

SOVEREIGNTY AND VIOLENCE CONTESTED FOREST LANDSCAPES IN CENTRAL JAVA

· ANU LOUNELA ·

ABSTRACT

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The article explores the ongoing dispute connected with land rights in the district of Wonosobo, Central Java, within the framework of state formation and sovereignty. It is argued that in many places in Indonesia and Central Java, local landscapes have become sites of struggles for sovereignty more broadly. An analytical distinction between modern and traditional forms of power is made and ethnographically explored, but it is argued that, rather than being separate entities, both forms become conflated in the struggle for sovereignty in various spheres, creating hybrid forms of power.
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Keywords: dispute, forest landscape, Java, power, sovereignty, state, violence

Introduction

In 1998, the open conflict between Wanasana¹ villagers and the State Forestry Corporation (SFC) took a violent turn in the Central Javanese district of Wonosobo. The dispute between the villagers and the SFC is about access to land and natural resources, and as I will argue here, about contesting sovereignty. At that time, uncontrolled tree stripping—principally of pines (*pinus merkusii*)—was being perpetrated by SFC staff, local villagers and people from further afield, even occurring in the area that was locally considered to be sacred forest. Villagers recounted that, amongst other misfortunes, trees had fallen on people because of angry spirits and violent clashes had taken place between different actors in the course of the upheaval. In this article I will address the state forest land dispute in terms of power and sovereignty enacted in the context of local landscape. Here, landscape is understood as a “configuration of humans and nonhumans across a terrain” (Tsing 2005: 173). In Wonosobo, power is manifested in the stones, trees and caves that form the landscape or topography wherein narratives of local histories are re-lived and recreated by the people. This forest landscape is the place where power is contested and struggles over sovereignty create a process in which violent tensions emerge.

The research which provides the data for the following discussion took place during eleven months of fieldwork in 2003–2004 in an upland forest village inhabited by 5,010 people, located in the district of Wonosobo within the province of Central Java, Indonesia. Central Java is also considered the most centrally located area in Indonesia in terms of cultural and political discourse, and in this article I consider Wonosobo and ‘upland Java’ as having specific ties to central government, being at the same time marginal yet close to the ‘centre’. During fieldwork, I lived in the poor neighborhood that bordered the people’s

forest on the edge of the village. I explored and took part in villagers' activities in the state forest land and I followed how they formed forest peasant organizations which claimed access and user rights to this land, and how they negotiated these rights with different actors.

'Wanasana' village is inhabited by rural cultivators, who get their livelihoods mainly from forest related activities, but also from rice cultivation, crop farming, and temporary jobs inside and outside of the village. In their own forests and gardens, Wanasana villagers plant multiple hardwood trees (mahogany, albizzia and teak, mostly) and various fruit trees, herbs and crops (maize, rice, cassava and beans being the most popular) in order to have harvests throughout the year. Those not destined for household consumption are generally sold through the *borongan* system which may be translated as 'total sale': a man comes to the village, estimates the value of the harvest, pays the purchase price in advance to the owner, and later harvests and sells the crop.

When I arrived in Wanasana in 2003, the surrounding landscape was one of naked sandy hills where maize and other crops and a few tiny pine trees grew in the midst of other vegetation. There were no trees, as such, in this state forest, but the villagers anxiously talked about their rights of access to forest and land, raising the question of their relation to the Indonesian state, which claimed to have legal management rights over the land via the SFC. During the New Order (1967–1998) period, less than 10 percent of the Wanasana villagers worked with pine trees on the state forest land—which borders the village territory as it has been defined by the state and extends into the hills above the village. To my knowledge, only one villager worked officially as a member of an SFC field unit; most of those working with pine trees did not have any formal contracts. However, tapping sap offered a routine, if low, income, especially to those who did not have much land of their own. Sap tappers had permits to plant cassava amongst the pines during the first three years of tree growth and then the plantations were 'closed'. Those villagers who gained the right to manage their own 'block' of pine trees (normally a hectare or so) could start tapping sap when the trees were nine years old. During the New Order period, many villagers would take fallen branches for their firewood from the state forest area. According to the SFC, taking branches or any timber was illegal, and villagers were sometimes caught and taken to the police. Violent clashes often occurred in these instances between the villagers and SFC staff or forest police troops. The villagers have been even more visibly involved in the land dispute since 1998, openly confronting the SFC which has legal management rights to state forest land in all of Java. However, the history of the dispute can be traced back to the Dutch colonial period.

Analysis of empirical material in this article is grounded in theoretical discussion of sovereignty and power. Sovereignty is a concept linked with state formation and forms of power—and the ability to exercise that power; Hansen and Stepputat (2006) have suggested that ethnographies of sovereignty can create a more coherent and historical understanding of continuities between 'modern' and 'traditional' forms. They have redefined sovereignty as a "tentative and always emergent form of authority grounded in violence that is performed and designed to generate loyalty, fear, and legitimacy from the neighborhood to the summit of the state" (2006: 297). The idea of sovereignty being grounded in violence links to the formation of the modern nation-state and the use of techniques of government to obtain people, land and natural resources as part of its territorial domain and under its sovereign

power. This concept of sovereignty contests the liberal view that the nation-state has a legitimate right to control and rule resources, territory and people, the idea which was central to seventeenth-century political theory such as outlined by Hobbes in his “State of Warre”. It is a view that owes much to the Foucauldian concept of micro-power that has recently inspired many anthropological studies. In Foucault’s conception (1991), power works through technologies of government such as law, institutions and disciplines, creating categories which become means to exclude those seen as ‘deviant’. Modern sovereignty “is marked by an unprecedented desire to become not merely a legal or symbolic reign but a comprehensive, effective, and totalizing form of detailed government of territories and their populations” (Hansen and Stepputat 2006: 302). This assumption raises the question of the nature of the relationship between modern sovereignty that expresses itself through certain technologies, and ‘traditional’ sovereignty (such as kingship) as expressed through myths and ritual.

The Dutch colonial government in Indonesia used violent technologies and coercive control and punishments when annexing the territory and population and this was legitimated by the claim that local populations were primitive and lacking in both law and civilization: they needed governance. After Dutch rule ended, the independent state continued to employ colonial technologies of government, though unevenly, to extend control over territories and populations in the course of legitimizing its sovereignty. During President Suharto’s regime this governmental machinery was characterized by violent suppression of any opposition to state schemes, including forestry.

