Mandala As The Idea Of Centralised Sites Of Power

Introduction

A popular topic of study within the field of ancient kingdoms in Southeast Asia deals with the understanding of how these polities functioned in terms of notions of power and rule. In the course of doing so, many scholars have attempted to propose various models to characterise their workings with examples of hydraulic (Wittfogel, 1981), riparian (Bronson, 1977) and theatre (Geertz, 1980) states being put forth. However, perhaps one of the most arguably popular models out of the multitude associated with this study, would be the mandala which Wolters (1999) examine with the idea of a centralised site of power.

Using Wolters' work as a key text of examination, this essay attempts to explore a research question of how centralised sites of power in ancient Southeast Asian kingdoms can be located within notions of power and influence over time. The proposed thesis to this would be that a pattern of continuity can be suggested in these sites of power with focus being placed on the role of geographical boundaries against the common attribution to human relations alone. The structure of this paper will begin with a brief introduction of Singapore's Bukit Larangan before Wolters' (1999) conceptualisation of the Mandala is expounded on. This will be followed by an analysis of the site as a lens and case study with relation to its negotiations with three significant time periods of the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial and its respective actors before a conclusion is reached on the topic.

An introduction of Bukit Larangan

Bukit Larangan, meaning forbidden hill in Malay, is known as Fort Canning hill in modern day Singapore today. The history of the hill can be traced back to the 13th Century where it was said to be the royal site of an ancient palace built by Singapore's first king, Sang Nila Utama. The setting of this site lends itself to the explanation of its name, Bukit Larangan, where the royal family prevented common folk from ascending and entering the hill due to their presence there.

The hill was subsequently renamed multiple times in reflection of its occupancy or purpose after established themselves there. This saw its change in name from Bukit Larangan in the pre-colonial era to Singapore hill in 1819 to 1822, followed by Government hill, Bukit Bendara and Bukit Tuan Bonham from 1822 to 1858 to the current name of Fort Canning hill after the first Viceroy of India, Viscount John Charles Canning (Diagana & Angresh, 2013). As of today, in 2019, the hill falls under the government's jurisdiction through the National Parks board, a statutory arm of the state which regulates and maintains the location as a public park, an educational site and currently acts as a centrepiece of the nation's Bicentennial commemoration (Zaccheus, 2019). The circumstantial longevity of this hill to undergo continual transformations with a continued persistence from its ancient kingdom origins to the modern day thus makes the choice of the hill to be an interesting and relevant case study to argue for the continuity of power in centralised sites.

The Mandala and Centralised Sites of Power

In order to use the Mandala as a reference to centralised sites of power, the idea of a Mandala must first be broken down and explained, followed by a highlighting of its deconstructed elements which relate to this essay's notion of concentrated power.

The Mandala is a circular Hindu-Buddhist symbol which the people of ancient Southeast Asia structured themselves upon and this influenced them greatly from their understanding of religion to the organisation of life. Wolters (1999) uses this same emblem as a framework and means of explanation for the governing principles which kings of that time period established themselves upon. At its core, the Mandala operates on the idea of a sacred centre, with the ruler as a consolidation of divine power that legitimises his kingship over those in his circle. These circles were not fixed but rather, oscillated over time periods and geographical spaces with the peripheries being the weakest points that determined these changes in power, and the centre of the Mandala being the stronghold of its influence.

This notion of the sacred centre thus makes Wolters' idea to be most relevant to this paper's exploration of a centralised site of power among the many proposed models of administration in the field. Specifically, the points which this paper builds on is the emphasis of power being concentrated within the centre point of a geographical boundary that radiates out and his suggestion that there is "no permanent obliteration of local centers either by colonisation or through the influence of centralised institutions of government". Through this, the conceptualisation of a continuity of localised power points is derived.

However, this paper deviates from the work in one key aspect which he proposes, and that is on the idea of the 'men of prowess'. This underlies the basis of his conceptualisation that significant figures, in this case the king, are the main factor which influences the control and success of the point of power. Heavy emphasis is given to the notion that relationships and people remain as the largest propeller which allows for continuities of these sites to be driven forth. This paper seeks to dispel the disproportionate attention given to such human factors alone. It can be argued that the territorial locality also plays a role in continuing patterns of power, thus presenting an alternative view to Wolters' idea.

Pre-colonial: Setting up a site of power

The origins of centralised sites of power are crucial in contributing to the understanding of the factors which create its success in continuity. In line with this paper's argument of focusing on the physical landscape as the force behind the creation of power, an examination of the importance of geography will be provided through the case study of Bukit Larangan. This would be covered through the significance of geographical sites and practicality, followed by its significance derived from its intersection with religion.

