

**DIARY OF “A MASS OF STONES”: BOROBUDUR IN PEOPLE’S  
EXPERIENCES**

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the cancer warriors of whom I was a part of.

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## **Summary**

Up till the present time, scholars have been mostly dealing with either the architectural aspect of Borobudur or speculating about its functions in the past. The author argues that many scholars placed an enormous amount of emphasis on speculating what Borobudur was and what it was for. It seems that the discussion of what Borobudur is and what it is for in our contemporary world completely escapes the attention of many scholars.

This thesis is therefore an attempt to fill the gap in existing literature by researching on human activities at Borobudur. Believing that a monument should not be studied in isolation, the author endeavours to discuss about Borobudur and its landscape, as well as the kinds of activities and festivals that are held at and around the site. The author also takes into consideration people's feelings, opinions, experiences and how their lives revolve around the monument. While it might be useful to apply some of the theoretical insights from scholars to articulate the author's case, a more monumental task would be to give readers a sense of the individual people and of the specific case. Therefore, interviews, whether brief or in-depth, take centre stage in this research process.

Through observing and participating in major events such as the upacara Waisak and acara Sejuta Pelita Sejuta Harapan festivals, the author uncovers how Buddhism in Java/Indonesia is being divided among rival factions. The author also sheds some light on the relation between ethnicity and Buddhism in Indonesia, and she describes how the current tourism phenomenon brings about certain kinds of activities at the religious site which may be deemed "un-sacred". Observations of how different groups of people use the power of their creative imagination, emotion, and intellect to construct their own sense of this historic site and to create their journey of

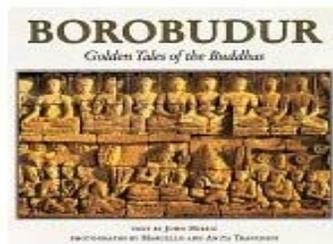
self-discovery are shown in this thesis. By presenting this thesis in a diary style, the author hopes to personalise this piece of writing by sharing her research journey with the readers.

*"I have always loved architectures with some form of religious bearings. I simply feel that there is a sense of "meditative calm" that religious arts or temple arts bring. The thing about religious art is that there is something special if you let your mind settle and absorb the atmosphere, within it there's great respite from the chaos of the world....."*



**25 September 2004**

**Falling in love with Borobudur**



My love affair with Borobudur is a serendipitous one. Today, my supervisor, Dr Jan Mrazek, handed me a book authored by renowned archaeologist, Professor John Miksic, on *Borobudur: golden tales of the Buddhas*<sup>1</sup> in the midst of our conversation on the religious monument.

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<sup>1</sup> John N Miksic, *Borobudur: golden tales of the Buddhas* (Berkeley, Calif.: Periplus Editions, 1990).

I vividly remember how, when I flipped open the pages of that book, those awe-inspiring pictures taken of Borobudur left a deep imprint on my mind. However, when I finally came to the last page of that book, a tinge of disappointment set in. Most of the pictures taken were only of the monument itself, and the contents of the book focused on only three main aspects: History and Archaeology, Architecture and Symbolism and the Bas-Reliefs. While discussions on these three aspects certainly provide the readers with an excellent understanding of ancient Javanese history and a speculation of what Borobudur was intended to be, the book has scant information on Borobudur's current role, the kinds of activities or events which are conducted there presently, and the monument's relevance to tourism today.

## **26 September 2004**

### **Reading up further -- What had been written about Borobudur?**

Intrigued to know more about Borobudur in our present-day, I started looking in libraries and major bookstores for books on the monument and tried to read as many books as I could get hold of. Most theories propounded that Borobudur was originally constructed in the 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> century as part of the Buddhist kingdom by the Javanese of that era when there were documented close relations with the Buddhists of India, Sri Lanka and Cambodia. Borobudur was lost to international consciousness until an Englishman, Thomas Stamford Raffles, became Lieutenant Governor in the early 19th

century and was fascinated by the half ruin he found buried.<sup>2</sup> In the years that followed, the Dutch colonial engineers did some work at restoration but it was not until Independence that the substantial work to complete restoration of the Borobudur was undertaken by the Indonesian people.<sup>3</sup> The restoration work was funded largely by the Indonesian government, and took place over a ten-year period from 1975-1984. It was greatly assisted by experts and support from UNESCO as well as many countries, individuals and companies from around the world. Borobudur now stands in a majority Muslim area, supported by the taxes and services of a Majority Muslim population.<sup>4</sup>

Many authors unanimously agree that Borobudur is a monument which excites the interest and awe of many who know it. It remains not only one of the greatest Buddhist monuments and a precious gem in the history of world architecture, but an enigma as well. Up till the present time, there have been numerous scholarly and stimulating discussions concerning the meanings and functions of the monument in the past. Many theories have also been advanced to account for the monumental architecture and artistic achievements of Indonesia. Early scholars, especially European ones, were inclined to attribute the penetration Indian ideas and techniques to conquests or settlements.<sup>5</sup> However, theorist like Fiona Kerlogue argued that while the Buddha images at Borobudur clearly owe much to their Indian forbears, there is a big difference. The

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<sup>2</sup> Wiendu Nuryanti, Heritage, tourism and local communities (Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Gadjah Mada University Press, 1999), p.6.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Fontein and R. Soekmono, The sculpture of Indonesia (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art; New York: H.N. Abrams, 1990), p.33.

Buddha images were sculpted in a softer, more naturalistic style, with gentle, subtle contours that speak of calm, divine beauty. The carving of the reliefs echoes this grace, and again the modeling of the figures is more restrained than in Indian sculptures.<sup>6</sup> Robert L Brown's article which I chanced upon compared the artistic conventions of Indian art and Borobudur. He explained that Indian artistic conventions do not occur at Borobudur, such as making the most sacred or important figure in a scene larger than others; everyone is the same size in the Borobudur reliefs.<sup>7</sup> Another book written by Dr. Soekmono described that Borobudur has no inner space; it can therefore be considered as a place of pilgrimage rather than a place of worship, the system of staircases and corridors guiding the pilgrim gradually to the uppermost platform through perambulations along successive terraces.<sup>8</sup> There are so many other books relating to Borobudur which I have picked up to read up on but I will not be talking about each and every book since the crux of this thesis is not about book reviews.

By giving a brief overview of some of the books I have read on Borobudur, my intention is to show that it is evident how booksellers' shelves have been groaning under the weight of books dealing with either the architectural aspect of Borobudur or speculations of its functions in the past.<sup>9</sup> I certainly admit that they are all very fine and valuable works. However, many scholars placed an enormous amount of emphasis on

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<sup>6</sup> Fiona Kerlogue, *Arts of Southeast Asia* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), p.103.

<sup>7</sup> Robert L. Brown, "Place in the sacred biography at Borobudur", in *Pilgrims, patrons and place: localizing sanctity in Asian religions*, eds. Granoff Phyllis and Koichi Shinohara (Vancouver, B.C.: UBC Press, c2003), p.250.

<sup>8</sup> R. Soekmono, *Chandi Borobudur: A monument of Mankind* ( Assen:Van Gorcum; Paris: The Unesco Press), p.17.

<sup>9</sup> Past in this context means around the period of 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries.

speculating what Borobudur was and what it was for. It seems that the discussion of what Borobudur is and what it is for in our contemporary world completely escapes the attention of many scholars.

## **3 October 2004**

### **Filling the Gap**

For the past one week, I have been eagerly trying to find pictures that were taken of festivals, events, rituals or human activities at Borobudur. I longed to see pictures of people and even yearned to read about the ways they are involved with the monument and the way they attach meanings to it. To look for this “missing piece of puzzle”, I spent several days in the NUS library as well as bookstores, hoping to chance upon books written on Borobudur that include the “human perspectives”. However, my attempts proved futile. The thought to fill the gap in existing literatures on Borobudur sprang to mind.

A question which I asked myself is -- what does it take for Borobudur to be considered a “living” monument in the present day? My own perception is that there are various ways of keeping Borobudur “alive”. Perhaps, one can argue that Borobudur continues to be a “living” monument simply because its past functions and architectural symbolism have been intensively studied for more than a century ago up till the present time. I would even go to the extent of arguing that Borobudur would “live” for many years to come because the fact that it remains a mystery or riddle implies that scholars

will continue to speculate about its meaning, purpose and symbolism. However, is it enough just to see Borobudur “live”? In my opinion, merely understanding and discussing Borobudur from the architectural angle is inadequate as it merely sustains the “life” of Borobudur. In order to add a *sense of vibrancy* to our understanding of Borobudur, I propound that the discussion of what is *happening to* and *happening at* Borobudur presently are of paramount importance. While the understanding of the tangible asset<sup>10</sup> of a monument is important, its intangible asset<sup>11</sup> is a weighty issue to be considered too. This is an area lacking in existing literature and a gap which I set to fill. I believe that a monument should not be studied in isolation. I wanted very much to discuss about Borobudur and its landscape, and the kinds of activities that are held at and around the religious site. This research seeks to provide a rich picture of Borobudur as seen through the eyes of different people. Discussions will include people’s feelings, opinions and how their lives revolve around the monument. While it might be useful to apply some of the theoretical insights from scholars to articulate my case, a more monumental task would be to give readers a sense of the individual people and of the specific case. Therefore, interviews, whether brief or in-depth, take centre stage in my research process.

## **22 October 2004**

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<sup>10</sup> Tangible assets include all assets that have some physical embodiment of cultural values such as historic towns, buildings, archaeological sites, cultural landscapes and cultural objects. See Bob McKercher and Hilary du Cros, “Tangible Heritage”, in Cultural Tourism The Partnership between Tourism and Cultural Heritage Management (New York, London: Oxford, 2002), p.65

<sup>11</sup> Intangible assets include language, literature, architecture, rituals, customs, the people, their traditions and what they know. See Ibid.

## **In search of some preliminary information about Borobudur**

Before I embark on my fieldtrip, I thought it would be beneficial to talk to some friends who have visited Borobudur and listen to the way they describe their own experiences at Borobudur. Personally, I feel that in the process of doing field research, it is essential to talk to groups of people or individuals to understand a situation so that a researcher sees not only his or her own perspective about a certain phenomenon, but derives a wide spectrum of opinion. I do feel some degree of excitement since this is going to be my very own piece of writing about Borobudur. However, the first reaction I got from a friend, Lim, was, "why do you want to go there? Nothing to see lah, nothing fantastic, the place is scorching hot, and you're there just to view a mass of stones! Not worth it!" His comments were followed by a sneer.

Lim had high expectations of Borobudur even before arriving at the monument because most tour brochures or guide books painted a beautiful and magnificent picture of this Southeast Asia monument, Lim was disappointed that Borobudur is "nothing spectacular -- only a mass of stone!" He made comparison between Borobudur and the temples of Angkor in Cambodia and remarked that Borobudur, when compared to the "magnificent" Angkor temples, faded into the background. Other friends of mine also remarked that they would rather make many more trips to the temples of Angkor which were of outstanding scenic beauty than to Borobudur. Also, they did not take time to go through the reliefs at Borobudur as they did at the temples of Angkor. Some of my friends did not even realize that there are bas-reliefs at Borobudur. One of them had

likened Angkor to an art gallery. A few of them who managed to take notice of the reliefs at Borobudur mentioned that the reliefs are very boring and that the statues of the Buddhas at Borobudur are "all the same". I think they do not even know that there are six different mudra positions displayed by the 504 Buddha statues at Borobudur. They wanted to take pictures of the monument, just to show friends and relatives that they had glimpsed the biggest Buddhist monument in Southeast Asia. To quote my friends, "Borobudur is not in anyway eye-catching; it's just another tourist attraction".