Tony Day (2002: 251) has suggested that violence (and the aesthetics of violence) has been linked to state formation in Southeast Asia since as early as the pre-colonial period, as illustrated in the old Javanese poems, for instance *Bharatayuddha*, and Javanese *wayang* stories. In pre-colonial Java, the throne was always a focus of familial rivalries and war. Changes in regime were often violent. In the pre-colonial period, however, state formation was more about the mobilization of men and maintenance of hierarchy than about taking over territories and controlling them effectively. Thus, over a long period of time, the people of Wonosobo have built sacred shrines around the caves, in the forests and on mountain tops, forming a landscape of cosmic and political centers associated with multiple religious orientations, traditions and languages.² The Dieng Plateau north of Wonosobo is said to be the ancient domain of the Hindu-Buddhist demigods—the Pendawas and Kaurawas of the Indian Mahabharata epic (Woodward 1989: 221). Wonosobo’s local history states that Dieng was the centre of Hindu-Buddhist Majapahit state that was in the form of a *mandala* in the fourteenth century.³ Between the eighth and fifteenth century the temples in Java were linked to deceased kings who were identified with the deity and worshipped there (Robson 1983: 296), thereby indicating the state form and its presence in the villages. In this way the king’s power became available to worshippers: marked by the presence of shrines, temples and associated cults. These sites were sources of power, as understood in Javanese cosmology, and they could be said “active agents” (Day 2002) of the king’s sovereign power in the area.

Anderson argues (1990) that in contrast to Western ideas of power, the Javanese see power as concrete, homogenous, a fixed total amount in quantity, and without moral implications; furthermore, it is concentrated through certain practices, rituals and ceremonies (see also Atkinson 1989). Thus, in traditional Southeast Asia, the state’s rule is ‘attractive’

rather than coercive. This conception of power also becomes visible in the landscape and in the relation of the people to the forests. Interestingly, the Javanese form of power is about how to gather and accumulate it, which seems to be in contrast with the modern form of power and its exercise through different techniques.

Wessing (2003: 204) argues that Javanese rulers had a “shamanistic background” that can be seen in their relationship to the forest: when establishing kingship, the spirits of the forest or nature had to be tamed by the ruler. It was through his success in taming these potentially evil spirits that the king gained legitimacy. “While local founders were perhaps not out to start a kingdom, they too had to face the dangers of the forests and come to some kind of arrangement with the local spirits that were seen as owning the land they were to occupy” (Wessing 2003: 205). Land and forests had supernatural elements and even kings had to negotiate with forest spirits to maintain their position as ruler.

In this article I will demonstrate that the concept of power, as enacted in contemporary Central Java, deserves reconsideration and amplification. As it stands at present, in the dispute over state forest land in Wonosobo, local people as well the SFC or army may use the help of *preman* (petty criminals) in taking control of the state forest land. These criminals may act as *jagos* (thugs) who have charisma and magical powers (in the Javanese sense) when they serve their patrons: the state bureaucrats, politicians, state forestry staff or sometimes villagers. Additionally, the local landscape illustrates how local sacred places conflate with totalizing forest governance systems, pointing to a hybridization that is not a smooth process but rather one filled with contradictions wherein (violent) tensions emerge (Day 2002).

This article explores how the modern state exercise of power interacts with the local (Javanese) idea of power. What kinds of power emerge in disputes over land? How is violence related to them? My ethnographic example of a struggle over sovereignty leads us to a small hill on the margins of Wanasana village, and the specific landscape of power that is disputed between the villagers and the SFC. There, in the midst of the people’s forests, in state forest Block (*petak*) 40, the local sacred place is located.

Forest cosmology as a source of local sovereignty

Pak Wahyu: *Kontrak* [state forest land] is what we call the Navel of the World [*pusare bumi*, jav.]. Puncak is *kontrak*; most people say it is the center of the earth. There stood the huge Ficus tree; there stood very big trees, rubber trees, but the SFC cut them down.

Wanasana state forest land, and specifically Block 40, consists of a few hilltops, one of which is called Puncak, ‘the Summit’. The local name of this place is *alas kalongan* (forest of bats). According to a local narrative, when the forest was still jungle hundreds of years ago, a man went there to meditate but he became attached by his legs to a branch and had to hang there with his head downwards like a bat (*burung kalong*), hence the name. A huge round rock (Navel of the World) is surrounded by about 2.5 hectares of land, near a spring which provides the village with its most important source of water. Two meditation huts and a small cave lie near the Summit. Its character as a sacred landmark is also indicated by a Ficus tree.⁴ Villagers say that the rock is exactly in the center of Java and in the center of

the cosmos. When I visited the cave, the Ficus was only few years old; the earlier one had probably been cut down by illegal loggers with a seedling being planted in its place.

During the first weeks of my stay in the village, my host, a forty-year old villager called Pak Wahid, took me for a walk to the Summit with a second, elderly man. On the way we passed the house of the village head and followed a path through the forest gardens, some planted with maize, others left fallow, along the slopes leading towards the hill. I could see small pine trees growing here and there between the crops on the sides of the big rock—it really reminded me of an enormous navel emerging from the earth. The men took me into the bush to see an old stone statue called Nini Ngenddong Iyan, about a half a meter high. The older man said that it was an *arca*—which is a term referring to ancestral beliefs and the stones or statues representing them (Boomgaard 2003: 303); he said that the statue had already been there when he was young, around seventy years earlier.

On a later occasion, one villager said that the statue was a *dhanyang*, a guardian spirit (which might also be a village god) of the Summit. In Java, a *dhanyang* is related to the taming of the primeval forest. Geertz (1960), drawing on the Javanese creation myth (*Babad Tanah Djawi*), explains that these kinds of spirits “support the wishes of men”, but they were “pushed” into the mountains. These places were thus called *punden*: holy places of spirits or places to offer reverence. He explains: “*Demits* (...) live in holy places called *pundens*, which may be marked by a small Hindu ruin (perhaps one little broken statue), a large banyan tree, an old grave, a nearly hidden spring, or some such topographical peculiarity” (1960: 24).⁵ *Demits* are similar to *dhanyang* spirits.

