

THE DYNAMICS OF THE STATUS OF BOROBUDUR TEMPLE AND THE POTENTIAL FOR DEVELOPING COMMUNITY-BASED RELIGIOUS TOURISM

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the complex interplay of factors influencing the status of the Borobudur Temple, a significant cultural heritage site in Indonesia. It examines its potential for fostering community-based religious tourism. Through an interdisciplinary lens, the study explores the historical, socio-cultural, and religious dimensions shaping the temple's significance and its evolving status within the contemporary context. It analyses the intricate relationship between the preservation of the temple's religious and historical value and the development of sustainable community-based tourism initiatives. Through literature reviews, this paper highlights the challenges and opportunities associated with balancing preservation efforts and promoting tourism activities that benefit local communities.

Additionally, it underscores the importance of engaging various stakeholders, including local communities, religious authorities, government agencies, and tourism organizations, in fostering a collaborative approach to sustainable tourism development. Within the socio-religious approach, the framework emphasizes the need for a comprehensive strategy that respects the religious sanctity of the site, promotes cultural heritage preservation, and ensures the equitable distribution of economic benefits to the surrounding communities. The findings aim to contribute to formulating effective policies and strategies that promote the sustainable development of community-based religious tourism while safeguarding the cultural and religious significance of the Borobudur Temple.

Keywords: Borobudur Temple, Development, Community-based Religious Tourism

1. INTRODUCTION

At the end of January 2021, the Minister of Religious Affairs announced his plan to make Borobudur a worship centre for Buddhists worldwide. He brought it up in a discussion with the Director General of Buddhist Community Guidance (*Bimas*) of the Ministry of Religious Affairs at his official residence. In his official statement, he expressed his hope that all religious mass organizations and Buddhist assemblies would unite to realize Borobudur as the centre of Buddhist places of worship worldwide (CNN Indonesia, 2021). There are differences of opinion from the government regarding the proposal for the Borobudur Temple to become the centre of Buddhist worship worldwide. The Minister of Religious Affairs stated that he is willing and ready to facilitate the needs if Borobudur becomes a world pilgrimage site for Buddhists (Erwanti, 2021).

Meanwhile, the Coordinating Minister for Human Development and Cultural Affairs (*Menko PMK*) argued that Borobudur was not a sacred place for Buddhists (Fitriana, 2021). This was also supported by the Buddhist leader Bhante Sri Pannavaro Mahathera, who explained that Borobudur was not written in any Buddhist scriptures as a place of worship (Fitriana, 2021). Therefore, it is important to understand the status of Borobudur from time to time from a political, cultural, and, most importantly, religious perspective.

Historically, from the beginning of construction around the tenth to the fifteenth century, under the rule of the Sailendra dynasty, Buddhists used the Borobudur Temple as a place of worship. However, due to political problems in Central Java, around the early seventeenth century, religious monuments began to be neglected by society until they were damaged and also affected by the eruption of Mount Merapi (Nagaoka, 2016, p. 2). Likewise, what happened to Borobudur Temple, natural ravage is inevitable. Therefore, throughout the centuries, especially when European colonizers occupied Indonesia, Borobudur and its surroundings became an abandoned and neglected place.

Indonesian independence in the 1970s, there were significant efforts by the government and the community to preserve the architectural features of the temple and the wider surrounding landscape, which was later seen as at odds with the heritage discourse that the European region had previously dominated. However, due to the desire for community participation, the Japanese heritage practitioner developed the plan to create a JICA Master Plan based on the Borobudur Prambanan National Archeological Parks Final Report in July 1979. Borobudur Temple was finally inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1991, and the nominations pinned on it are outstanding examples of Buddhist monumental art and architectural masterpieces (Nagaoka, 2016, p. 13).

The embedding of this status has made Borobudur Temple better known by many people as a historical site. Both local and global communities consider it a historical and cultural tourist spot. However, for Buddhists, Borobudur still has religious and spiritual values. Hence, this paper will explain the importance of determining the status of Borobudur

Temple. This is intended not only for the state's interests as the one responsible for managing Borobudur but also for adherents of Buddhism in Indonesia or the world who are directly affected because it is related to their beliefs.

2. METHOD

In the discourse on determining the status of Borobudur Temple, heritage politics is crucial because it can explain the dynamics of Borobudur from time to time. Coupled with the many parties involved in managing Borobudur Temple, there will be different and sometimes even conflicting interests. Bloembergen and Eickhoff explain the background and definition of the concept as follows:

“Parts of the temple have travelled to other regions of the world where they have played (and continue to play) a role in alternative heritage politics that are not exclusively based in national or colonial state formations and that co-existed in parallel worlds with centres located outside of the Europe-based empires.” (Bloembergen & Eickhoff, 2015, p. 85)

They described the colonialist relationship with the changing status of the Borobudur Temple. In addition, they also elaborated on how the Indonesian government and its cooperation with world organizations in trying to restore and preserve the condition of Borobudur Temple and its surroundings after being decayed.