However, there are also differing views from some other friends like Ms Ma and Ms Tay. They both referred to Borobudur as a "Buddhist shrine" and a place to pay homage to the Buddha. Both of them are Buddhists and they told me that Borobudur is a place where all Buddhists should visit at least once in their life time, just like how the Muslims should go on a pilgrimage to Mecca. They mentioned that Borobudur is the "original and most authentic" place to feel the "Buddha's presence". What is interesting to note here is also how Ms Ma and Ms Tay equate the *concept* of "authenticity" with the "Buddha's presence". What Ms Ma and Ms Tay said came as a surprise to me because I have always assumed that the Buddhists would have acknowledged the Maha Bodhi temple of Bodh Gaya in India as a "more authentic" Buddhist spot because it was where the Lord Buddha attained enlightenment.

Indeed, as Dallen Timothy and Bruce Prideaux aptly put it, "authenticity is a relative concept, influenced and defined by individual experience. It should be understood that in most cases, the meanings of historic artifacts derive from people's collection and personal experiences rather than from the objects themselves.....and what

is consistent in the authenticity debate is its inconsistency".<sup>12</sup>

Ms Ma also mentioned that she spent a considerable amount of time going through the reliefs as a mark of respect for the Buddhas. Ms Tay expressed her contentment and how she was able to appreciate the totality of the religious landscape. She told me that she felt a deep sense of peace and calmness just by sitting quietly around the monument during sunset, reflecting upon her life.

However, my other few friends, who are atheist, seemed unimpressed by its beauty and symbolism. While religion *might be* a probable factor in contributing to the degree of emotional attachment to Borobudur, it must be noted that there are always exceptional cases whereby non-Buddhists do find the experience at Borobudur a “spiritual” one and also impressive artistically. Traveling to religious site may be viewed on a motivation continuum where at one end it is regarded as a means of gaining deeper spiritual meanings, on the other end of the spectrum is simple curiosity by tourists about places of interest. While some regarded the trip as a form of pilgrimage and find the journey purposeful, others were merely interested in sightseeing and had pictures taken on Borobudur, hoping to bring home “a part” of the monument.

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<sup>12</sup> D.J. Timothy and B. Prideaux, “Issues in Heritage and Culture in the Asia Pacific Region”, Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research 9, 3 (2004), p.215.

After hearing about Borobudur and getting such diverse views about the monument, it intrigues me even more to go ahead with my research. It is amazing how this ancient monument could elicit such diverse responses from people of the present day! After hearing about my friends' experiences at Borobudur, my yearning to set foot in Borobudur just gets stronger. Somehow, even though a few of my friends' comments on Borobudur did not sound encouraging at all, that did not deter me from wanting to visit the monument.

## **13 March 2005**

### **The decision on thesis presentation in a diary style**

After much contemplation and discussion with my supervisor, I have decided, for once in my academic years, to present a thesis in a diary style. My suspicion is that many people would be very surprised, and probably shocked at why I have chosen to present my thesis in such an unconventional format. I also prepared myself mentally for the worse that I will likely get scorned by others since this is supposed to be a "professional" and "academic" piece of work.

Part of the reason is that I would really love to personalize this piece of writing with entries, while retaining some aspects of "conventional" academic writing with the inclusion of some theories and major topics of discussion.

I think it is very important that every writer writes about something not because

he or she is obligated to do so, but because he or she shares a special relationship with the subject. In my case, I enjoy writing down human experiences as part of my every-day experience. The other reason is my interest in human beings and a curiosity in understanding how they live their lives and make sense of the world they live in. In the past (during my undergraduate days), some lecturers actually advised that we students write in a “professional” manner and encouraged us to be “objective”. To be “objective”, according to those lecturers, meant that we are supposed to present only the “facts” or “figures”, and not to allow personal emotions or experiences to be included or influence our writings. That school of thought, to me, is restrictive and stifling. I have always believed that we as human beings would definitely carry some cultural or emotional baggage around with us. I really cannot figure out what is so wrong about acknowledging the things which have shaped our opinions and feelings. What I am concerned about is not so much about my personal preference in writing in a particular style, but more importantly, the whole idea of education, especially one in the Arts and Social Sciences disciplines.

To me, every piece of academic writing is a prized possession because every individual’s perceptions, experiences and writing style is unique and influenced by many factors such as one’s background, experiences, social relations and even education. If objectivity is about accepting “*the*” answer, or the so-called universal “*truth*”, wouldn’t that impede intellectual growth? And what is the point of holding discussion sessions and exchanging ideas and feelings about an issue? A philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, aptly described what I wanted to express. To quote what he mentioned in his book, “all

my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced.”<sup>13</sup> My supervisor made a point with which I could not agree more. He said that objectivity pretends to see everything from a disembodied, impersonal, “God’s eye view”. I would argue that objectivity is just one way of seeing things, but not the only way. This approach is seriously warped as it totally disregards other individual’s experiences. The purpose of education, in my opinion, is not about finding out the right or wrong answer, but to understand what and why shaped a particular point of view.

Previously, I had always felt disconnected or alienated from my own piece of writing and I had always, to a large extent, detested writing, simply because at the end of the day, I was only presenting my writing in a matter-of-fact manner, often reducing people into numbers. One more thing is the issue of “footnotes”. Someone once told me that an “academic” piece of writing has to include lots of footnotes in order for it to look “professional”. I dislike that idea because I feel that footnotes should only be inserted when one really needs to acknowledge the use of certain ideas or if there is a need to clarify certain issues. However, I do not agree with the idea of inserting footnotes just to make a piece of writing look “professional”. The style of presentation for my previous academic essays, especially those during my undergraduate study days was very stark

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<sup>13</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception* (London, Routledge; New York: The Humanities Press, 2002), p.ix.

and devoid of emotion, starting off with a conventional introduction for the first chapter, followed by the main text and finally ending with a conclusion. I often wonder why there is a need to have a conclusion in most writings. I often feel the beauty in writing lies in the fact that it is inconclusive and I would even contend that there are actually no “facts”, only interpretations in every piece of writing.

I appreciate my supervisor’s advice for me to pay attention to what people are saying, their ways of thinking and how they feel about a certain phenomenon. His encouragement and support rekindled my love for writing. I think everyone should be given an opportunity to write in a way which best expresses their thoughts and analysis of a phenomenon. Hence, I reckon that my subjects and aims are best presented in this style -- one that allows me to talk about a personal picture of Borobudur in which I myself, and others share a special relationship with.

## **14 March 2005**

### **Laying down the research objectives**

One of the main areas of research which I will be focusing on is to explore and observe the upacara Waisak held at Borobudur. Waisak is a major annual Buddhist celebration and the only event most books briefly mentioned so far held at Borobudur annually. I am also hoping to find out if there are any other major events performed at Borobudur since this piece of information is lacking in existing literature. Through human participation and the way they perform festivals at Borobudur, I hope to yield

some important insights into contemporary Java/Indonesia or even Southeast Asia region. Another area of focus which I will include in my discussion is about Borobudur taking on a new role as a famous tourist attraction in our present time. It is a great pity that only brief mention is made of tourism development at this site in most academic writings. Few that I have read actually went on more deeply to discuss about the tourism development and its dynamism at this site. Cultural tourism can contribute in a substantial way to the renewal of culture and heritage. It has given an opportunity to bring people all over the world to this grand monument. This is a way to encourage people from all parts of the universe to learn about such a remarkable heritage of Java/Indonesia. Tourism, as such, is one of the channels to ensure that Borobudur's existence would not remain unknown to the rest of the world like it was once lost to international consciousness. However, the other side of the coin of the tourism phenomenon as noted by Daniel Olsen is that, when religious site is being transformed into tourist site, this creates a 'convergence of duality of place where religion and tourism overlap and commingle with one another', raising questions pertaining to the management, maintenance, interpretation and meaning of sacred site.<sup>14</sup> I wonder, with the advent of tourism, how has this phenomenon changed the way people or visitors perceive Borobudur?

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<sup>14</sup> Olsen, Daniel H, "Heritage, Tourism and the Commodification of Religion", Tourism Recreation Research 28, 3 (2003), p.99.

Gathering a more in-depth understanding of people's interaction with and interpretations of Borobudur will be part of my agenda. It is also my intention to present something about what I have discovered about others, and also about myself during the research journey. In my opinion, producing a piece of writing is not about individual knowledge. I believe that words can shape consciousness, and I hope that my writings have the ability to galvanize people to learn more about the world that we are living in, and also about ourselves.

## **15 March 2005**

### **Some possible areas of research**

Once I have set my mind on researching on Borobudur, the next step which follows is to think about the possible areas of research and questions which I could concentrate on. It is interesting to note that most of my friends who have visited Borobudur referred to guide books before their departure to give them a general understanding of the site. However, none of them asked for the assistance of tour guides or joined guided tours at Borobudur. Thus, I thought it might be interesting to do some research in this aspect. In the past, I have always regarded the role of the tour guide as someone who brings tourists around a place to scout for good food and to lead the directions of the tourists to ensure that the tourists do not lose their way in a foreign land. After reading through some articles on the tour guides, I realized that they actually play an important role in influencing tourists' perceptions of a place. Thus, one of the

objectives of this research paper is to analyze the ways in which guides contribute to the construction of Borobudur as a tourist attraction and how their activities fit in with the tourism development in this area. Also, I am eager to understand how the narratives of the tour guides influence tourists' perceptions of Borobudur and the way they feel about the site.

According to Heidi Dahles, tour guiding constitutes a strategic factor in the representation of a tourist destination and influencing the quality of the tourist experience. Tourism based on cultural heritage in particular, demands a specific body of knowledge and a high standard of guiding.<sup>15</sup> Among the first to study tourist guides systematically was Christopher Holloway. His approach started from role theory, exploring the ways in which guides defined their role and illustrating how tourist guides could be regarded as information giver, teacher or instructor, motivator and initiator into the rites of touristic experiences.<sup>16</sup> He also expounded how the guide may be regarded as an ambassador. The guide, while not necessarily a typical representative of the host country, may nonetheless personify many of the national characteristics of the host population for overseas tourists.<sup>17</sup>

Erik Cohen goes more deeply into the interpretative role of tourist guides. He distinguishes different styles of guiding in terms of 'path finding' and 'mentoring'. Pathfinders are guides who restrict themselves to pointing out the route and the

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<sup>15</sup> Heidi Dahles, Tourism, heritage and national culture in Java: dilemmas of a local community (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2001), p.131.