My host was not sure why the statue was there. Puncak was a protected forest and place of meditation. The female statue guarded the forest or watched over nature. While we were looking at the statue, he said:

When I was young all the people were afraid to get closer [to the statue] (...) people of my age were afraid [*ketakutan*], but the younger people, especially young children, don't believe anymore in what we call *ghaib*, they think it is not in any way special. Formerly, people did not dare to break it, they did not dare to touch it, did not dare [*enggak berani*].

Now, however, the female statue no longer had a head. When I asked about it, my companions said that somebody had cut it off. We walked about in the grass fruitlessly looking for it before continuing on our way. Nobody in the village was willing or able to explain how the statue had lost its head. In my view, the missing head pointed to the inability of the tutelary spirit to protect the village, the loss of her cultural sovereignty, probably in the aftermath of the SFC logging the trees in the power-laden place. In the sixties, the villagers had been forced to cut down the forests after the PKI-related violence and subsequently the state forest land became a timber-producing economic unit.

We walked further and saw the meditation hut which the older man said he could not enter because he did not have any specific request. Neither of my companions could take me into the hut, nor any further, since we did not have permission from Puncak's ‘key keeper’. It is dangerous to go into these places without being properly prepared for it. For the villagers, Puncak constitutes a place which in Java is generally described as *alam gaib* (the realm of nature and mystery), somewhere that existed before humans and contains mystical power, spirits and gods that have their own lives. In principle, these forces still inhabit the ‘world’ (*alam*), but in the guise of ‘mystery’ (*gaib*). Javanese tend to go to

forests (or graveyards) to present requests to the spirits through ascetic practices, and such places as Puncak are ideal for doing so. Puncak is also *angker*. Boomgaard (2003: 309) says that *angker* means 'forbidden'. In the dictionary it is translated as 'eerie'. Magnis-Suseno (1993) writes that, in Java, 'nature' (*alam*) is considered *angker*, because it is full of potentially dangerous spirits, beasts and other creatures; only those able to concentrate power may wander freely in nature, thereby demonstrating that they have that power. As it is, nature can be 'cultured' (*balus*) through the arts: *gamelan*, *wayang* and so forth. For instance, it was believed that the spirits in Puncak hold a sacred *gamelan*.

This hilltop with its cave and spring, guarded by a female spirit inhabiting the statue, was sacred and thus potentially dangerous. It was a place where villagers and outsiders may accumulate power. It was also linked to the king's power, as inscribed in the local landscape. As Wessing (2003: 204) writes, in Southeast Asia the guardian of the forest is often a female spirit "and the relationship between it and the ruler was often said to be sexual". Wanasana villagers explained that the statue was female because it guarded the fertility of the place. It was also described as 'grandmother' (ind. *nenek*, and in this village *nini*), referencing the forest as a place of 'origin' (Beatty 1999). Thus, the missing head here points to the loss of origins or 'tradition' due to the New Order discourse and practices marginalizing forms of local power as potentially threatening.

The Javanese forest is a source of knowledge and space in which relationships are formed between the people and state, people and spirits and among the villagers themselves. As noted by Paige West (2005: 639) on Papua Guinea, the environment is deeply social, aesthetic and poetic, rather than being governed by an economic rationale. In the next section I will more deeply explore this social and poetic aspect of the forest landscape, and how people in the village conceptualize power through the landscape, with all its contradictions.

Forest as a sovereign sphere

Villagers regarded a man named Mbah Wahyu as the 'key keeper' or *juru kunci* of the sacred forest and the Navel of the World. He regularly withdraws to that place in order to fast for periods which range from between three and 45 days; when fasting he does not eat anything other than chili or cassava, nor does he sleep, spending his time in the hut or cave until different spirits enter his body. He says that fasting is a hard practice and involves the risk of death for one who does not possess sufficient power. In a metaphor which resonates strikingly with Anderson's (1990) description of the concept of power in Java, Mbah Wahyu describes power as an oil lamp in which the flame dies out if it is not strong enough. Fasting also brings him into communion with spirits which might come from a great distance, as far as from the Dieng Plateau (mentioned above). Mbah Wahyu has had severe fights with giant spirits (e.g. Buta Sastro) and has been able to defeat them by using Islamic formulas, such as the Confession of Faith (*sahadat*, *jimat kalimasada*).⁶ Mbah Wahyu explained:

The statue [Nini Ngendong Iyan] was the *tokoh* [prominent figure] who opened the place [Puncak]. She had two *pengawal* [retainers] named Konco Suryo and Ponco Suryo. In the meditation hut above

lives the spirit of a relative of the sultan from Surakarta; there his name was Jogo Negoro. The trees are probably inhabited by the spirits; these spirits are *penjaga* [guardians] and in cases of wrongdoing they may revolt or cause death, as has happened in the village. They also guard the water that goes from the centre of the world to Puncak. There two *ipik* trees grow and if one hits the trees one can hear the sound “dung-dung”. If the *kontrak* is cleared [without rituals] the guardian spirits become angry, and once a tree fell on the fasting hut; and a man met a bad fate. Next to the *tugu* [monument] there is big stone, a *bintang* stone which has a name; the stone is guarded by a *buta raksasa* [giant spirit or ogre] (...). In the stone is a picture of a cup that was destroyed. The name of the spirit is Kolondoko. Semar and Tunggulwulung were guardians there some time ago. The king is called Puntodewo. The other guardian spirits are called Noloboyo, Jogoboyo and their relatives Woloboyo, Jogoboyo and Ronggoboyo (Compiled from discussion 8.12.2003).⁷

The forest is powerful because of the spirits who inhabit it. However, supernatural forces of the forest and nature may be tamed by ritual and ascetic practices. Cutting down a tree is a violent act that may arouse the anger of the spirits and disturb the balance in the cosmos and for this reason a ritual is needed, which the key keeper has the authority to perform. At the same time, he keeps tradition alive by recreating the past and making it relevant to the villagers or those visiting the place (Fox 2002: 172). It is also possible to interpret Mbah Wahyu’s narrative in terms of Javanese state formation which is a process involving power struggles between humans, and spirits and deities which creates balance in the cosmos and maintains the state.