Apart from being a world heritage, Borobudur Temple is also a monument, to be precise, a monument of religious history. The declaration regarding Managing the Historic Urban Landscape from 2005 onwards in the Vienna Memorandum on World Heritage states that:

“...an integrated approach linking contemporary architecture, sustainable urban development and landscape integrity based on existing historical patterns, building stock and context.” (Szczepanski, 2019, p. 43)

Problems often arise in the effort of monument preservation due to contradictory needs between the preservation of the local identity of the monument and the restoration of buildings, which are sometimes adapted to different purposes. Therefore, the preservation process should involve various parties, from the community and local authorities to international organizations interested in the common good. Community involvement in preservation and tourism management makes the goal focus on protecting and enhancing cultural heritage resources and local traditions by not neglecting economic purposes but not those that are exploitative towards heritage (Taylor, 2003, p. 59). However, economic development in the tourism aspect must maintain the value of Borobudur as a sacred place of Buddhist worship (Christiani et al., 2022). Thus, considerations for preservation are not only focused on the Borobudur Temple alone but also the surrounding area. The area surrounding Borobudur Temple is also called a cultural landscape, where there are people with their culture and the presence of nature.

A cultural landscape has a broader meaning than a monument because the monument itself is part of the cultural landscape. It was previously known as a historical landscape with recognition as part of the World Heritage (Taylor, 2003, p. 54).

“In 1992, the World Heritage Committee, at its 16th session in Santa Fe, USA, acknowledged that cultural landscape represents the “combined works of nature and man [*sic*]”; this is designated in Article 1 of the World Heritage Convention. It adopted cultural landscape as a category on the World Heritage list through its incorporation in the *Operational Guidelines*.” (Nagaoka, 2016, p. 17)

The concept of cultural landscape, on the other hand, has a meaning that is contrary to the concept of heritage. This happens because of differences in the conceptualization of the cultural landscape between Asia and Europe. Asian people tend to use an innovative approach in interpreting cultural heritage because they seek to protect the wider landscape and also involve community participation in the process (Nagaoka, 2016, p. 17). Thus, the cultural landscape of Borobudur Temple covers the entire region of Central Java.

A more detailed explanation is that Borobudur becomes the central point of the larger mandala landscape, which consists of other sacred landscape features and the surrounding natural environment, such as hills and rivers (Nagaoka, 2016, p. 20). For the Javanese, based on ancient Javanese beliefs, natural elements, including water, mountains, and trees, are important symbols because they can represent an ideal perspective that influences how landscapes are created and how they manifest in various forms (Nagaoka, 2016, p. 20). This kind of belief is also similar to the values in Buddhism regarding the view of nature. Differences in views among Buddhists in Indonesia are not only related to natural conditions but also to the relics and icons at Borobudur Temple. Therefore, it is also important to address the concept of iconography.

The discussion on iconography is quite pivotal in explaining the function and meaning of Borobudur Temple for Indonesians, especially Buddhists. This is because Borobudur consists of Buddhist icons in stupas and reliefs. There have been many scholars who have researched iconography from various approaches, such as art, history, and anthropology. Gifford (2011), in his book, explains:

“Most previous iconographic studies of Borobudur have treated its vast array of relief panels as “illustrations” of texts, with the strong implication that they are (or, in the case of “jumbled” relief panels, ought to be) utterly subordinate and “faithful” to the text.” (Gifford, 2011, p. 3)

Buddhist icons found in Borobudur Temple are sometimes debatable because of the lack of narration about gods in Buddhist literature. Therefore, some consider depicting the Buddha and his disciples through icons to overlap with Hindu tradition (Gifford, 2011, p. 50). On the other hand, icons become something that has a universal meaning. It is said that the ash stone monument symbolizes a public domain of philosophy aesthetics, a stone of deep thought and prayers inspired by the tenets of the Buddha that everyone can comprehend spiritually (Suamba, 2015, p. 30). Stupa positions and relief images can be studied by all humanity regardless of their religious background. Hence, despite non-Buddhists not understanding the meaning of icons the same as adherents of Buddhism, at least they can philosophically respect teaching and tradition.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The discourse that Borobudur Temple will serve as a pilgrimage centre for Buddhists proposed by the Minister of Religious Affairs, Yaqut Cholil, is not the first time. Previously, in 2015, the Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs, Rizal Ramli, had also promoted the Borobudur Temple for world Buddhist religious activities (Hermawan et al., 2016, p. 101). However, the program was not actualized because, at that time, there were many considerations from the government regarding the consequences of making Borobudur a centre of worship. Apart from considering the consequences, the proposal is assumed to be a political and economic effort that sees only potential benefits for Indonesia from the tourism sector.