<sup>16</sup> J.C. Holloway, "The Guided Tour. A Sociological Approach", Annals of Tourism Research, 8, 3 (1981), p.385.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

attractions, without offering elaborate explanations. The pathfinder is a geographical guide who leads the way through an environment in which the tourists lack orientation or through a socially defined territory to which they have no access.<sup>18</sup> The role of the mentor, on the other hand, resembles the role of teacher, instructor, or advisor. The mentor points out the objects of interest, explains them, and their narratives may be interspersed with historical facts. The mentor received directions from their employer or the authorities. The mentor-type of guide blossoms in mature tourist destinations where the transfer of information takes on an almost academic character. An extensive body of knowledge is required to establish a professional status of the mentor.<sup>19</sup>

For the case of Indonesia, according to Steege and Bras, the Government's Guiding Courses is one way of controlling the quality of guiding is through education. To become a licensed tourist guide, it is obligatory to follow a government training organized by provincial tourism office in cooperation with HPI (Himpunan Pariwisata Indonesia) (Indonesian guide association). The tourism office has an "Education & Training" division (DIKLAT-Dinas Pendidikan dan Latihan), which organizes courses at three levels.<sup>20</sup>

- 1) Junior Guide (pramuwista muda), qualified to work on regency (kabupaten) level
- 2) Senior Guide (pramuwisata madya), qualified to work in the whole province.
- 3) Special guide (pramuwisata khusus), qualified to work at one specific tourist

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<sup>18</sup> Erik Cohen, "The Tourist Guide: The Origins, Structure and Dynamics of a Role", Annals of Tourism Research 12, 1 (1985) p.7.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.14.

<sup>20</sup> Karin ter Steege, Sandra Starn and Karin Bras, "Mountain Guides in Lombok", in: Tourism and small entrepreneurs: development, national policy and entrepreneurial culture: Indonesian cases, eds. Heidi Dahles and Karin Bras (New York: Cognizant Communication, 1999), p.123.

object -- like, for instance, Borobudur or Prambanan or Dieng Plateau.

For all levels, a preparatory selection is standard, consisting of an interview in which the ability to speak proper English is tested and a written test about state ideology. After having some theoretical understanding of tour guiding, I thought it would be wonderful and beneficial if I could talk to a guide who has some working experience in the tourism industry of Central Java. Coincidentally, my supervisor knew of someone who was formerly working as a tour guide in Solo and he managed to introduce her to me. The meeting session with Ms Nunuk<sup>21</sup> proved beneficial as there is something interesting which I discovered when I tried to compare Heidi Dahles's research findings with the interview done with Ms Nunuk.

Anthropologist Heidi Dahles described in the beginning of her book that in many countries, tour guides can go about their activities as they please as guiding does not constitute a well-established and formalized profession.<sup>22</sup> She then continued to expound that the situation differs in Indonesia. The New Order established formal training, and promoted the professional ethics of guides. In addition, government intervention extended to the possession of a licence to be the criteria in deciding who may operate as a guide and who may not. In her book, "Tourism, heritage and national culture in Java: dilemmas of a local community", Dahles described her field research done in 1992 in the city of Yogyakarta and presented her observations. According to her, under the New

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<sup>21</sup> I am in no way saying that her point of view is representative of all guides in Indonesia. My point of interviewing her is to get some insights to several issues concerning the tour guides, especially before I embark on my fieldtrip.

<sup>22</sup> Heidi Dahles, Tourism, p.133.

Order regime, guiding was subject to government regulations in compliance with the tourism policy. The first step towards more control on guiding was the establishment of the HPI in 1983. In the by-laws of the HPI, the Pancasila state ideology naturally formed the basic philosophy.<sup>23</sup> The ideal guides in terms of the New Order government regulations were educated in the Pancasila ideology. Dahles also gave her opinion that the government approved guides in Indonesia were the mentor-type guides. In view of Dahles's explication of the guides in Yogyakarta, one would naturally assume that the guides in the 1990s were subjected to Pancasila indoctrination, and that they were unquestionably of excellent quality.

However, Ms Nunuk painted a very different picture of the quality of tour guides in the 1990s. I am indeed thankful that I had met up with her because due to the fact that I have not embarked on my fieldtrip, the questions I had in mind were rather limited and I must confess at times, I do not know what are some of the relevant questions which I could ask her regarding the guiding industry. Fortunately, Ms Nunuk suggested that she would start off by relating her own experience as a guide in the 1990s to me, and probably after I have a rough idea of this profession, I might find myself having more questions to ask her.

Ms Nunuk began by mentioning that she did not even have any inkling of the indoctrination of Pancasila ideology which was imposed on the tour guides and their narratives. She recalled how the standard of examination for tour guiding was very low.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

“Only simple questions and basic knowledge of the site is required”, she said. According to Ms Nunuk, the government’s so-called “ideal” guides did not possess good knowledge of the site and their conversational English was so bad that some tourists complained about their incomprehensibility. Ms Nunuk told me that at times, guide books provided more precise information than the licensed tour guides. From the interview conducted with Ms Nunuk, it is evident that her experience was not congruent with Heidi Dahles's observations. Ms Nunuk also mentioned that the special guides and senior guides, or the licensed guides in general, were different from the guide *liars* (unlicensed/ “wild” guides). The unlicensed guides, or commonly known as the guide liars (pronounced as *lee-ah-r* in Bahasa Indonesia) in Indonesia, were regarded as an obstacle in the development of tourism. Ms Nunuk explained that unlike the licensed tour guides, the guide liars often hangout along Malioboro street in Yogyakarta. They were usually aggressive in competing amongst themselves for tourists. As they were unlicensed guides, guiding did not provide substantial income. As such, their main agenda was to make the tourists happy and to earn money (commission or tips) by trying to find out what the tourists want. The guide liars often tried to look out for “richer” tourists as they were always ambitious to earn more money. After meeting up with Ms Nunuk, my excitement towards the upcoming fieldtrip grew stronger. I wonder if the present tour guiding situation at Borobudur would be similar to the guiding situation Ms Nunuk had told me during the 1990s. I have a feeling that I am going to have much to explore during my upcoming fieldtrips.

**22 May 2005**

**Culture shock!**

After about two hours of flight, I finally arrived at Yogyakarta (henceforth, Yogya) around 8 pm. I gasped in astonishment upon arrival at the Adisucipto airport. Dilapidated and small in area, it is in no way comparable to the grandeur of the Changi airport in Singapore. I am shocked at the condition of the airport partly because I have the pre-conceived notion that Yogya, which is referred to as a “city”, is comparable to a city like Singapore. This trip has definitely taught me to re-think the idea of a “city”. When I was on my way to hotel Hyatt Yogyakarta just now, the bumpy road made my traveling experience absolutely dreadful as I felt really queasy. Today is only my first day in Yogya. I wonder how I am going to survive the rest of the days. I certainly miss the impeccably paved road in Singapore. Earlier on while I was taking the hotel’s shuttle service, a staff told me that most retail shops close around 8 pm in Yogyakarta, there is basically no vibrancy of nightlife going on after 8 pm, unless one is talking about Malioboro street, which is probably the only place where people could enjoy the nightlife. This is quite unlike the situation in Singapore. Another thing which annoys me is, all Garuda direct flights from Singapore to Yogyakarta arrived at around 8 pm in the evening. I think it is high time Garuda Airline considers scheduling morning or afternoon flights because I basically have to waste the entire evening waiting for the next morning to begin any activities. That kind of slow-paced life over at Yogya frustrates me no end!

Just to make some clarifications in case some wonder why there is a need for me to stay in such a posh hotel. Well, I need to stay at hotel Hyatt for the first few days of my fieldwork because accommodation at the hotel is included in my air package. One observable phenomenon upon stepping into the premises of hotel Hyatt is that its architecture is like a mini replica of Borobudur -- most of the lightings found around the hotel are in the shape of a stupa, there are many framed pictures of Borobudur hanging on the walls of the hotel, some are of its architecture, while others are of its bas-reliefs, and these framed pictures of various sizes could be found in the restrooms too!



(Lightings which are shaped like the Borobudur stupas )



(Framed picture of Borobudur in hotel Hyatt Yogya)

I must admit that I am suffering from an overdose of Borobudur's presence -- in a way, Borobudur is definitely "living" since it is being reminded of at all times through

various means. Even uniforms of staffs have motifs of Borobudur reliefs! However, the funny thing is that when you actually talk to the hotel staffs and ask them about their knowledge of Borobudur, history of Buddhism, what festivals are held there, whether anyone is still using the vicinity for prayers, very sadly, many do not know much. A hotel staff who is stumped by my question conveniently told me that “Hampir semua tertarik oleh arsitekturnya aja.” (Almost all are interested only in the architecture). Indeed, according to a few people whom I have briefly talked to, especially Indonesians who are non- Buddhists, Borobudur appeared to be attractive to them only in terms of its tangible asset. Its intangible asset escaped the attention of many, consciously or unconsciously. My impression is that Borobudur is something so near (in terms of geographical proximity to the Indonesians), yet far from the hearts of the Indonesians. I do wonder if this is due to human nature of taking what is closest to you for granted, or if there is a deeper reason to it. It is very probable that this phenomenon has got something to do with national education. I thought to myself that it is a good thing that I am already starting to observe some phenomenon and questioning them.

## 24 May 2005

### I) The eagerly awaited upacara Waisak 2005<sup>24</sup>

After hearing much and reading widely about Borobudur for the past eight months, I finally set foot in Borobudur yesterday with the intention of attending the annual upacara Waisak ceremony. I am actually feeling very run-down today after going through a hectic day yesterday but I am still looking forward to write down yesterday's event, in case important details slipped my mind. I remember vividly how, upon arrival at the monument, I was completely awed into silence. There was a surge of gratitude to ancient Javanese and great respect for such a remarkable feat of engineering. Many times, mere words seem insufficient to communicate all that is Borobudur. The grand scale of Borobudur could be experienced even from a distance! Even if one does not know anything about Borobudur, it is still an atmospheric place worth exploring and experiencing.

The Holy Waisak Day is normally held every year in the month of May with the programme of ritual<sup>25</sup>, procession and ceremony. This year, 2005, the ritual started on the 21 to 22 May, followed by the procession and the grand ceremony on the 23 May.

The ritual commenced with programme Pengambilan Air Berkah<sup>26</sup> (Blessed Water), a ritual whereby the blessed water was taken from pure fountain in Umbul

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<sup>24</sup> Upacara Waisak is an Indonesian term for the celebration of the life, the delivery of the first sermon by the Buddha and the death of the Buddha. Upacara Waisak is also known as the Vesak Festival in Singapore or Visakha Puja in Thailand.

<sup>25</sup> Ritual in this context refers to a form of religious activity which is carried out on a smaller scale as compared to a ceremony.

<sup>26</sup> Perwakilan Umat Buddha Indonesia. Buku Acara Waisak Nasional 2549/2005 (Unpublished Material), p.11.

Jumprit<sup>27</sup>, Central Java. Water represents a humble characteristic, and this virtue is expected to be learned by all human being, always bringing freshness in human spiritual life.<sup>28</sup> On the 22 May, program Pengambilan Api Alam (Natural Flame) takes place. This is known as the Dharma Fire ritual at Mrapen<sup>29</sup>, Grobogan and Purwodadi, Central Java.<sup>30</sup> The natural flame, taken from a natural fire source, is a spiritual symbol. It is a medium in Buddhist ritual that symbolizes enlightenment in life. The water and the fire were both stored in Mendut temple for the main procession to Borobudur.