A week later I went back to see Mbah Wahyu, and this time he seemed to think that more information that he considered important could be revealed to me.⁸ Here I am reconstructing his narratives as we walked and talked.

Mbah Wahyu explained that one had to walk from the eastern side around Puncak (anti-clockwise) and never in the reverse direction if one wished for something. We walked uphill with green *sawah* (rice paddy) to the left of us and, to the right, the people’s mixed local forest where albizzia trees grew among the other plants and fruit trees. These were lands owned by the villagers. When we reached the upper slopes, we saw maize, beautiful, almost two meters high, waiting to be harvested in a few weeks. Here started the state forest land. At the highest point we stopped. This is Sapu Angin (Windswept), Mbah Wahyu told me, and this is in the middle (*tengah tengah*), indicating the centrality of the place. There were animals, and he pointed north to the hills close by and explained:

In Sapu Angin there was a tree, but all the leaves fell because of the dry season. The tree broke because it was brushed by the wind. It turned upside down; it was because the tree was not strong [*kuat*] enough. At first we did not know about that, there were lots of people, a white tiger followed (...) and then people died, they were not strong enough to hold the tree up, it was falling over the place, it was attacked by wind, it broke down [*patah*].⁹

Sapu Angin is a place that is located close to the meditation huts and spirit palace above the rock. The trees were not strong because Puncak was losing its strength and sacredness due to the logging of the pine trees. The tiger is a spirit tiger that guards the forest.

Mbah Wahyu also told me that the palace of a deity named Puntadewa (the eldest of the Pendawa brothers) is located inside the rock (to me it looked as if it were under the monument). Puntadewa loved Mbah Wahyu and for that reason he had moved to Puncak. Puncak was also the place where a giant spirit called Cokrobirowo lived. Mbah Wahyu was

able to meet the spirits by meditating in the huts or cave. Cokrobirowo becomes frightening when angry as does Puntadewa, and it requires a great deal of power to face either of them.¹⁰ Mbah Wahyu told me that the palace has been in Puncak since the Sultan of Yogyakarta with his follower Jogo Negoro abdicated there (*turun takhta*).¹¹ Close to the palace is located a carved stone, which was made by a *wali* (Islamic saint) who had turned the Javanese religion into a slave of the Islamic religion. Mbah Wahyu made it clear that he was not involved with Islam; he told me that Javanism resembled Buddhism because it was about asking from other than the Islamic god. However, he did not follow Buddhism because he did not have a teacher to guide him, but rather followed the Pendawas and the wisdom of Sang Hyang Lorda (the highest god), and his disciples Batara Guru and Betari Durga, and *bidadari* (a fairy or beautiful female spirit). The first deity was Betara Kala.

The spirits mentioned all live in the Puncak landscape and are either village guardians or forest spirits that are given names or represent characters from the *wayang lakons* (the stories enacted in the Javanese shadow-puppet theatre). Powerful people may try to match their strength against that of the spirits, with the aim of creating balance in the cosmos between people and spirits, and people and nature, and also maintaining order and hierarchy in the state. Power, therefore, is inscribed in the landscape and brought to life by the key keeper.

In the Javanese *wayang* stories, Batara Guru and Betari Durga comprise a pair: Batara Guru is the Lord of Heaven and Betari Durga the Goddess of Violence who sides with the Kurawas, causing misfortune to their Pendawas cousins. She can be overcome only by Semar. Semar belongs to the clown class (Punakawan) and is a loyal servant of the Pendawas (and sultan), but is also considered higher (more powerful) than them.¹² In the *wayang* mythology, Puntadewa is the oldest brother of the Pendawas or the same as Yudistira. He is the ideal priest-king, representing good, order and justice; he does not fight or possess weapons (not even a *keris*, unlike the other four Pendawa brothers) but he owns a sacred text (*kalimasada*) that makes his rule righteous (Mbah Wahyu claimed that he now held this). In Javanese *wayang* stories, Puntadewa had to leave the Ngastina kingdom after the deception of the Kurawas. He and his brothers wandered through a thick forest which they clear before building a beautiful palace (Ngamarta). Here Puntadewa becomes king, and famous for his just rule. The Pendawas' Kurawa cousins represent evil or disorder; they want to have the kingdom and they chase the Pendawas away. The rivalry between the Kurawas and Pendawas continues through different episodes, ending with a final struggle where all the Kurawas die, following a bloodbath in the palace of Ngastina where some of the Pendawa family are also slaughtered. The five brothers travel to Mount Mahameru, but their strength weakens on their way to heaven; only Puntadewa reaches the heavenly gate which he enters with a request to the gods that his family may join him. (Anderson 1996 [1965]: 23, 47, 79–83.)

Wayang narratives comprise a Javanese religious myth that explains the universe and its order. The stories derive from the Mahabharata and Ramayana but also explain the position of the Javanese in the universe and connect them with the natural and supernatural order. Thus Anderson (1996) claims that *wayang* myths call for tolerance in a universe where the balance between evil and good is always being sought and potential sources of conflict uncovered.

The giants represent disharmony and uncontrollable nature in contrast to the *ksatrya* (or 'knight') who demonstrates his power through his self-control and concentrated energy; a knight is invulnerable and overcomes violent giants or ogres with his 'halusness' (Anderson 1990: 50–51).¹³ For instance, Puntadewa is a knight. However, the division of the natural realm into evil and good does not follow the western logic of strict separation, but rather these forces are perceived to exist as a union:

the philosophy of the *wajang* stories is that insofar as one can perceive ultimate reality, which is within oneself as an ultimate feeling, *rasa*, one will be free of the distracting effects of earthly emotions (...) This gives one great power—either for good as in the case of Pendawas, or for evil, as in the case of Kurawas, who after all are *alus*, too. (Geertz 1960: 273).

This understanding is central to what makes *wayang* as religious mythology different from Islamic or Christian religion: good and evil are not strictly separated (Mbah Wahyu explained that Puntadewa may also turn into a terrifying giant if angered). This is the immoral nature of power: the Pendawas may become angry (killing and so forth) and the Kurawas may have a good side or even be *ksatryas*. However, by building and strengthening one's inner power through ascetic practices, one may defeat evil. Ultimately, the forest is a proper place for building the balance of good and evil through related practices and it is also an arena wherein to build a kingdom, that is, the state.

