotto de Maria once a week. He knows that there are so many Grotto de Maria in Indonesia and around the world but he doesn't feel that GMAK is less sacred than others. This finding underlines MacCannell's critics toward Boorstin's idea of "tacky image and not intellectually satisfying". MacCannell shows that mostly tourists have already know what they are experiencing is "not-real" and "inauthentic" performances but they do not express uneasiness, or feel less authentic (MacCannell, 1973, p. 601).

Moreover, the sacredness of the site is not limited to certain religious belief. There are pilgrims who come from non-Christianity tradition. Marijati, a woman approximately on her 40's, regularly visit the Maria de Grotto, Kerep. Her veil made her appearance stood out among the pilgrims and visitors. Once a week, she accompanies her employer to visit the sacred place. Usually she sits down in front of statue, bows her head, and closes her eyes for more than 10 minutes. "I feel comfortable being here. Though I'm a Muslim," said the woman who came from Semarang, around 40 minutes from Ambarawa. This kind of spiritual experience shows that the sacredness of the site is continuously reinvented by the visitor, regardless their religious belief. Related to that discussion, after examining the New Salem Historical Salem, Bruner underlines that "all culture as continually invented and reinvented" (Bruner, 1996, p. 397). In other word, in GMAK case, we could see how the feeling of sacredness of the place is being reinvented beyond its religious boundaries.

The renovation, along with the story behind that circulated underneath, drew many people to visit and practice the pilgrimage to GMKA. The increasing number of pilgrim made the activity around the site become more varied at that time. The pilgrim not only prayed in front of the statue but also performed another ritual like recollection, Eucharist, worship in chapel, and novena. Responding to this circumstance, the site manager created a committee on 1992 to re-align the area as well as to develop supporting facilities for spirituality practices, such as recollection place, retreat mansion, and meeting hall. Moreover, for the pilgrim who performed Stations of the Cross or *Via Dolorosa* ritual around the caves, the management also built stations within the site around the dense trees. Responding to the various needs and health condition of the pilgrims, GMKA provides two versions of Stations of the Cross, the long and the short. The long Stations of the Cross are begun from Santo Yusuf Church and pilgrim who choose the shorter one will start just near the altar of Virgin Mary statue. On the second phase of renovation, the GMKA already equipped with big open air aula, two stories transitional building, and some prayer rooms in southeast of the cave. Rather than individual donation, the financing for the second phase of renovation was taken from various sources especially from the regular collect of Misa ritual and people who felt gratitude for their fulfilling wish after perform pilgrimage practice to GMKA.

After the second phase of renovation, the area of GMKA now covers up to 20.753 m<sup>2</sup>.

As the economic situation is getting better, many pilgrims now visit GMKA by the private car. Before that, many pilgrims use the public bus or local car and stop at the bus station. They walk from the bus station approximately 1,5 km to the site. Since the road to Maria de Grotto site is uphill and quite long for the walk, some of the pilgrim at that time started their *via dolorosa* ritual near the bus station. After the official Stations of the Cross built, only a few people perform the “old long version” one. As the time goes, the number of pilgrims who bring their own car raise significantly. The parking lot of GMKA was insufficient to cover, even after they made use of the village field and school yard. At the peak month, some pilgrims have to park their car on the bus station because along the roadside toward the GMKA is also filled with visitor’s car.

Responding to the demand for decent and convenient parking lot, GMKA site manager make special committee consist of technical team from Soegijapranata Catholic University Semarang in order to build an integral 8.500 m<sup>2</sup> parking lots which could cover more than 300 cars and 200 motorcycles. Moreover, the parking lot would also be equipped with meeting hall with fascinating design called “Rumah Kaca” or glass house. The entire wall in this meeting hall fully made from glass. Near the entrance of the parking lot, there are two stories building consist of six unit of store in each floor plus 44 stalls for food vendors and a variety of merchandise. Most of the store and stalls seller are the street vendors who previously sell their goods along the road or in yard of GMKA site. Interestingly, instead of pay some retribution or fee to GMKA site manager, the store and stall seller just need to give donation as they pleased. Furthermore, celebrating the year of the youth on 2000, a wide camping ground is also built at the west side of the parking lot to facilitate the young and teenage activity.