During the procession<sup>31</sup>, which is a way to honor the Buddha, all Buddhist members, led by 150 monks, carried holy water, fire, a Buddha statue and a holy book. They also carried tuberoses and incense and recited prayers. The procession involved Buddhist devotees walking from Candi Mendut to Borobudur. The total distance covered was about 10 kilometres. I was told by the Buddhist devotees that the long distance walk was an act of quiet contemplation and perseverance.

The joyful procession was highlighted by dances from a number of lion dance groups. Lion dance is generally seen as a “Chinese” dance, but I was told by some Indonesian Buddhists that some of the dancers are Pribumis.<sup>32</sup> The procession was carried out with the hope that all people would be blessed by the Buddha and that they would be bestowed prosperity and peace.

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<sup>27</sup> Umbul Jumprit is a location at the province of Temanggung, Central Java.

<sup>28</sup> Perwakilan Umat Buddha Indonesia, Buku Acara, p.33.

<sup>29</sup> Mrapen is a location at the province of Gobrogan.

<sup>30</sup> Perwakilan Umat Buddha Indonesia, Buku Acara, p.11.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.37

<sup>32</sup> The Pribumis are often referred to as the indigenous Indonesians or non-immigrants. See “Assembly called racist over possible ‘Pribumi’ decree”, Jakarta Post, August 11, 2002.

Subsequently, the final programme which followed was the most important event held yesterday's evening, lasting till the dawn of today. It was the Waisak ceremony, which was the official ceremony involving some forms of cultural programme<sup>33</sup>. The ceremony was attended by the Governor of Central Java and Indonesia's President, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Everybody was allowed to join in the Waisak procession, but for the ceremony itself, an invitation card was essential to be allowed access to the Borobudur complex.

Before I make my trip to Borobudur to attend Upacara Waisak, I had read an article written by Kaye Crippen. Crippen shared her feelings about her visits to Borobudur from 1985 to 1998 and compared her trips before and after the monument achieved park status in 1992. She mentioned that prior to 1992, "the parking lot was empty of sellers and I only saw one person asking for money...Borobudur is so beautiful and I think I got much closer to the site...." However, during her subsequent visit in 1998, she mentioned that there was a vast sea of sellers and she felt disappointed and somewhat annoyed and surprised that the celebration of Waisak "seemed more like a carnival".<sup>34</sup> She lamented that many had little understanding that Waisak is a holy day, and that Borobudur is a holy place, every day of the year. Crippen added that it does not matter what one's religion is to appreciate and honor the site.

Initially, after reading what Crippen had written, I could not get a clear picture of

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<sup>33</sup> The programme includes the singing of Buddhist hymns and dance performed by the members of various Buddhist organizations to re-enact the life, enlightenment and passing away of Lord Buddha.

<sup>34</sup> Kaye Crippen, "Customer-focused community empowerment", in Heritage, tourism and local communities, ed. Wiendu Nuryanti (Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Gadjah Mada University Press), p.156.

the situation of the Waisak celebration at Borobudur. There were many questions in my mind regarding what really took place, how chaotic the situation was and how “un-holy” such a holy festival could be. When I finally had the chance to witness the upacara Waisak personally, I had a deeper understanding of Kaye Crippen’s feelings and could almost share similar sentiments as her.

What happened yesterday’s morning was that I was frantic with worry as one of my contacts, who is a Buddhist in Yogya, had promised to fetch me at the lobby of Hyatt hotel to attend the upacara Waisak. However, she did not turn up. Not everyone could attend the upacara Waisak ceremony, unless you know of a member of a Buddhist organization who is able to issue you an invitation card. I had no choice but to proceed to the concierge to enquire the Hyatt hotel staffs how I should get there to join the festival, or if there was anyone whom they know who could help me. However, to my dismay, two of the staffs replied me in an indifferent tone; they kept shrugging their shoulders saying that they did not have any knowledge of Upacara Waisak at all since they are Muslims, and that Waisak “adalah kegiatan keturunan Cina!” (activities of the Chinese). They even told me that the Waisak ceremony at Borobudur might be over already! Initially, I felt really unhappy because it was as if they were unwilling to help me because Waisak is a “Chinese religion” and that the way they put it was as if the Muslims “have nothing to do with the Chinese”. I admit that everyone is entitled to their own thinking especially when it concerns sensitive issue like religion. However, I was indignant because I felt that the two hotel staffs were behaving in a selfish manner. I have often felt

that one can profess a religion but still be knowledgeable about other religion, unless they choose to be indifferent. Not only did they strongly advise me not to attend Waisak, they instilled in me a sense a fear by explaining how upacara Waisak is prohibited to the public and that it is only celebrated within the Buddhist community themselves. At that moment, I really wonder if the celebration of Waisak is considered an illegal activity in Indonesia. To quote what they said, “Waisak seperti kegiatan rahasia” (Waisak is like a confidential activity).

The two hotel staffs also told me that no one knows about Waisak and activities related to the festival except the Buddhists. Perhaps I am reading too much into their reactions, but it seems to me that they are trying to create the impression that the Indonesian Buddhists are a secluded group who chose to act in isolation! Although I did not understand why they did that, my suspicion is that it might be due to the apparent long standing ethnic conflict between the Chinese and the Pribumis, and that the two Pribumi Muslim staffs seem to think that all Buddhists are Chinese! As I have yet to attain much insight to Buddhism at Yogya as of that point in time, I thought that would be a challenging issue to find out.

The fortunate thing was that I bumped into a few members of WALUBI (they are Indonesian Chinese; I do not know if I am being too sensitive, but my personal encounter is that the Indonesians who are of Chinese origin seemed more willing and ready to help. The members were wearing shirts bearing the logo of their Buddhist council. They were about to head to where the Waisak procession was about to begin at Candi Mendut, and later on proceed to Borobudur to attend the ceremony. I approached them and introduced

myself and my agenda. Pak Lambang who was an Indonesian Chinese, willingly gave me an invitation card and asked his driver to give me a lift to Candi Mendut free of charge upon hearing my “sorry plight”! And there at Candi Mendut, where the procession began, I met several thousands of Buddhists, most of whom were wearing the t-shirts bearing the logo of the Buddhist organizations they come from! Not known to many is the fact that there are actually so many Buddhists in contemporary Indonesia.

## **II) Schisms within Buddhist rival factions**

Before I embark on my fieldtrip to Yogya, some of the research questions I had in mind were: what is the role of a Buddhist monument in a predominantly Muslim country? How much conflict is there between the Muslim majority and the Buddhist minority? What is the status of the Chinese Buddhists in contemporary Indonesia?

One of my lecturers, Professor John Miksic, who had spend an enormous amount of time researching on Borobudur during the 1980s shared with me that during his stay at Central Java in the 1980s, most of the Buddhists in Indonesia were of Chinese origin. Therefore, before I embarked on my field research, I have the pre-conceived notion that religious rivalry that exists in contemporary Indonesia is one of “Pribumis versus Chinese” kind of situation. I am not at all aware that Buddhism in Java is being divided among rival factions until I was at Central Java conducting my field research, and I suspect that the details probably escaped many academics too. This is a very interesting subject which I pursued, because I feel that it can yield a lot of important insights into contemporary Java/Indonesia/Southeast Asia. Also, before I zoom in on upacara Waisak,

it is necessary to have a brief understanding of the current situation regarding different Buddhist groups in Indonesia. Vera, the secretary of the Buddhist organization MBI (Majelis Buddhayana Indonesia), had kindly provided me with some background information on Buddhism in Indonesia. Currently, there are two main Buddhist councils in Indonesia. They are WALUBI (Perwakilan Umat Buddha Indonesia) and KASI (Konferensi Agung Sangha Indonesia).

Since the founding of WALUBI (Perwakilan Umat Buddha Indonesia) in 1998, the organization has, from 1999, been recognized by the Indonesian government as the only official council to host upacara Waisak at Borobudur.

KASI (Konferensi Agung Sangha Indonesia) gained independence in the year of December 1998. There are three groups of Sangha<sup>35</sup> under the umbrella of KASI. They are Sangha Agung Indonesia (SANGIN), Sangha Theravada Indonesia (STI) which gained independence in 1976, and Sangha Mahayana Indonesia (SMI) which gained independence in 1978. There is one more Buddhist organisation, MBI (Majelis Buddhayana Indonesia), which is cooperating closely with SANGIN.

Apparently, there are political issues involved between WALUBI and KASI. That explains why the upacara Waisak (Waisak ceremony) is held separately by WALUBI and KASI at different locations annually. KASI gained recognition as the second official Buddhist council in Indonesia 7 years ago. Since 1999, KASI has also been hosting the celebration of upacara Waisak in various parts of Indonesia, except Borobudur. Borobudur has become a site of government control, not a site under the management of

the Buddhist monks or Buddhist groups. Only the government approved Buddhist council has the power and right to gain access to Borobudur for the celebration of upacara Waisak, as Borobudur is currently not only a sacred site of the past, but also a national symbol and a state asset presently. The Indonesian government's intervention in the management of monuments affects not only the tourism sphere, but also the religious and cultural spheres. This is because historical monuments today function not only as tourist attractions, but also as religious sites and cultural symbols.

Throughout the entire process of conducting this field research, I have come to realize that religious rituals are always, inevitably, more than just religious phenomena. At least from my point of view, an important insight which I have gained is that religious rituals or ceremonies not only serve religion, but also social status and politics as well. According to Vera, KASI is led by the Sangha (monks) while WALUBI is led by the entrepreneurs and the politicians. Dewi, a committee member of MBI had revealed to me that in Indonesia, most Buddhist organizations prefer to join KASI because they place their trusts in the monks whom they believe to be more knowledgeable in terms of Buddhist teachings rather than the entrepreneurs who are laymen. In terms of relationship with the Indonesian government, Dewi explained to me that every Buddhist organization can establish a close relationship with government, but KASI, in particular, has a closer relationship with former president Gus Dur and former cabinet minister Kwik Kian Gie. MBI and SANGIN have, over the years, been celebrating the upacara Waisak around the entire Indonesia, at various candis such as candi Tandihat in Sumut, candi Muara Takus

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<sup>35</sup> Sangha refers to the community of ordained monks and nuns.

in Riau, complex candi Muara Jambi in Jambi, complex Peninggalan Sriwijaya in Palembang and for the past 2 years, at Candi Sewu. Their way of celebrating the Waisak have always been one of quiet contemplation and meditation, very different from WALUBI's style of celebration, which involved dances and singing. What I have gathered from the field research is that perceptions and interpretations of Buddhism vary according to different Buddhist organizations and that the interpretations of the Buddhist ideology are definitely not a homogenous one. From what I have observed, religious ceremonies are rarely about spirituality per se. It is evident how a religious ceremony like Waisak could become a symbolic battleground between two different religious ideologies.

### **III) Capitalizing on Waisak**



(Vihara Mendut)

Yesterday's afternoon, I went to vihara Mendut (a small temple in Candi Mendut) with the intention of speaking to some of the Buddhists who were around. I bumped into many Buddhists and who are willing to help me with some of the queries I had. Daisy, one of the Buddhists I had met there, explained to me that upacara Waisak is actually open to all, but because the President, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono would be attending the ceremony this year, the government had to step up their efforts in security measures and only people who could be identified as "participants", wearing either a tag or an invitation card would be allowed to enter the compound of Borobudur during the main ceremony held in the evening. That was a safety measure to prevent potential terrorist or anyone from assassinating the president.