There exist various spirits and sources of power in the forest. The female spirit embodied in the guardian statue, the palace, a city peopled with beautiful women, and the grave of Puntadewa, all belong in the forest domain and are a part of the King's sovereignty in which the spirits can be 'tamed' through ascetic practices. Thus, it is a local source of power, a centre, which both supports the state and connects the people with the state. In the process of state formation people are made loyal to the state; they are subservient to the king because the king has the capacity to tame nature and communicate with the mystical sphere which comprises his sovereignty, thereby protecting the people from danger. In the following section, I will connect these Javanese ideas of power, as found in the village, to modern forms of power, showing how contradictions evolve in the struggle over sovereignty that is part of the state formation process in Indonesia.

Contesting sovereignty and nature in Puncak

A pillar monument (*tugu*) stands above the invisible palace, next to these mythological sources of power, above the Puncak rock. Most of the villagers hold the view that the *tugu* was built when Dutch officials opened the forest to forestry. The *tugu* marks the place as a source of modern state power. Here the state territorial activities in relation to the forest land area become concrete; the *tugu* is actually a sign of the institution of forestry (*sinderan*—a term for a forestry administrative unit during the Dutch colonial period). Thus, the villagers relate *tugu* to *sinderan*, connecting spiritual power with the King's domain, inhabited by his official representative, and with nature. However, it is also seen as a sign of the institution of forestry itself. Here I invoke the idea of hybridity (Day 2002) and fluidity in relation to power. The state draws from local notions of power in building the *tugu* that represents national unity, but also the state's territorial power over the forests, and for some

villagers it may appear as an agent of kingship and the union of people with spirits and nobles.

Pemberton (1994) has taken the view that the Indonesian state (especially during the New Order government of 1967–1998) has been increasingly interested in expropriating collective rituals, which is why it has made a practice of building sacred sites and monuments. For Pemberton, this means that the state, via national monuments, is nationalizing sacred sites and alienating people from the spirits, which undermines the sacredness and power of the local power centers (Pemberton 1994: 266). I would suggest that the spirits are being contested (*rebutan*, using Pemberton's expression) by the modern state or army, or here the SFC, as well the villagers, as I will demonstrate. The state monument is interpreted in local terms as inhabited by spirits and thus integrated into their belief system, but it is also clearly marking the place as part of the modern state domain and supervised pine tree plantation.

Yet, grand acts of *rebutan* do occasionally appear in contemporary Java, particularly at sites considered magically endowed with power(s) emanating from legendary figures whose spiritual weight has created an inertia so great that even the forces of Mini-ization seem diminished in comparison (Pemberton 1994: 253).

In 2000 or so the state forest area in Puncak became the target of forest stripping. According to the narrative of the local key keeper, the SFC wanted to harvest the pine tree forest.¹⁴ A forest officer (and later some other staff) asked Mbah Wahyu to perform a ritual for permission from the spirits to log the forest without landslides or other natural catastrophes. Mbah Wahyu agreed to perform the ritual and, together with forestry officers and some villagers, went to Puncak. There he presented an offering to ward off catastrophes (*sesaji penolakan*) consisting of a black chicken, rice and *cemongkok* chili sauce. He started to utter the prayers but had not yet finished when somebody took a chainsaw and started to cut the trees. Fifty people followed him in a sudden wave. Somebody was wounded. There was chaos. But Mbah Wahyu cut the throat of chicken. The feathers and intestines were buried in the ground at the place of the *selamatan* ritual. He continued the prayer (*doa*). However, misfortune followed, because of the disrespect shown to the ritual. The daughter of the key keeper continued telling the story: when the SFC later asked villagers to plant pine trees there again, a rumor spread that children with long dread-locked hair should have their hair cut in order to prevent the catastrophes. SFC staff returned and asked Mbah Wahyu to come and calm the people. He organized a new ritual *selamatan*: “We had to have a *selamatan* so that there would not be catastrophes (*bencana*),” the daughter said.¹⁵

Why did the key keeper collaborate with the forestry staff? Why did they ask him to perform the ritual? The act of logging the trees is a violent one and may arouse the anger of the spirits in nature (both mysterious and real). Trees are inhabited by spirits. These tree spirits may guard the village, or may turn against it. A person who violates the customary rules of communication with the spirits is vulnerable to misfortune. Creating a balance between good and evil, mediating between the people and spirits and between the SFC and the villagers, was a task of the local guardian. Here, however, spirits and local sources of power were also contested by the SFC staff and the villagers.

For the villagers, the turning of Puncak into *kontrak* had been a source of contradictions for decades, ever since the sixties or seventies when the natural forest was cut down and the area was turned into a pine tree plantation: the cosmological power of the place had become questionable, the sacred *gamelan* was defiled and lost its voice, the head of the statue was cut off. It seems that the role of the key keeper as the regulator of access to Puncak suffered: people came and went, and finally the trees were cut down in a sudden wave despite the protective ritual having not yet been completed. The ritual may be interpreted here in terms of contestation: the *selamatan* ritual is interrupted by *rebutan*, the struggle for power. In the following section I will explore different modes of forest contestation where different forms of power operate in the struggle for sovereignty.

Narratives of violence in the village

The villagers refer to the period after 1998 as a period in which state law did not function. In 2003 the situation in the village was calm, but with an undercurrent of accounts of violence which had occurred over preceding years when villagers had clashed with SFC officials, and with each other. Villagers were still shocked by the violence of the deforestation: in a short span of time, large areas of forest had been totally devastated. Furthermore, villagers were angry with SFC officers because of the long history of restricted access to state forest land and the repressive techniques of the corporation. As one member of the SFC field staff said of preceding years:

There was a lot of intimidation and I was afraid. I still have trauma from it. If I walked on the village road nobody greeted me and they looked at me angrily. One member of the forestry field staff was kidnapped and taken to some house and beaten [and] is still experiencing trauma—you can meet him if you want. Day and night, stripping of trees, it was brutal. If a forestry field worker saw timber theft and he reported it to the police, later this [person] would be kidnapped [by villagers]. I don't understand why the police did nothing. If they had wanted to do something [to stop illegal logging], it would not have been difficult! I once suggested that we should set up posts by the road where every truck carrying timber would be checked. The drivers would know the big buyers. But this was never done.