Less than 5 years after building the camping ground, GMKA site manager build “Taman Doa” or Prayer Garden, a replica of some biblical scene and landscape in Jerusalem in order to commemorate 50 years of GMKA. Consists of many large scale diorama of Jesus lifetime, from his baptism in Jordan river through his death and ascension, this garden provides plenty of spaces for the visitor to draw some reflection the important event of the Messiah. As the other facilities in site, Taman Doa is free for public. Hence, many people around the site visit the garden regardless their religion just for sightseeing and enjoying the beautiful landscape. Thus, we could see an early stage of blurring boundaries between religious practice and tourism, or between pilgrim and tourist. The attraction qualities of the Taman Doa not only draw people from around the site to visit and enjoy it but also attract the pilgrims who perform devotion at that side. Many pilgrims relax on the park after they pray in the altar. On the other hand, there are many tourists who come into Taman Doa feels a little unease if they don’t pay a short visit to Virgin Mary statue. “We already go far to get here. It’s too bad if we don’t pray though only a brief” said A. Heri, a 37 years old businessman from Jogja. This phenomenon correspond on Olsen and Timothy’s argument about the flexibility of modern travelers who can, “swing from one extreme to another” (Olsen and Timothy, 2006, p. 08). Should be noted, most pilgrims have one or more secondary motives and overlapping reasons. In fact, sometimes

individuals visit pilgrimage site without any religious motivation, but affected by the sacred place once they are there. Badone and Roseman (2004) calls this practices as “intersecting journeys” which tourists allow themselves to be carried away, intentionally or unintentionally, by the sacred experiences of the shrine or the pilgrimage.

Moreover, as Bremer underlines, “the hybridity of these sites does not allow a seamless blending of the two” (Bremer, 2006, p.30). By doing careful observations, we could reveal clear distinctions between the places of religion and the places of tourism. In GMAK case, we could deduce it from the zonation of the place. The more someplace closer to the altar or Virgin Mary statue, the more it becomes sacred place and vice versa. Furthermore, the behavior of the visitor on Taman Doa and the altar is way different where in the altar people tend to be quiet and behave.

### **The Maria Assumpta Statue: From Sacred to Spectacle**

Through time, from the local pilgrimage site of Virgin Maria devotion, Grotto de Maria Kerep site changes into Catholics religious center around the region. Yet, the urge to upgrade and beautify the sacred site of GMKA is never recede. Inspiring from the Maria Assumpta Holy day that coincidentally happen at the same date with 60 years commemoration of GMKA, a parishioner of St. Yusuf Ambarawa want to make tribute for GMKA by making the giant statue of Maria Assumpta. R.A Nugroho Adi Prabowo, the name of parishioner and also a sculpture artist, together with his brother, RBA Koentjoro Budi Pranoto and RA Hartanto Agung Yuwono, built 42 meters height statue that represent the Virgin Mary who drifts toward heavens. GMKA site manager welcome this good intention and give permission to three brothers for manifesting the idea. Besides, F. Satrijanto, the secretary of maintaining team of GMKA, mentions that the people around the site as well as the pilgrims are in dire need of an icon to represent the GMKA. On the other hand, after its inauguration, the 42 meter height statue of Maria Assumpta is declared by the media and the record institution as the highest Mary statue in Southeast Asia. Thus, the establishment of gigantic Maria statue becomes the new icon of the city in general and especially for the Catholics society.

Interestingly, rather than becoming separate feature of GMKA, the existence of Maria Assumpta statue are integrated into the wholeness of pilgrimage site as well as become important part of devotion toward Virgin Mary. The gigantic Maria Assumpta statue serves as landmark as well as focal point to attract people for visiting the site. People could take photograph or just sightseeing and play around the statue as part of celebrating the glory of Virgin Mary. After enjoy the Maria Assumpta statue, the visitor continues their reflection to Taman Doa by contemplating the important events in Jesus life before they pray and make devotion through the Virgin Mary statue. However, only a few people perform this “standard” ritual. Some people just go to Taman Doa and enjoy the scenery without performing the devotion. Some others directly go to the altar and pray. There are so many who just come for taking selfie with Maria Assumpta statue as the background.