During Waisak procession, many horse carriages (known as the "andong" in Yogya) lined along roads near Candi Mendut as well as Borobudur, waiting for potential customers because it was quite a long walk from Candi Mendut to Borobudur.



(The "andong")

Actually, all Buddhist devotees were encouraged to join in the long walk led by the Buddhist monks. The walk itself was an expression of perseverance and strong faith

in Buddhism. However, many Buddhist devotees chose to opt out of the walk because some were physically unable to do so, and others were simply too lazy. The andongs, then, were the best transport available to these people.

It was obvious that the owners of andongs (presumably non-Chinese, Muslims) tried their best to capitalize on upacara Waisak -- the only period in a year when so many Buddhists or tourists (foreign or domestic) from all over the world came. A few locals told me that to get a ride on the andong normally costs only 1000 rupiah (around 18 Singapore cents). But during Waisak, the owners of the andongs could increase the fees to 7000-8000 rupiah! The narrow streets which linked vihara Mendut to Borobudur complex were thronged with cars, buses, horsecarriages and crowds! The sight was simply chaotic! The uneven ground was littered with used cans, bottles and plastic sheets, and all I breathed in was dust and dirt. But for once in my life, I was at somewhere where I did not have to bother about the watchful eye of the police, issuing fines to litter bugs. In Yogya, one experiences some kind of freedom, but one pays a price for polluting one's own environment in which one lives in.

Talking about the residents of Magelang, like I had mentioned earlier on, they really seemed like a whole lot of people who are experiencing financial difficulty -- at least this was what I had observed from their run down and shabby residences. I do not know if I am exaggerating a little by saying that Borobudur is a blessing to the people of Magelang Province, but from what I observed, Borobudur is, to quite an extent, some sort of a 'lifeline' to the people of Magelang. Borobudur's existence drew a great number of tourists to the Magelang Province. Most residents there depend on selling bottled mineral

water to the tourists to sustain their everyday living expenses. They were really elated by the fact that one big bottle of AQUA could fetch them five thousand rupiah (slightly less than one Singapore dollar). Five thousand rupiah could fetch them at least three simple meals, such as the nasi campur. When I bought a few big bottles of AQUA from a stall vendor, who is a middle-aged woman carrying her baby in her arms, she smiled her thanks at me with so much gratitude. She also told me that everyday, she looks forward to the arrival of the tourists. But only during school holiday seasons or during a grand event like upacara Waisak would she be able to earn more money by selling the mineral water. Also, there were many other stall vendors who grabbed this opportunity to sell “souvenirs” like sunglasses, hats which bear the logo of Borobudur, toys, snacks, masks etc., many of which had no direct relationship with the religion, Buddhism.



(Souvenirs sold during upacara Waisak)

It is amazing how, a Buddhist monument like Borobudur, has taken on a new role in contemporary Indonesia. While till today, no one is certain of the symbolism and function of Borobudur intended by its builders, Borobudur has certainly, in this present day, become a sort of commodity on which the residents of the Magelang province could capitalize on. If Borobudur were meant as a place of solace for the Buddhists in the past,

then, today, its presence has definitely served beyond what was “originally” intended of it. Borobudur has become the light of hope, not only in the spiritual sense, and not only for the Buddhists, but also in the economic sense, encompassing people of other religious faith as well.

#### **IV) Localisation of Buddhism in Indonesia**

There was something interesting I noticed during the procession at upacara Waisak. The Laughing Buddha is actually deified in Indonesia, but not in Singapore. The laughing Buddha which I saw at Candi Mendut was one that was brightly painted in white colour.



(The laughing Buddha seen at upacara Waisak)

However, the one that is usually seen in Singapore is maroon or gold colored. The Laughing Buddha in Singapore, I would say, is not actually deified in that sense. Rather, most people, especially the Chinese, believe that by touching the belly or the mouth of the Laughing Buddha would bring them lots of wealth and prosperity. If one asks me what kind of Buddhism the Indonesians practise presently, I would say that it depends on which Buddhist council the Buddhists are under. According to Mr. Xu, one of the

committee members of SANGIN, the Buddhists who are under WALUBI worship only the Buddha, whereas the Buddhists who are under KASI worship both the Buddha and the Kuan Yin (Goddess of Mercy). However, I felt that Mr. Xu had missed out on the fact that WALUBI does incorporate the statue of the Laughing Buddha during the Waisak Procession. A few Indonesian Buddhists had told me that the Laughing Buddha, also known as the Maitreya Buddha (I am not sure about other countries, but in Singapore, most Buddhists also refer to the Laughing Buddha as the Maitreya Buddha) is believed by many Indonesian Chinese to be the future Buddha. They respect the Laughing Buddha and would like to honour him. A Buddhist friend whom I bumped into during the Waisak procession had shared with me that the Maitreya Buddha is believed to be the Buddha of the future and the one to follow up the historical Buddha Sakyamuni. He waits for the moment he is to appear on earth as the Buddha of the fifth world cycle. At present he is considered as one of the Bodhisattvas. In the future he will be like Sakyamuni, a mortal Buddha who lives on earth for a while in order to teach mankind the doctrine. I think what Trevor Ling<sup>36</sup> mentioned in one of his articles best describes some of my thoughts, which is the need to be aware that “Buddhism” is an ideological abstraction, since “Buddhists” and their Buddhist traditions are everywhere country-specific, and that Buddhism, has from the earliest days been pluralistic.

If I may put it this way, I would suggest that Buddhism is also “organization-specific”, especially in Indonesia. Trevor Ling also mentioned that no

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<sup>36</sup> Trevor Ling, Buddhist trends in Southeast Asia (Singapore: Social Issues in Southeast Asia, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies 1993), pp.4-5.

doubt the Buddhist philosopher will claim that Buddhist philosophy remains the same in whatever country it may be, and that Buddhist teachings are universal in nature. Nevertheless, Buddhist teachings, like any other philosophical or religious ideas and teachings have to be applied in real situations. After conducting fieldwork at the upacara Waisak this year, I realized that it is getting more challenging to distinguish Buddhism in specific categories, such as the “purely” “Mahayana” type or “Theravada” type.

#### **V) Chaos, “Fake monks” and “pop star President”**

The much awaited Waisak ceremony commenced around 7 pm last night. At the entrance, when the gate to Borobudur was opened by the police, thousands of people thronged the entrance of Borobudur and I was really worried that I would die in a stampede. Yucky, one of the Buddhists I had met there, had to keep reminding me to carry my bag in the front, not in the back because there are so many poor people (mostly Pribumis, I was told) eyeing for a good time to pickpocket my valuables. The upacara Waisak, as I had observed, was not only a day to commemorate the Buddha and his teachings, but also a day and a good opportunity for pickpockets to commit a sin. I had to be guarded about my belongings, everywhere I go. It is so ironical that such a “holy” Waisak as presumed by me turned out to be such a scary event! There was not a minute of peace within me last night. In Singapore, my past personal experiences of the celebrations of Vesak festival at temples were never so disorderly. I could not imagine what would have happened if I had not crossed paths with some of my Buddhist friends

such as Ibu Listiorini, Yucky, Lili and Nina.



(Buddhists friends whom I met during upacara Waisak)

Ibu Listiorini had to literally drag me along and elbow others to make way for me. To many Indonesians, that chaotic kind of situation was something very “normal” but I really felt so horrified and jittery at that moment that I realized how much I had taken Singapore’s peaceful and secure environment for granted.

All communication reception was cut off during the Waisak ceremony. One of the members of the organizing council, James, who was helping WALUBI in coordinating the Waisak Ceremony, told me that all communication reception had to be cut off to prevent any potential coordinated assassination of the President. When I commented that it was very nice of him to help out in such a grand event, he told me with a chuckle that he did not volunteer himself since he is a Christian. He went on telling me that he was assigned by his boss to take on such a task. According to him, whatever that he was doing during the Waisak ceremony was more of an obligation since he had to show some respect for his employer. He also told me that WALUBI is a very influential Buddhist

council in Indonesia, since its members comprises mainly of entrepreneurs and politicians. James also told me that his boss's company has close affiliations with the committee members of WALUBI. Actually, just by looking at how WALUBI was able to mobilize such great manpower to coordinate the entire Waisak celebration already speaks of its great influence.

Around 8 pm, many of my Buddhist friends and I waited eagerly along the main road leading to Borobudur complex for the arrival of the President. Eventually, when President Yudhoyono's car zoomed pass all of us, many Indonesians shouted hysterically "SBY" (Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono). Many told me how much they adored him and that they were counting on him to rebuild a better nation. Some ladies, young and old alike, had told me coyly how suave and charismatic President SBY is and how these qualities of his somehow added on to his credibility as the leader of the nation. That kind of awestruck expressions on the faces of the Indonesians was simply unbelievable! I, for one, cannot imagine myself, or even fellow Singaporeans, getting so overwhelmed if we ever get a close-up glimpse of our President. I would say that the main focus that night was not on commemorating the life, enlightenment and death of the Buddha, but more on President SBY. President SBY, indeed, had stolen the limelight!

President SBY also gave an impressive speech during the Waisak ceremony. The message which he delivered in his speech was indeed impressive as it made me, and a few others (as I had observed) sit in a quiet, reflective silence. In his speech, he mentioned that the Indonesian population had yet to understand the need to respect the rights of others in their own community, nation and state. President also highlighted in

his speech that the Buddha had pointed out that the lives of human beings are fraught with difficulties and temptations. He gave an example of how, the current situation of corruption faced by Indonesia is a case of temptation and is definitely a big obstacle to the progress of Indonesia. This problem, he contended, cannot be ignored. He urged the Indonesian population to start developing a right mentality, and highlighted the importance on having a strong moral foundation. The teachings of these moral foundations, he maintained, could be found in religious teachings. Below is an excerpt from his speech:

“Kita belum dapat menghormati dan menghargai hak-hak masyarakat dan hak hak bangsa serta Negara....masalah korupsi memang sangat rumit dan kompleks karena kejahatan itu telah berjalan sekian lama di negeri kita. Namun, saya percaya bahwa ajaran agama akan memberikan dorongan yang sangat besar untuk mengatasi masalah ini.....saya mengerti masing-masing agama memiliki konsepsi yang berbeda dalam dasar-dasar keyakinannya, termasuk ritualnya. Namun, secara moralitas, umat manusia kita tidak akan menjumpai perbedaan mendasar antarajaran agama. Semua ajaran akan mendorong umatnya untuk memegang teguh kaidah-kaidah moral...kita harus membangun masyarakat yang memiliki fondasi moral yang kukuh. Fondasi yang seperti itu sesungguhnya bisa kita temukan dalam ajaran-ajaran agama.<sup>37</sup>

(We have yet to respect and appreciate the rights of our community, the rights of our nation and country. The problem of corruption is really difficult and complex because this has been a long-standing problem in our country. But, I believe that religious teachings would serve as a great motivating force to overcome this problem...I understand that each and every religion possesses concepts and beliefs which are different, especially in terms of rituals, but all religion will motivate their followers to uphold the strong moral principles. We have to construct a community which possesses a strong moral foundation, and these foundations can be found in the religious teachings.)