As the community surrounding Borobudur comprises predominantly Muslims, their creative endeavours reflect the essence of Islamic heritage or a fusion of Javanese and Islamic influences unrelated to Borobudur itself. Recognizing the significance of intertwining these local art forms with the essence of Borobudur, residents advocate for a bridge that would enrich public perception and appreciation of the temple's cultural significance (Ekowati, 2018). Concurrently, endeavours to boost tourism at Borobudur primarily revolve around the sacred essence inherent in the temple, aiming to heighten the interest of Buddhist visitors, including the targeted foreign tourist demographic (Hermawan et al., 2016, p. 106). This kind of debate regarding the status of the Borobudur Temple in matters that intersect between political, social, economic, cultural, and religious always occurs even if we draw far back in time.

Historically speaking, the Sailendra dynasty which ruled the archipelago at that time, had maritime trade relations with India and China. With its glory, relationships also developed political and religious ties with Buddhists from all over the world (Gifford, 2011, p. 178). Therefore, even though it is full of political and economic dimensions, Borobudur is not only monumental but also has religious values. Over the centuries, the Borobudur Temple was abandoned after the centre of the Medang kingdom was moved. The arrival of European colonizers to Indonesia became the point in time for the rediscovery of the Borobudur Temple. There was the Dutch colonial effort to restore the temple's condition, and then they were involved in forming the Borobudur heritage along with the rise of Buddhism in Indonesia. It is stated that Borobudur Temple has been the object of pilgrimage for Buddhists from the Asian region since before the colonial arrival to Indonesia (Bloembergen & Eickhoff, 2015, p. 85) (Hermawan et al., 2016, p. 106). Although, at that time, the glory of Buddhist kingdoms in Indonesia had collapsed and then Islam began to dominate most of the archipelago, Borobudur Temple still stood firm and became a favoured pilgrimage destination for people from the Central and South Asia region. Furthermore, the rise of Buddhism—globally—was also the result of interference from European colonials, which at that time occupied most of Asia.

The New Order regime played a significant role in making Borobudur a world heritage. Much speculation at that time arose about the goals of Suharto, who served as president of Indonesia, in advocating for international institutions to work together in conserving Borobudur to become one of the world heritage icons. Around the 1970s, Indonesia began to introduce a new approach to understanding the non-European discourse on heritage management because previously, the government was too influenced by the Dutch, who understood the concept of cultural landscape heritage with a monument-centered approach (Nagaoka, 2016, p. 14). The cultural element became an important value at that time to be brought to the international stage since, at the same time, other countries also had landmarks that became UNESCO objects to be designated as world heritage. However, there is a conflict of interest in the process. The community considered at least two things at that time. Namely, there were local people in several villages around Borobudur who refused to be relocated because they felt they had settled in the place they dwelled in and also concerned that the possibility of Borobudur Temple would be commercialized into a tourist spot that attracts local and foreign tourists so that its cultural and historical values are reduced (Bloembergen & Eickhoff, 2015, p. 86). Furthermore, there is also a good cause for developing Borobudur into a world heritage recorded by UNESCO. It is with the growth of shared understanding between cultures globally.

The dynamics of understanding the heritage discourse continued. In the mid-1990s, the heritage conservation sector underwent a dramatic shift in protection and theory across various issues and categories, including quantity, portability, and intangibility (Fitri et al., 2015, p. 72). More than that, the government and society are starting to realize the importance of the involvement of all stakeholders in managing cultural heritage. The aim is to be able to do conservation not only limited to the temple as a monument but the entire landscape around it (Nagaoka, 2016, p. 21). Finally, UNESCO includes elements of nature and culture in the list of World Heritage categories.