Furthermore, located in peripheral area, the statue may disseminate the crowd from the main zone. Thus, the pilgrim who wants to perform their ritual may not be disturbed by the tourist or non-pilgrim visitors. Should be noted, even though it has the same figure of Mary, it is prohibited to pay devotion

through Maria Assumpta statue. “They have different function. It is just an icon, not place for devotion,” said R.C. Yunarto Kristantoro, head of site manager of GMKA. However, there are some people who still pray in front of the statue. Usually, they are doing it in silent just by standing still, bowing her head and then make the cross sign in their body. This contestation of meaning and “legal” practice in sacred place is commonly happen around the globe, even n the extreme level. Justine Digance (2009) examines the complex contestation to access and use the sacred site among the indigenous or local resident, the site manager, and various types of pilgrims. Furthermore, as Digance underlined, the “the spiritual magnetism” and claim of the sacredness become the source of this contestations. (Digance, 2009, p.146).

Meanwhile, not all people agree or pleased with the existence of Maria Assumpta statue. One bold statement comes from Franz Magnis-Suseno, a prominent scholar as well as Jesuit priest of Indonesia. He stated that the Maria Assumpta statue in Kerep is provocation toward Muslim and Protestant. Moreover, the existence of the lavish statue show unwise and intolerance behavior toward poor people, especially form other religious belief, around the region. Should be noted, a city symbol is a spatial contestation and competition among multiple cultures (Nash, 2011, p.08). Thus, by proposing a religious figure as city symbol even indirect way, it could also means a statement that the city is belong to certain religious community. Within this framework, the Maria Assumpta statue are valued not for the actual-use function but rather for their social function. Hence, reflecting from Marxism and critical theory on Deborg works, Maria Assumpta statue may serve as “superficially spectacle” that distract people from political, economic, labor, and ethical concerns of society (Deborg, 1967, p. 175). Thus, Romo Magnis statement corresponds with Deborg’s notions of spectacle society.

On the other hand, the negative respond also come from the pilgrim. On holiday or peak season, the escalating numbers of visitor sometimes disturb the calm and quite situation of pilgrimage site. “In the past, there are officers who gives warn for the visitor who make a noise. Now, they are too many. The officers can’t warn all of them quietly,” said O, 55 year old housemaid from Kendal who regularly visits GMAK once a week since 20 years ago. Moreover, it is almost impossible to contemplate in Taman Doa because the green grass and beautiful garden is the favorite photo spot for teenagers. Bremer underlines vulnerable potency to contestation by various interested parties in hybrid religion and tourism site (Bremer, 2006, p.27). In GMAK case, this potency is getting bigger along with escalating number of visitors who are attracted by the highest Mary statue in the Southeast Asia.

## **CONCLUSION**

The demand of lighter, comfy, attractive, and non-time consuming pilgrimage practice without losing the sacredness of the site encourage the site manager of sacred place to upgrade its facilities. Initially, the aim is to make the visitor more comfort so they could perform their ritual in prime condition. In the other hand, it is also important for sacred space to maintain their sacredness and “authenticity” in the amidst of modernity. Thus, along with enhancing their secular facilities, the site manager of sacred place also need to think to boost the sacredness of the site by giving another feature that may support and supplement the spiritual journey of the visitors. Eventually, all of

the efforts are made to attract more visitors, whether its pilgrim or non-pilgrim visitors. However, the escalating number of visitor may confront with the attempt to maintain the sacred quality of the place. Maria Assumpta statue in Ambarawa shows that boosting the sacredness of the place by adding various and lavish feature of religious feature may lead into the spectacle park as well stimulate the secular practices.

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