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<sup>37</sup> “Nilai Ajaran Buddha untuk memperbaiki Moral Bangsa”, Kompas, 25 May, 2005.

According to one of the committee members of SANGIN, Ms Jo, someone had once told her that WALUBI members actually dressed up laymen as monks, to show the public that WALUBI is an organization that could win the hearts and minds and support of the monks. Ms Jo continued saying that WALUBI also tried hard to invite as many monks as possible from all over the world, just to create the impression for public that they have great ability to organize such a grand ceremony and to lead the Buddhists from all over the world. What Ms Jo disclosed to me did not really come as a shock to me because during the Waisak procession, I had a chance to chat with a few monks from Hongkong. When I asked them what they were required to do for the ceremony since they were being invited, the monks chuckled and told me that they have no idea about their role and their presence at all! They said that they just played it by ear. I never expect a Waisak ceremony to turn out so bizarre.

I think that the builders of Borobudur from 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century probably never expect that many centuries down the road, a Muslim President would use this site as a central congregating place to advise fellow Muslims to look up to Buddhists teachings as well as other religious teachings to boost their morale and to cultivate the right mentality.

But, I also wonder if the Indonesians who were present yesterday's evening were only hearing the speech, not really listening with all their attention. Perhaps, many never really had the intention to internalize the meanings behind the President's speech. Just like what my supervisor, Dr Jan Mrazek, wrote about wayang and his puppet theatre<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Jan Mrázek, "Javanese Wayang Kulit in the Times of Comedy", Part Two, *Indonesia* 69, 2000, p.117.

and he mentioned that by hearing about something does not mean that one is listening, and hearing does not equate to understanding or internalizing an issue. Even as I am in the process of writing this thesis, my Chinese Buddhist friends who are from Jakarta told me that on and off, they still get the jitters because they have been receiving some “anti-Chinese” sms (short message send) from anonymous senders. My Chinese Buddhist friends told me that they are really very worried that history may repeat itself (the ‘history’ they meant refers to the 1998 May riot where it has been commonly believed that the riot was ethnically motivated due to negative sentiment of the indigenous people to the relatively more prosperous ethnic Chinese).

## **VI) Buddhism -- the neglected religion in Indonesia?**

After attending Upacara Waisak, I gave much thought to the current status and role of Buddhism in contemporary Indonesia. Several books which I had read up on that dealt with the religions in Java, such as that of Clifford Geertz’s<sup>39</sup> and Andrew Beatty’s<sup>40</sup>, left out the discussion of the Buddhists in Java of whom formed a substantial amount of the population. Even though most statistics on the internet would highlight that the number of Buddhists found in Indonesia comprises only of a pathetic 1%, I personally feel that 1% out of the entire Indonesian population indicates quite an enormous number of people, and I have always disliked the idea of reducing people to numbers.

Geertz’s book dwelled mainly on Islam, equating being a Javanese to the religion,

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<sup>39</sup> Clifford Geertz, The religion of Java (New York: Free Press, 1964, c1960).

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Beatty, Varieties of Javanese religion (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Islam. While Beatty's book, which is very much an extension of Geertz ideas, went further to include the study of Javanism and Javanese Hinduism, but neglected the discussion of Buddhism. That made me wonder if they had left out the Buddhists due to a lack of information, or a lack of interest, or if she was not at all aware that the Buddhist community still forms a substantial group in Java/Indonesia. Also, it is very interesting to find out that the Directorate General of Tourism and Culture in Indonesia<sup>41</sup>, while having a column which introduced the "Land and Resources; the People of Indonesia; Arts and Culture; Economy; Government; History", omitted the percentage of the Buddhist population.

Two Indonesian Chinese Buddhists, Daisy and Oli, whom I have interviewed, told me that a lot of Indonesian Pribumis, particularly the Muslims, are still biased against the upacara Waisak because most Pribumis still have the perception that Waisak is widely celebrated by the Chinese only. Not known to many, there is still a significant number of Pribumis who are Buddhists too, and they are mostly from the cities of Semarang and Yogyakarta. Many of these Pribumi Buddhists had followed the religion of their ancestors.

According to Dewi, a committee member of MBI, many Pribumi Buddhists she knows work as farmers. They do not have their own land and they have to work for others. Buddhism as a religion to many of the Pribumis is not really that symbolic. They adopted the religion mostly as a form of respect for their ancestors who were Buddhists. To them, following the religion of their ancestors is a form of filial piety. In the past, the

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<sup>41</sup> [www.tourismindonesia.com](http://www.tourismindonesia.com)

Pribumi Buddhists had to go through a lot of difficulties in order to get their marriage solemnized. But now, there are many Buddhist abbots around to help solemnize their marriages. This makes the solemnization process much easier. Dewi had told me that many Pribumi Buddhists still feel very awkward and embarrassed about admitting their religious identity in a predominantly Muslim country. Majority of the Pribumis still have the mentality that to be a Pribumi is to be a Muslim. This conservative type of mentality caused those Pribumi Buddhists to be “malu” (embarrassed), especially when they are being questioned about their religious identity by their fellow Pribumi Muslims. Payment for everything is also much more expensive for the Pribumi Buddhists. Thus, they are compelled by circumstances to proclaim Islam as their religion. In this case, we can see that religious identity to them is not so much an issue of faith; religion becomes a situational tool, which one could use to manipulate according to one’s own advantage.

Dewi had also told me that it is a rather disappointing situation for the Buddhists because the Indonesian government does not set aside any budget or fundings for the building of viharas (Buddhist temples), but they do set aside fundings for the building of masjids (mosques). Currently, most of the monks who are responsible for matters concerning Borobudur are stationed at the nearby Vihara Mendut. The monks comprise of a mixture of Chinese and Pribumis.

Upacara Waisak was first celebrated in the year of 1953. But the use of the historic temple site for the ceremony was not formerly allowed, on the grounds of protecting the ruins, and the ceremony had been held on smaller scale in front of

Borobudur.<sup>42</sup> With the support of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and other international organizations under the coordination of UNESCO, the Indonesian government conducted a comprehensive restoration of Borobudur in 1973-83.<sup>43</sup> During the period of restoration, the celebration of upacara Waisak was shifted to the nearby Candi Mendut. According to Haruya Kagami, most Javanese, the “supposed” descendants of those who built the temple, are now Muslims, and have no interest in the Buddhist ceremony, or the temple itself.<sup>44</sup> However, I beg to differ. From my conversations with some of the Indonesian Muslims, while most are very fascinated by the architecture of Borobudur, there is still a handful that shows interest in the history of Buddhism and also in the bas-reliefs of Borobudur. However, a few told me that very little about Buddhism was taught during their school days and so they are not aware of the religious significance of Borobudur.

Ita, who is a lecturer at Sanata Dharma University, told me that though she had been to Borobudur umpteen times for school outdoor excursions during her schooldays, her teachers explained nothing very much about the story of the bas-reliefs. Ita also told me that most of the Indonesian students only understood Borobudur as something that is representative of Indonesia from their teachers, and that all Indonesians would know and be proud of the monument since it is a world wonder which is situated in their country.

Two of my other friends, Sherly and Ms Happy, who are also lecturers from the

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<sup>42</sup> Haruya Kagami. “Tourism and national culture: Indonesian politics on cultural heritage and its utilization in tourism”, in Tourism and Cultural Development in Asia and Oceania, eds. Shinji Yamashita, Kadir H.Din, J.S.Eades, (Univeristas Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1997), p.64.

<sup>43</sup> “World Legacy awaits caretakers”, Jakarta Post, 12 July, 2003.

Sanata Dharma University, echoed the same sentiments as Ita. What I have observed throughout our conversations is that, Ita, Sherly and Ms Happy did not mention Borobudur as something that is exclusively “Javanese”. Instead, they have been reiterating how Borobudur is an Indonesian monument that every Indonesian should know and be proud of. Indeed, as Heidi Dahles aptly puts it, the objects of built heritage have turned into icons of Indonesian national identity.<sup>45</sup> It is very evident how the Indonesian government, especially under the Suharto’s regime, promotes Borobudur on a national and international level. However, the promotion of Borobudur as Indonesia’s ‘past’, is one based on selective preservation and selective eradication.<sup>46</sup> The Indonesian government decides the importance of what to showcase and what not. For example, importance is only placed on the façade of Borobudur. However, its religious significance and signs of Buddhism’s gradual revival is deliberately omitted out. While most Indonesians know about Borobudur, I would say that their understanding of it, apart from the Buddhists, is one which is rather superficial. Many Indonesians only know of Borobudur as a beautiful architecture, nothing more than that.

Apart from celebrating Waisak at Borobudur, the festival is also celebrated in viharas (temples) in various parts of the Republic of Indonesia. According to Vera, the secretary of MBI, former Presidents Suharto and Habibie had ever attended the Upacara Waisak celebration organized by WALUBI. But former President Abdurrahman Wahid had always attended the Upacara Waisak held by KASI (Konferensi Sangha Agung

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<sup>44</sup> Haruya Kagami, “Tourism and Cultural Development”, p.64.

<sup>45</sup> Heidi Dahles, *Tourism*, p.70.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p.39.

Indonesia) which was led by the monks. But for former President Megawati, although she had once made a promise to attend upacara Waisak, she cancelled her trip the very last minute. Vera mentioned that it was not because of a lack of respect for Buddhism on President Megawati's part, but because she was aware that there were two councils, KASI and WALUBI, both concurrently celebrating the festivals at different venues, and she did not wish to be deemed as someone partial by choosing to attend either one of the festivals.

## **25 May 2005**

### **D) Moving from Hyatt to home stay -- Leaving “paradise”**

After a wonderful three days stay over at hotel Hyatt Yogyakarta, I finally have to move out of my comfort zone this morning.

I wish I could have more funding and the luxury to stay in this “more than decent” hotel for a longer period of time, but I have to make do with a home stay subsequently. My stay at hotel Hyatt Yogya was indeed a very pleasant and memorable one.



(Hotel Hyatt Yogyakarta)



(Surroundings of my home stay)

Not that a home stay is bad or unbearable, in fact, I am fine with the environment of my home stay, but I would have preferred the “cleaner” and “better” facilities available at hotels -- blame it on my pampered “Singaporean privileged background” (of course there would definitely be Singaporeans who would protest against this remark, but at least in my own opinion, I do feel that I am privileged in terms of accommodation and general utility facilities).

My home stay hosts are very hospitable to me, but I certainly miss the hot showers which I could not do without in my life. Somehow, bathing becomes a chore when I have to heat up the water myself during my home stay. I realized how much of a spoiled brat I am! Also, whenever I fell sick in Singapore, clinics are so accessible in the neighborhood. Even if I get a slight fever, I would be running straight to the doctor. Everything is just so convenient in Singapore. But today, when I was feeling under the weather just now, my host family told me that there is no clinic around my home stay, only a pharmacy where doctors come in on certain days of the week. I almost freaked

out! Self- medication is very common in Yogya, but my Bapak<sup>47</sup> and Ibu (my host family) told me that usually Yogyanese do not rely on medicine unless they are really suffering from some major illnesses. Most Yogyanese simply take plenty of rest and drink lots of water and that would do the trick. My Bapak and Ibu are shocked at the way I (or most Singaporeans, I suspect) behaved. My Bapak is sort of amused that we Singaporeans are brought up in a really pampered manner. He asked me if Singaporeans whine at the slightest issues! He commented in a joking manner, “wah duh! kurang kuat hatinya ya?” (Oh dear, not strong emotionally ya?)