Violence was not only about conflicting interests. Villagers base their claims on the local normative order: a tree managed by a person is considered his tree, even though the land on which it grows belongs to someone else. The trees logged by the SFC, though managed by the villagers, were in the SFC blocks and the SFC considered the trees theirs. According to local norms, the villagers knew that the trees and land were not their private property but they felt it wrong that the SFC or other actors could just come in and take the timber at will. Furthermore, forests formed part of the landscape and were inscribed with sources of power, thus providing villagers with memories and narratives of their cultural identity as Javanese upland people. As Hansen and Stepputat (2006) have suggested, there are zones of sovereignty where local customary control prevails, and other zones where the state claims its sovereignty. In the colonial period the modern state-claimed zones became outsourced to businesses which the local population contests. These overlapping sovereignties cause violence.

The SFC defended its sovereign power over state forest land by claiming it was legitimized by state law. However, the villagers also claimed they had some rights to the land and forest. SFC staff became the target of frustrated outbreaks by the villagers, or violent attacks by mixed mobs of people of whom many may also have been criminals (*premans*). When President Suharto's regime ended in 1998, the chaos and violence emerging everywhere revealed the complex nature and structure of the Indonesian state: a network of relations between bureaucrats, corporation staff, criminals, police and the army (Schulte-Nordholt and van Klinken 2007).

In August 2003, I travelled with a local SFC unit chief to the main office of the SFC's Southern Kedu administrative unit in Purworejo and we talked together, in the back of the official car, during the few hours the trip took. The unit chief told me that he had held his post in the village unit since 2000, when he had replaced the previous incumbent. He had arrived with his wife and two children, though his wife had left after a month claiming she would be traumatized if she stayed on in the village. Most of the forest was already cut down by that time. His wife and children witnessed violent outbursts in the yard of the SFC compound in the village. Youth groups came once in a while asking for money; they were brutal; they wore red head scarves and carried knives. He added, "Once I had only 40,000rp in my wallet; I gave them 20,000rp, and they left satisfied." He was afraid to wander in the village because he could be kidnapped and beaten. "I was lucky not to die," he told me.¹⁶

Violence seemed to manifest itself in outbursts or moments, but at the same time, violence has long historical roots in state formation, involving both traditional Javanese as well as modern forms of power. Power relations were best revealed, however, when violence took a serial form, as I will illustrate in the following section.

Violence and village elites

In May 2003 the SFC organized a meeting between the Wonosobo village heads and the SFC, during the course of which a senior staff member said that he was very concerned about forest destruction in Wonosobo because there were no trees at all left in the subdistricts of Kaliwiro and Sapuran.¹⁷ The dispute was obviously not at an end. Later, in the village, my host and I visited the village elder, Mbah Wir, who regarded himself as being close both to the SFC and village bureaucrats, as he had been the most powerful hamlet head for almost forty decades until the eighties; he still wielded a lot of power and control behind the scenes. When I spoke to him in October, 2003, this eighty-year old member of the village elite explained the reasons that led to violence and illegal logging:

Wahid: Why did people [*masyarakat*] want to log the pines? Was it for quick profit or merely because they disapproved of the plantations? Why did they suddenly log them all? Earlier they calmly tapped the resin as a source of income, but then they cut them all down?

Mbah Wir: My view is that not everybody was able to tap resin; some did not have any income from the pines at all. But when people sold timber they suddenly got a lot of money. The contracts included the stipulation that forest land would be closed three or four years after people had fertilized the trees and they had grown big. Well, after that they felt they owned them [the trees]. Maybe there were

people who planted trees and got a number of them in return; then there were those who tapped resin and they got maybe only 100–200 trees to tap, which was not so much. But then there were those who got 1,000 or 2,000 trees with fewer tappers. Furthermore, it seems there were some ‘unknown actors’ [*oknum*] from the SFC who started stealing trees for different reasons: for instance, they might say that they were thinning the plantations by logging 2,000 trees while in reality they were taking 5,000. People thought: “Well, if I don’t take trees for myself I will get nothing, even though I was the one planting them.”

Mbah says that they felt they owned the trees and that is why they could steal them.

Here the important point seems to be that customarily villagers have rights not only to land but to the trees. The person who plants a tree (or crops) shares the harvest (even if not on his or her own land) or pays rent and gets the whole harvest, but it is not ‘right’ that somebody else takes the trees (the harvest). The concept of concretized property relations as created in the village are in this case extended to the state forest area thus questioning the whole idea of ‘illegal logging’. Who may claim to be the owner of the tree? Villagers have no strict private property rights, but rather, a ‘bundle of rights’; trees are expressions of social relations in the village; they are also metaphors of the relationship between the state forestry company/the State and the people. It is felt that if a villager plants a tree, he has the right to tap resin and also to log it or get a share of the profit from logging it.

The second point concerns the corrupt practices of the higher authorities. The male village head, whom I spoke to soon after his election in 2003, noted that villagers were angry and disappointed at the corruption of Suharto’s regime which at that point had become general knowledge. Villagers witnessed how SFC staff or employees took and sold trees for their own benefit, while villagers living on the borders of the state forest area got nothing. Everybody joined in the free-for-all. Law enforcement was weak, the forest police did nothing, and the state police did nothing, he said.

In an interview conducted at about the same time, the female village head told me that when the New Order regime collapsed and the stripping of the forest started in 1998, she remained passive. The wood traders (Chinese, according to her) came to her house and offered money to get access to the forest (which she said she refused). Somehow her husband got involved in the timber business at that time, as did both of her younger brothers. According to some villagers, one of the brothers went to jail for taking timber from the state forest and the other had to pay a big fine in order not to be imprisoned for the same reason. However, from the villagers I got the view that this village head was not considered one with actual ‘power’ (she herself hinted that villagers did not respect her), and she was also accused of corruption and of condoning the destruction.