If contextualised within Wolters' emphasis on men of prowess in the Mandala, Bukit Larangan's ability to remain relevant should be traced back to the role of Sang Nila Utama as the king which sets and establishes the hill to be what it is today. However, a quick glimpse at historical records such as the Hikayat Abdullah by Munshi and Chinese records of the Brief Account of Island Barbarians by Wang Dayuan would reveal that the importance of the site is attributed not so much to the ruler who created it but instead, of its geographical elements that

shape it (Sheppard, Mubin, Tan Sri Datuk, & Royal Australian Chemical Institute, 1982). Specifically, the strategic positioning of the hill and the presence of a freshwater spring in these records point to topography being key.

In fact, Diagana & Angresh (2013) argue that it is the “physical geography of Fort Canning Hill [which] has defined its personality over the centuries” and present that its elevation as a hill and subsequent relief from the heat that it provides in the tropical climate was one of the features which encouraged Sang Nila Utama to determine the palace’s position there. In addition, among the many hills present in Singapura, Bukit Larangan was deemed to be most strategic as it was located nearest to the river mouth and this offered an important view for incoming sea attacks which the height of the hill provided.

Furthermore, according to Wang Dayuan, Singapura and Bukit Larangan was recognised by its ban-tzu, a transliteration of the word pancur for spring where a freshwater spring was located on the hill and used as a bathing area for the royal family (Braddell, 1969). Springs were particularly important within this time period as a source of drinking water and the immediacy of this provision in its location on the hill added to the tactical positioning. Hence, it can be seen that the hill’s location as a centre of power was derived from the geographical benefits it afforded for a point of rule. The physical landscape is thus seen to be the more compelling factor here in causing a centre of power to be created as it is the foundation to the locality before the ruler is established.

This argument of geographical significance is not simply limited to the practicality it provides but extends to intersect with the role of religion. The physical structure of a hill is linked to the Hindu-Buddhist cosmology of Mount Meru as the centre of the universe (Heine-Geldern, 1990). The similarity in its form of the hill to the sacred mountain made Bukit Larangan a microcosm of this consolidated power according to the ideals of spirituality and it could even be seen as “the ancient ceremonial centre of the isle, the holy mountain of Temasik” (Miksic, 2013). Thus, this once again highlights the importance of the natural landscape to ancient notions of control which precede the man of prowess as the centre. Physical territory is thus used as the basis to be manipulated for rulers to create and manage a radiation of influence.

This section has served to dispute the role of ruling figures being key to circular frameworks of power by highlighting the often-forgotten significance of nature to these conceptualisations. In bringing up the importance of this factor as the foundation to the influence it accords from its roots in creation, this sets up the outline to observe how such power can be continued with reference to the latter part of this paper’s thesis of its relentlessness.

Colonial: Transitions and transformations

The ability of a centre of power to remain relevant is also affected by its capacity to withstand transitions and transformations. These changes are usually incited by the agents managing these spaces and this explains Wolters’ fixation on ruling figures in the Mandala. However, the faculty of the site to be malleable enough to conform to these modifications is often forgotten and thus must be considered in order to counter the skewering towards men alone.

Using the illustration of Bukit Larangan, the turning point for the hill in its continuity of influence can be observed in the shift of its agent from the ancient kings of Singapura to colonials who

took over and kept the hill as a central site of power amidst the colonisation of the city. With regards to the phenomena of territorial transitions, a reflection of this is seen in the shift of the hill as a royal palace of the king to the ruling administration of the colonial master. The renaming of hill from Bukit Larangan to Government hill exemplified this when its change in name was brought about after Raffles built his house there on the hill (Diagana & Angresh, 2013).

This decision to locate his residence on this same spot on the hill was no coincidence. It was noted that Raffles had been aware of the hill's former residents from his study of the Malay Annals and wished to be associated with this royalty in his wish to live and be buried near the "tombs of the Malay kings" which was the keramat supposedly housing the late kings (Firbank, 1900). An analysis of this would reveal the subtle shift in power that Raffles manipulated by recognising the localisation of power present in the site from its origins which would have continued in the consciousness of the people. In the choice to take over the space instead of destroying and establishing a new centre of administration, the land was able to retain its influence because of the convenience it provided in portraying the image of power already available which coupled with the geographical benefits mentioned in the previous section.

An example of the importance of flexibility of a site to withstand transformation isthen reflected in the more drastic measure of changing the physical landscape and meaning seen in Government's hill's replacement to a fort.

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