While the comment made by him may sound like a sweeping statement generalizing most of the Singaporeans, I could not help but feel that he is right to quite an extent! I think the term “culture shock” is applicable not only to “guests”, but to “hosts” as well. I have come to realize the fact that what seems to be normal and very much taken for granted by one, may be deemed fathomless by the other. Unknowingly, whatever I did or how I reacted became representative of a “Singaporean Culture”, at least in the eyes of my host family or some of the Yogyanese/Javanese! And I only started questioning the notion of a “Singaporean culture” when I am in Yogya.

It is only during my stay in Yogya that I realized I could be making so much comparison about my home country with another country, and griping incessantly about the “other”. In a way, I can say that I discovered more about myself -- both the nasty and appreciative sides of me. The trip to Yogya also made me realize that our perception of

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<sup>47</sup> Bapak and Ibu are Indonesian honorific referring to a father and mother respectively. These terms are also used as a polite way of addressing older males and females in Indonesia.

“the other” has got very much to do with the type of environment we come from and the emotional/cultural baggage we carry around with us. The funny thing is that when I was in Singapore, I often look for the slightest thing in Singapore to gripe about -- that the weather is too hot, the country is plain boring, and that there is nowhere to shop or explore. But now that I am in Yogyakarta, the weather is twice as scorching and telecommunications is still not that advanced or developed. Access to email is still not that common because most Yogya families do not own a computer set at home. Most of the time, Yogyanese have to go to WarNet (internet café) [*warnet*, short for *warung internet*] to surf the net.

Another issue worth mentioning is food. I have experienced for myself that the tastiest kind of food are those sold at the warungs along the roads. They are unhygienic (at least by my standard! Considering the fact that I come from Singapore; the much reputed “clean” and “green” city!) but delicious! Having diarrhoea becomes a daily ritual for me, and I have sort of gotten use to it after a while. I suddenly feel more appreciative of my own country, and feel that Singapore is actually “ample” in many ways already.

## **II) Reading up on policies of historical monuments in Indonesia**

It is a good thing that I have done some readings on policies related to historical monuments in Indonesia. Reading up on government policies has always been a dry process for me. However, I understand that it is an integral and essential part to give me a

good background understanding to why certain phenomena have become what or how they are today.

The official efforts to preserve historical monuments in Indonesia originated in the Dutch colonial Period. In 1901 the committee for Archaeological Research on Java and Madura was set up, and this was changed into the more effective Archaeological Service in 1913. In 1931 the Ordinance on Monuments was established by the then Dutch East Indies Government with the aim of preserving the historical monuments within the colonial domain. These colonial policies were basically taken over by the Indonesian government after independence. The task of the former Archaeological Service are now divided into two parts, that is, those of preservation and conservation, and those of research. The former have now been taken over by the Directorate for the Preservation and Restoration of Historical and Archaeological Monuments in the Directorate-General of Culture, while the latter are in the hands of the National Centre for Archaeological Research, both under the Ministry of Education and Culture. The historical monuments in Indonesia were long managed under the Ordinance on monuments, until 1992, when the new law on the Cultural assets was enacted by the Indonesian government.<sup>48</sup>

While the new Law on Cultural Assets, enacted in 1992, took over the fundamental parts of the former Ordinance on Monuments, some articles were renewed and some new ones were added. Among them is article 19 which states that some specific cultural assets may be utilized for religious, social, touristic, educational, scientific and cultural purposes. This is a totally new article which has no counterpart in the former

Ordinance on Monuments.<sup>49</sup> More noteworthy is the reference to their use for religious purposes, which has long been the subject of debate. Before the enactment of the 1992 Law on Cultural Assets, religious groups such as the Hindu or the Buddhists applied to the government for use of the temple sites for their religious activities. However, they were shown a reluctant attitude by the Government. In 1979, for example, the Minister of Home Affairs sent a letter to the provincial governors to instruct them that such applications should not be allowed. Though the rejection was suggested in the name of the preservation of the temples, the fact that the Minister of Home Affairs gave the instruction shows that the question was not simply one of preservation, but also of the control of religious affair. The addition of the article 19 seems to show clearly the situation surrounding the historical monuments in contemporary Indonesia. The approval of their use for tourist purposes can easily be understood, considering the recent government policy, which aims at promoting tourism as a means of national development.<sup>50</sup>

Since the 1980s, then it has appeared that the Indonesian government actively promotes the utilization of historical monuments for tourist purpose. Hinduism and Buddhism gained their status as legitimate national religions only in 1965. Then, in 1983, two of their sacred days, the Indonesian (more precisely the Balinese) Hindu New Year, Nyepi, and the Buddhist Waisak, were declared national holidays.<sup>51</sup>

Heidi Dahles mentioned that tourism is a very particular trade which is closely

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<sup>48</sup> Haruya Kagami, "Tourism and national culture", p.63.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.,p.65.

intertwined with culture, heritage, traditions, and identity itself. Cultural tourism especially presents itself as supporting a return to sources, a journey towards roots and ‘authentic’ culture.<sup>52</sup> It is cultural tourism with its appeal to cultural heritage and its potential for the exercise of power that most suited the New Order’s cultural policies. The New Order Government sought and obtained worldwide support for the restoration of its ancient ‘World’ heritage sites and invested money and energy in the maintenance of pre-colonial and colonial buildings (mosque, churches, palaces, and governmental buildings) and the establishment of monuments and museums to commemorate the struggle for independence and other peak events in recent history.<sup>53</sup>

In terms of cultural tourism, according to Heidi Dahles, the Indonesian government’s approach can be characterized as the ‘sites and monuments’ approach to culture. In this context the concept of “high culture” predominates. The first remains of the past that were designated ‘National Heirlooms’ were the monumental Hindu and Buddhist temples of Java, Prambanan and Borobudur, the temple complexes of Bali (Tanah Lot and Besakih), the palaces (kraton) of Yogyakarta and Solo and their sophisticated court culture expressed in dance, music, philosophy, and ceremonies. The Special Province of Yogyakarta is not at the periphery but in the centre of the tourism policy of the New Order.<sup>54</sup>

It has benefited from the special government support ever since the First

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.,p.66.

<sup>52</sup> Heidi Dahles, Tourism, p.9.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p.16.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.17.

Five-Year Development Plan which was launched in the late 1960s.<sup>55</sup> Yogyakarta was developed as the centre of Indonesian cultural tourism as a worthy representative of the nation to be presented on a plate to foreign as well as domestic tourists. What Heidi Dahles describes in her book linked my thoughts to what Professor Wang Gungwu mentions in one of his books, that borders are meaningless for some people and meaningful for others.<sup>56</sup>

After talking to some foreign tourists, local Javanese and Indonesians, I realized that it does not really matter to them if Borobudur is situated in Yogya or Magelang, as long as they get to visit the place. But one can observe the fact that for the Indonesian government to proclaim a monument to be “here” and not “there” or to acknowledge that Borobudur is considered “within” the border of Yogya city could have involved much more significance and complexity. One can only understand what I am trying to put across with a brief understanding of the living condition at the Magelang province. In the earlier part of my writings, I mentioned that I experienced quite a shock when I was in Yogya, because the environment is simply much dirtier as compared to Singapore. But when I arrived at Magelang province, I realized that the degree of shock I experienced over at Yogya pale in comparison with the situation in the Magelang Province! The Magelang province, in my personal point of view (taking into account my background again; that I come from a “clean” and green city”) is almost five times dirtier than Yogya!

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.,p.38

<sup>56</sup> Wang Gungwu, “Chinese ethnicity in new Southeast Asian Nations”, in Ethnic relations and nation-building in Southeast Asia, ed. Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), p.4.



(Poor sanitary condition in Magelang)

Thinking back, I really do appreciate the level of cleanliness in Yogya. I remember ordering a bowl of nasi campur (mixed rice) with lots of flies flying around the food at one of the warungs (roadside stalls). There were also no “decent” restaurants (I am using my “Singaporean” standard to judge again) around in the Magelang province. There might be slightly “cleaner” food (one cannot really be sure though) sold within the Borobudur complex, but only if one is ready to pay an exorbitant 30000-40000 rupiah (equivalent to 5-6 Singapore dollars!!) for a packet of nasi campur that includes only curry gravy and some vegetables. My pride and indignation stopped me from purchasing something, which I feel, is so not worth it! Another option available is to purchase the pop mie (instant noodles), which could be considered the “cleanest” and “safest” to consume.

By giving an idea of the living condition in Yogya and Magelang, what I hope to put across is that the borders can be said to be drawn with much interest by the Indonesian government, who decides to “situate” Borobudur in Yogyakarta, the “cultural heart of Java” on the tourism itinerary, rather than to “situate” it in the poor, dilapidated

province of Magelang. By doing so, Borobudur could then be in line with the “high culture” concept.

**27 May 2005**

**I) Narrative of licensed guide -- Mas<sup>57</sup> Adip**



(Visitors around Borobudur)

In the beginning stage of thinking about my research objectives, I had mentioned how important it is to understand the role of the guides and how they contribute to the tourism phenomenon. I managed to engage several licensed guides at Borobudur today but did not reveal to them my purpose to Borobudur as I was afraid that they would be more restrained if they knew that whatever they say would be documented. For the licensed guides, while they did provide some historical backgrounds to Borobudur’s past, their “stories” are really different from most of the academic books I had read. More importantly, the few licensed guides whom I had engaged revealed nothing that reflected any Pancasila rhetoric, contrary to Heidi Dahles’s description. I wonder whether the New

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<sup>57</sup> Mas is an Indonesian term which refers to a male around the age group of 15-35.

Order state actually had that much control or influence over the guiding profession. Also, some information given by the tour guides regarding Borobudur were totally irrelevant. The guides told me that they depend a lot on themselves to read up the books on Borobudur. I certainly have doubts if those narratives are good enough or if the narratives are informative enough to be presented to tourists from all over the world as some of those narratives really do not sound logical, especially if one has spent an enormous amount of time doing research on Borobudur and reading up works of academics, archaeologists or religious associations.

One of the licensed tour guides whom I have engaged is Mas Adip. He has been a licensed senior and special guide since 1992. He told me that he learnt about the story and history of Borobudur from some books written by historians, archaeologists and philosophers. He also told me that there are no specific texts assigned to them on Borobudur. A lot depends on their initiative to read up. When I asked him if the HPI of Indonesia assigned any prescribed texts for them to learn about Borobudur's past, or if there are any types of educational materials concerning Borobudur or other religious sites that licensed guides are assigned to read, Mas Adip smiled and shook his head. He then told me in a dry tone that the governments or Presidents themselves actually do not know much about Borobudur, because they are too busy with state affairs.

When Mas Adip first introduced himself to me, he told me confidently that he is proficient in seven languages very well. He also offered to narrate some of the events that took place at Borobudur in English. Overall, I find his conversational English comprehensible. At times of the guiding session, I was impressed that a few English

terms which were used by him were rather “difficult” ones like “formlessness”, “profound” and “eternity”. But the biggest drawback was that his sentence construction is rather weak. While he has quite a good vocabulary of words, he seems to have difficulty stringing words into proper sentences, and at times I had to re-confirm certain meanings of words or sentences with him in Bahasa Indonesia. Also, at times, his pronunciation of certain English words was not clear. So, I had to make him repeat himself twice.