Another member of the village elite, the wife of a man who had been a village head in the seventies, said that nothing could be done when the stealing of trees started. The village elite numbered but a few, and people stealing the wood in the forest were many. “Better they [village elite] left the place than died!” The conflict took physically violent forms. On some occasions 300 people went to demonstrate in front of the state forestry office which was located beside an ex-village head’s house; most often they were demanding that somebody already arrested be released, or that the forestry-unit chief pay them for their labor in cutting wood. Villagers and some outsiders logged or transported the (stolen) wood and when the forestry-unit chief came and confiscated the timber it resulted in mobs carrying gasoline and jungle knives demonstrating in front of the forestry building. Pine

trees were piled everywhere by the road. Even the busses did not dare to go through the village. Villagers also clashed with each other. Those who had tapped resin wept when they saw the trees being cut down. Groups of robbers threatened to log the trees. Tappers agreed to be paid and then logged the trees themselves rather than lose all their income. People were hugging trees to prevent the logging. Some of the timber traders lived in the village but acted through other, poorer villagers who cut the timber, with the traders acting as mediators. The whole scenario was described as 'horrifying' by the ex-village head and his wife.¹⁸

Tsing has described the paradoxical situation in Kalimantan's forests where "lines between public, private and criminal were unclear" (2005: 34): when the loggers, timber thieves or local people stripped trees, some of them were working individually for small entrepreneurs, some for corporations; the legality of operations was hard to establish though much of it was outside the law. The forest had become the site of new dynamics and destruction. The situation in Wonosobo took a similar kind of direction although it was not the original forest that was being destroyed, but rather the state forest plantations. The clearance of the state forest and violence related to it draws attention to the network of actors involved in contestations over power in the area, and in the combination of traditional and modern elements being invoked. For example, the SFC could use local *jagos* (thugs) who are considered to have magical powers, to terrorize the villages, but villagers could ause them, in their turn, to mobilize local people, and *jagos* could also take part in the demonstrations or rallies against (or for) the SFC.

Peluso (2002) argues that people may feel justified using violence in contestations over resources if they have experienced violence during previous regimes. The New Order government had taken for granted that it had a legitimate right to control resources and govern people as it wished, using the threat of violence if needed. The unitary nature of the Indonesian nation state was based on control over territory by laws and military force. When the state apparently collapsed, the villagers saw that the police and the SFC were helpless or, most often, collaborating with criminals (*preman*), practices which were then linked to forest destruction, timber theft and corruption. This system of 'backing', as it is called in Indonesia, means that "[s]treet-level *preman* increasingly were controlled and protected by state officials" (Krstiansen and Trijono 2005: 239). It has been said that a kind of "*preman* society" was formed (Peluso 2002: 10). However, this "*preman* society" seems to me rather to be a response to the '*preman* state' formed in the New Order period during which time, for example, the state organized killings of 'criminals' such as in 1983, or *pembunuhan misterius* (mysterious killings) more generally (see Siegel 1998; Kristiansen and Trijono 2005: 238). In post-Suharto Wonosobo, it was claimed that the police force took part in illegal timber extraction, and also that the SFC sent local *premans* to cut trees in a village where people had planted albizzia trees as part of their application of regional regulations. Many *premans* are today's *jagos* and they extend their power to political life in Wonosobo.

In Wonosobo confusion spread over who had the legitimate right and authority to govern the state forest area and how security would be maintained. The SFC had its own police force, which could not prosecute people but could catch them and hand them over to the official police force. The village elite said they did not have the authority to control what happened in the state forest area; it was the SFC's territory. However, a network of

actors worked in the area, the forest was logged, and necessary rituals were conducted. As Hansen and Stepputat have suggested, different segments of sovereignty resulting from uneven control and rule have developed in Java since the colonial period.

Interpreting violence

Peluso and Watts (2001: 26) define violence as “practices (brutal acts) that cause direct harm to humans. Those harms have to be understood in physical, symbolic, cultural, and emotional terms.” Adopting a Foucauldian approach and using the concept of modern governmentality as the new regime of “bio-power”, they discuss how violence emerges from “calculation of nature” and related techniques: “Novel forms of surveillance, regulation, self-policing, and resource exclusion imply new techniques through which the relations among sovereignty, discipline and population are reconfigured” (2001: 36). For instance, in the case of Wanasana (and more broadly Wonosobo), state sovereignty over natural resources (the pine tree plantation area) meant exercise of violent forms of power through techniques of surveillance and resource-exclusion (the forest police forces with their guns, field technical staff patrolling and chasing people in the forest area etc.). However, as we have seen, violence in Java is not a monopoly of the state; villagers responded to it by kidnapping SFC staff, beating them, and finally taking part in logging as many pine trees as possible.

Furthermore, in Java violence is not only violence between human agency and institutions; it also occurs between humans and the spirits inhabiting the trees. It is related to the struggle over power, creating balance and maintaining the order of the state. Harming the trees is connected to the people’s well-being because the trees are inhabited by spirits which guard the balance of good and evil in the universe, but also because there are consequences for nature and people’s livelihoods. Cutting down trees might be seen as a violent act by the villagers who try to maintain good relations with the spirits who inhabit the forest sphere and have a duty to protect the villagers. However, logging may also mean getting rid of the state forest plantations and—in the state’s terms—the effective forest governance that restricts the access of local populations to the socioecological landscape.

Conclusion

How then, does power operate in Wanasana, and how is it related to sovereignty? The ideal Javanese form of power is based on a sovereign who attracts followers through his power and ability to communicate with surrounding nature such as the Wanasana landscape and Puncak. In contrast, modern forms of power are grounded in territorial control: mapping, physical coercion, discipline and punishment by the forest police force, all of which are exemplified by the SFC and its territorial control over Puncak and areas around the village. These different ideas of power are materialized in the land dispute and struggle over sovereignty in Wanasana village. However, rather than being separate entities, they become conflated in the struggle over sovereignty when the villagers and SFC staff together turn on *preman* who steal trees, some of whom supposedly have magical powers, and others

guns or other weapons from the post-Suharto state formation process. This network of actors resonates with the Javanese familial state and related power struggles.