Apart from historical and cultural aspects, the main thing that needs to be considered regarding the conservation and preservation of Borobudur is its religious and spiritual aspects. Regarding tourism, it must be understood that three different categories often overlap but can also stick together. Religious tourism, spiritual tourism, and pilgrimage are three different things. Religious tourism is closely related to rituals and practices that aim to increase faith by visiting places of worship, spiritual tourism is more focused on socioeconomic development by maintaining religion and the sustainability of inheritance, and pilgrimage is a more essential and fundamental fulfilment of religious obligations based on written in the religious scripture (Hermawan et al., 2019, p. 73). Based on the above categories, Borobudur could have all three or not, depending on the role of the government and society, particularly Buddhism, in determining it. In 1999, Walubi (a Representative of Indonesian Buddhists) wrote an article about the Buddhist view of the discourse of developing Borobudur Temple as a pilgrimage tour. Contains the challenges and opportunities, historical evidence from the Buddhist kingdom, and the economic potential of the tourism resources inherent in Borobudur (Murdaya, 1999). At that time, it coincided with the Reformation; Buddhists took the momentum conveying their wishes to revive the function of Borobudur, which had deep meaning for them.

The latest discourse echoed by the government regarding the proposal to make Borobudur Temple the centre of the world Buddhist pilgrimage has been in the spotlight and has received much support. Coordinating Minister Muhadjir Effendy, who initially expressed doubts about Buddhist teachings on Borobudur, was eventually involved in studying Borobudur as world religious tourism with the Minister of Religious Affairs (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2021). Ganjar Pranowo, as the governor of Central Java, also showed his support; he claimed that he either had the plan for a long time and had conveyed it to the vice president who was in office then (Rezkiari, 2021). Besides government officials, many Buddhists are excited and support the discourse about Borobudur. Monk Bhadra Ruci affirms Borobudur Temple in Magelang as a holy place for Buddhists even though it is not among the four sanctified sites according to Gotama Buddhist literature (Prihantoro, 2021), as the chairman of SANGHA Vajrayana Sangha Agung Indonesia (SV-Sagin), he welcomes the government's plan (Chairullah, 2021). Suhadi Sendjaja, who is the chairman of Parisada Buddha Dharma Niciren Syosyu Indonesia (NSI), argues that if Borobudur becomes a pilgrimage centre, it will have a very good impact on economic growth, especially for the people around Borobudur (Nursalikah, 2021). Activist Lieus Sungkharisma stated that the Minister of Religious Affairs' proposal was a wish that had been in the minds of Indonesian Buddhists for a long time; he then hoped that the Director General of Buddhist Community Guidance would be more active in embracing all Buddhist organizations and assemblies to actualize the plan (Editor Id Times, 2021). DPP Gemabudhi, Bambang Patijaya, also stated the same thing; he also conveyed his readiness to coordinate (Ake, 2021).

In addition to endorsements from individual Buddhist figures, support has also come from Buddhist communities in Indonesia. HIKMAHBUDHI, through their chairman, Ari Sutrisno, supports the discourse and encourages youngsters and millennials to engage in the process of making Borobudur the centre for Buddhist worship (Dahono, 2021). Bhante Sri Pannavaro, who is the representative from Sangha Theravada Indonesia, despite his previous statement saying that Borobudur was not written in Buddhist texts, as part of Buddhist organization then respects the plan and considers it as a form of religious moderation (Sangha Theravada Indonesia, 2021). After gaining much support from the Indonesian Buddhist community, the government took further steps toward their plan. In February 2021, Bimas Buddha conducted a coordination meeting with DPR RI (People's Representative Council), Buddhist leaders, Sangha representatives, and Chairmans of the Assembly, which resulted in three agreements: all participants who attended the meeting agreed on the instruction of the Minister of Religious Affairs for Borobudur Temple to become the religious centre of world Buddhists; agreed on the togetherness of Buddhists on behalf of Indonesian Buddhists; and the conception of governance arrangements will be discussed further (Humas et al., 2021). With this agreement, it means that the government and the Buddhist community, as well as the public, are ready to be involved in making Borobudur Temple the centre of pilgrimage for world Buddhists.

4. CONCLUSION

From the explanation above, we can see that the previous efforts to preserve Borobudur Temple were not based on goals that benefited Indonesian people in general and followers of Buddhism in particular. During the process of making Borobudur a legacy, not many representative figures from the Buddhist community were directly involved. The government-dominated includes local agencies and tourism business players who have the authority over the previous management of Borobudur Temple. Even though after Buddhism was officially recognized as one of the

religions in Indonesia, they were allowed to use Borobudur as a place of worship only for Waisak; this did not necessarily give Buddhists in Indonesia any privileges. With its status laden with political interests then, Borobudur was in a dangerous position and deserved to be saved. Today, the government's proposal to make Borobudur Temple the centre of the world Buddhist pilgrimage, coupled with the support of the Buddhist community and the entire community, is expected to bring a good future for Borobudur. All aspects, including economic, social, cultural, and religious, can develop along with the change in the status of Borobudur Temple, which is increasingly attracting global attention.

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