Benedict Anderson, in his book *Language and Power*, argues that old and new forms of power exist together in contemporary politics but these powers differ in their relative dominance over each other at different times (1990: 77). In his view, the amalgam of the modern nation-state is born from the conflict between the “old nations” and colonial-rooted “new” states: “the state, which can never justify its demands on a community’s labor, time and wealth simply by its existence, finds in the nation its modern legitimation” (1990: 95). However, a state often also has deep historical roots or, as Anderson expresses it, genealogies. For the Wanasana villagers, the Javanese ‘state’ and power centre as found in the Wanasana forest were seen as a sign of equilibrium in the cosmos, a space in which to form relationships between the people and nature, and between the people and the state. On the other hand, state formation during the New Order regime was based on certain violent techniques: surveillance, exclusion from nature, logging its trees and control over the geographic area by introducing new tree species and by restricting forest access (with violent enforcement).

My argument is that ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ sovereign states are not, in present day Java, ‘distinct entities’ whereby one continues where the other ends (as argued by Hooker 1978: 9), but rather that state formation is a continuous process of hybridization that incorporates violence or conflicts (Day 2002). Some forms of a ‘traditional state’ overlap with the ‘modern state’ that operates through apparatuses, techniques of government and territorial principles. The overlapping sovereignties and potential conflict become visible in the landscape: an invisible palace inside a rock, spirits inhabiting the trees in the forests, and essential rituals to pacify these spirits all reference Javanese idea of power, while above them all one can see a national monument and a monoculture pine tree plantation.

Rebutan, or struggle over power, takes the form in this case of a violent stripping of trees that challenges modern forestry institutions and effective governance as experienced in the village. In their struggle for power, villagers might turn to criminals or *jagos* who may either use their magical powers or forge links with the army, the police or the SFC, who also rob the forests. On the other hand, the SFC may turn to the village key keeper to perform a local ritual to pacify spirits and villagers’ ancestors, but also employ *jagos*, thus demonstrating the complicated nature of ‘power’. Violence and *rebutan* seem to be part of the state formation process whereby different forms of power are contradictory in terms, and sometimes conflated.

However, in the ongoing contestation over access to land and forest, the local forms of power (capacity to communicate with spirits, asceticism) become marginalized. This marginality was reflected, for instance, in the position of the local forest guardian and his capacity to control access to the sacred forest. At the same time, though, villagers temporarily took over forest land after the pine tree devastation, and started to claim rights there. Ritual was not about security or harmony in this case, but a moment of struggle, *rebutan*, for authority over the state forest land and a local, power-laden place.

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NOTES

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- ¹ Pseudonym. The names of the villages and villagers have been changed.
- ² Beatty (1999: 10) has stressed the different ‘Javas’ and different characteristics of regions.
- ³ Woodward (1989: 199) explains that the *mandala* form of the Mataram kingdom (after Majapahit) had fourfold guardians: Ratu Kidul, Sunan Merapi (a spirit king on the top of Merapi Mountain), Sunan Lawu (the last king of Majapahit) and Semar (a *wayang* figure and the sultan’s mystical guide).
- ⁴ Wessing (2003: 212) has discussed the sacredness and symbolic meaning of trees and especially the Ficus that one finds in Central Javanese court palaces (*kraton*). The tree can be seen as a symbol of Indra (a Hindu god), or possibly representative of the wilderness and forest—the shamanic side of kingship (the king’s mediating role between the gods and spirits and people).
- ⁵ *Demit* comes from the word a *dedemitan*; it is translated as a ghost or apparition (Kamus Indonesia-Inggris). *Danyan* is a Javanese term, and could be translated as ‘guardian spirit’ or ‘spirit of a place’. These are general names for spirits in Java.
- ⁶ In other words, Mbah Wahyu has been able to gain knowledge (*ngelmu*) of Islamic and Javanese traditions, becoming a key holder to that knowledge. Anderson (1990: 55) has argued that knowledge is a key to “ontological reality” and power in Java. For instance, a piece of written text like the *surat kalimasada* that comprises a special *pusaka* (‘heirloom’ of the Puntadewa—or eldest of the Pendawa brothers), has long been a sign of power in Java where many are illiterate (1990: 58).
- ⁷ The original discussion was in Javanese, and was translated into Indonesian by the anthropologist Puju Semedi (UGM). I have looked at Javanese texts and compared them to the translation.
- ⁸ Fox (2002: 162) notes that all *juru kunci*s he met gave the information in the form of revelations and it is given in stages. I have had the same experience with Mbah Wahyu.
- ⁹ The transcript in Javanese was translated with the help of my assistant Ani Dwi Marsyanti; the original discussion was in the form of dialogue (videotape and recorded cassette).
- ¹⁰ Anderson (1990) has noted that in Java ‘good’ always has its evil side—power is immoral.
- ¹¹ Local history relates that Jogo Negoro was a regent head (*tumenggung*) with supernatural power, one that dwelled in the forests of Wonosobo. Thus, in Mbah Wahyu’s story, his power extended to Wanasana forests.
- ¹² The social order is hierarchical in these mythologies; thus Semar belongs to the clown class and the *ksatria* (knights, military-administrative ruling class, nobles) to a higher class as protectors of the state. However, Semar is considered the most powerful of gods, combining great wisdom with gentle humor. (Anderson 1965: 18, 37.)
- ¹³ In the village, peasants could be referred to as knights on the basis of their behavior. Robson (1983: 296–297), citing Gadson, explains that *ksatriyas* should defend the poor, should be heroes in battle, generous and obey the teachings of scriptures, as described in the old Javanese chronicle, *Agastyaparwa*.
- ¹⁴ Here Mbah Wahyu says that harvesting (*penjaranagan*) is the same as illegal logging (*penjarahan*). He clearly knows that usually when the SFC legally harvests or cuts trees it also illegally cuts wood over the quota.
- ¹⁵ Fieldwork diary, December 2003.
- ¹⁶ The sacrifices made by lower echelons of SFC staff in the interests of their jobs reached personal levels.

For instance, one forestry field-unit chief gave his own money to the villagers in order to prevent riots escalating. In another situation he said that if the seeds of the trees he planted failed, he would have to buy more himself.

¹⁷ 29.5.2003, diary notes.

¹⁸ Ex-village head from the 1970s, 4.8.2003: recorded discussion.

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ANU LOUNELA, Ph.D.
 SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY
 UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
 anu.lounela@helsinki.fi