In the beginning of the guiding session, he asked if I knew why the entire Borobudur structure looked like a circle. He then explained that “circle”, in India, represents “eternity”, which he equated to “forever”. He then continued expounding that since Borobudur is an “Indian” monument, and the builders must have intended Borobudur to be an “eternal” Buddhist temple. It is interesting how Mas Adip referred to Borobudur as an “Indian” monument. I am reminded of what Professor John Miksic had mentioned in his book on Borobudur that a previous generation of historians believed that ancient Java was simply a primitive land which Indian civilization penetrated by colonization, commerce, conquest and migration. They even assumed that Borobudur must have been built by Indians. In fact, many theories have been advanced to account for the monumental architecture and artistic achievements of Indonesia. Early scholars, especially European ones, were inclined to attribute the penetration of Indian ideas and techniques to conquests or settlements.<sup>58</sup> But what amazes me is that till today, Indonesians, like Mas Adip, still believe and referred to Borobudur as an Indian monument. Mas Adip also told me that Buddhism originated in India, and therefore he

was adamant that it was the Indians who had wanted to see Buddhism flourish in Java. He also said that Borobudur was conceived with the hope that Buddhism would last forever. It is such an irony that, while many recent studies have been trying to give a voice to the Indonesians by producing several evidences to show that Borobudur was indeed built by the ancient Indonesians themselves, the Indonesians themselves, like Mas Adip, still decides that such credit should be given to the Indians.

In the book written by Professor Miksic, he mentioned that Tantric Buddhism was practiced by the Indonesian Buddhists at Borobudur during the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> century. However, when I asked Mas Adip about Tantric Buddhism and requested for more information on that, he replied that he did not know what kind of Buddhism that was and that the only thing he knew was that the Indonesian Buddhists presently are practising only Mahayana Buddhism, a kind of Buddhism that help others attain “Nirvana”. He also told me that no Javanese are Buddhist in the present time. It is also very interesting to note how Mas Adip considered only the Pribumis as Javanese, while the Indonesians of Chinese origin, who are born and bred in Java, will always remain a Chinese, never a Javanese. When I asked Mas Adip the reason for it, he smiled and said, “It is always like that.” The rewarding thing about talking to a licensed guide is that, they not only tell you what they know about the monument they are introducing, but also revealed to you about the society in which they live in, and the way they perceive certain phenomenon in their society. I remember the first time I enrolled for Bahasa Indonesia classes in my university, my teachers, who are of Chinese origin, often address themselves as

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<sup>58</sup> John Miksic, Borobudur, p.20.

“Javanese”. It seems like they are really proud of their Javanese identity. However, it may remain a fact that perhaps, the Indonesian Chinese will always be regarded as a segregated group in the eyes of the Pribumis. Mas Adip told me that the Javanese presently are either Muslims or Christians or Catholics. He also explained that there is a “lucky Buddha” on the uppermost terrace of Borobudur. He mentioned that everyone should try touching the foot of the “lucky Buddha”. When I asked him how the lucky Buddha got its title, he paused for while and told me that a man from east Java wanted to de-stabilize the government many years ago but he did not know the reason behind it. He did not even remember the year the event took place. When I asked Mas Adip what he meant by “destabilizing” the government, he said it means to “unstable” the government. I knew at once he was not sure of his facts and he was not really sure of what he was talking about. The feeling I got was that he was trying to brush me off. I have read about the bombing incident in the article written by Mark Hampton<sup>59</sup> which mentioned that Borobudur was bombed by one of the “Muslim extremists” on the 21 January 1985. All Buddha statues were blasted by the bomb and many of the smaller stupas were damaged, only one survived undestroyed. That is why people had honored that particular Buddha statue as the “Lucky Buddha” and it is believed that touching the foot of the statue of the Lucky Buddha would bring good luck and prosperity. However, no details were given on who the “Muslim extremists” were.

So far, I tried looking up books or sources on reasons which explained why

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<sup>59</sup> Mark P. Hampton, "Cracks in the honeypot? Tourist attractions, local communities and economic development in Indonesia", in Heritage, tourism and local communities, ed. Wiendu Nuryanti (Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Gadjah Mada University Press, 1999), p.218.

“Muslim extremists” carried out that act, but up till now, my search for an answer has been in vain. However, a statement made by Mark Hampton is definitely worth giving some thoughts. He mentioned that this “extreme action illustrates some of the complexities of the question of whose heritage, and whose history, such ‘national’ sites embody in a complex, multi-faith and ethnically mixed society such as present-day Indonesia.”<sup>60</sup>

Mas Adip continued saying that the Javanese practised Buddhism only during the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century. “This is already in the past”, he contended. It is surprising to note that being an Indonesian and a supposedly trained guide, Mas Adip is not even aware of the fact that many Javanese are Buddhists even till today. Like many others, he had the misconception that only the Indonesian Chinese are Buddhists.

Mas Adip then revealed his own thoughts about religion and shared with me his personal experience as a Muslim. Even though the law stipulates that he is a Muslim, he still practices Javanism (a kind of animistic belief) and he told me that many other Muslims are doing the same thing. He continued saying that he is someone who can do without religion, and that he is definitely not someone very fervent or cares much about religion. But under the Pancasila Ideology, the government enforced the regulation that all Indonesians need to have a religion, and only six<sup>61</sup> official religions are acknowledged by the law. They are Islam, Catholicism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Konghucu. Mas Adip pointed out to me the discrepancy between theory and practice. He

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p.218.

<sup>61</sup> Konghucu or Confucianism has recently been acknowledged as a state recognized religion.

said that unlike many “orthodox” Muslim who pray five times a day, he and his friends do not carry out the prayers that conscientiously. What Mas Adip told me reminded me very much of what my home stay host (Ibu Bambang) had mentioned to me before, that she previously had no concern for religion at all. But under the Pancasila Ideology, the government stipulates that it is compulsory for everyone to have a religion, and so my Ibu chose Catholicism because most of her neighbors in the village she lives in are Catholics. I also remember Ibu Bambang confessing with a sheepish grin that it is more convenient to hold gatherings for prayers together somewhere near her house. Another reason is that Ibu Bambang’s brother is a Catholic priest, so, it is a natural thing and a convenient excuse for her to choose Catholicism.

As we were coming to the end of the guiding session, Mas Adip, with his back leaning against one of the stupas, told me that he would take a breather to enjoy the breeze, and that if we do had any more questions, he would be happy to help. He also told me that if the weather was much more cooling, he could doze off at Borobudur with the gentle breeze cooling his face. Mas Adip spoke of his younger days, when he often “main-main” (play) around the monument. It was like everyone’s playground, and especially popular among children. He also told me that he prefers the Borobudur presently, because it is not so dirty but well-maintained. He told me that many lovers would come by Borobudur treat Borobudur as a romantic dating spot. He asked me if I know what a “pengemis” is and I nodded. He then heaved a sigh and said, “Di Indonesia, hampir semua adalah pengemis” (In Indonesia, almost all are beggars).

He then smiled at me and asked if I have ever seen a pengemis in Singapore since

Singapore is such a rich country. I told him that like anywhere else in the world, there are bound to be the poors, and Singapore is no exception. However, he replied with a cheeky smile saying that even the poorest in Singapore is an “orang kaya” (rich person). Mas Adip made me feel very bad and awkward, and it seems as if being rich is a sin, especially in contrast with the situation of the high rate of poverty faced in several parts of Indonesia. As I was getting ready to leave Borobudur after the guiding session, Mas Adip advised me to take as many photos with the Buddha statues and stupas as possible to show them to my friends in Singapore. He also suggested to me the nicer angles to capture the pictures of Borobudur. I could strongly feel that Mas Adip thinks of Borobudur as an art piece or a leisure park, nothing of religious significance to him at all. Perhaps, the reason why many people who have been to Borobudur do not feel anything “religious” and “sacred” about the monument is largely due to the ways the tour guides present Borobudur to the public. The tour guides, who are supposed to be the “leader” and the “mentor”, did not present themselves in a way such that there is a need to observe the sanctity of the site. As such, the visitors who are in a foreign land often take the cue from the guides and follow the way the guides treat the monument.

## **II) Narrative of licensed guide -- Bapak Herlambang**

Pak Herlambang is another licensed guide whom I have engaged. He has been working as a guide since 1990. He is a senior as well as a special guide and is authorized to provide guiding service at all monuments in Indonesia, not just at Borobudur only. Pak

Herlambang speaks good English, “good” in the sense that he could be understood in general. But his grammar sometimes poses as a challenge for my understanding as a slight change in grammar could affect the whole meaning of what he is trying to convey. Therefore at times, I communicated with him in Bahasa Indonesia, just to make sure that what he had narrated to me in English is the meaning that I have understood from him. Right at the start of the guiding session, Pak Herlambang told me that Borobudur reliefs were carved and designed by the Indians. It is therefore, he contended, a “Buddhist monastery” built by the Indians where monks could reside in. It is interesting how he had described Borobudur’s function in the past as that of a “monastery”. None of the academic books I had read referred to Borobudur as a “monastery” or claimed that Borobudur was built for monks to reside in. Pak Herlambang spoke with assertion that if there is one thing that is “Indonesian” about Borobudur, it would only be the whole architectural structure, or what he called the “exterior” of Borobudur. He told me that the ancient Indonesians probably just contributed their ideas to the exterior design of Borobudur, but the whole construction process was done by the Indians. He pointed to some panels of the bas-reliefs, bringing my attention to the carved human figures. He asked me to look carefully at the facial features of the carved human figures, and said that Indonesians certainly do not have facial features like that. When I asked him what he meant by the words “like that”, Pak Herlambang replied that he could not exactly put his feelings into words. He said that just by looking at the facial features of the carved human figures, he was able to discern straight away that those carved human figures were Indians, not Indonesians. He then pointed to a panel of bas-reliefs of some elephants, and

maintained that elephants are found only in India, not in Indonesia. That, he contended, is proof that Borobudur is an Indian architecture. However, I do remember someone telling me that elephants are also found in Sumatra. So, I asked Pak Herlambang about it, but he smiled and told me that I was mistaken. Though I did not pursue the topic further, in my heart, I knew that Pak Herlambang had been misinformed. I did not want to confront him, because my agenda is to listen to tour guides' narratives, not to judge whether the narratives are right or wrong.

The next thing which Pak Herlambang told me was that Borobudur was built by the Buddhist Sailendra to compete with the Hindu Sanjaya. He maintained that political competition was the key factor to why Borobudur was built. Pak Herlambang also told me that he had read about it from a "famous" history book on Borobudur. I looked at him in evident perplexity and wondered how Professor Miksic would have reacted if he was with me at that point of time. According to Professor Miksic, the Sailendra became a dominant political family in Java around A.D. 780, when they displaced another group known as the Sanjaya. The Sanjaya were older elite who were devotees of Hinduism and had been important since at least A.D. 732.<sup>62</sup> However, Professor Miksic expounded that tension between members of the Sailendra and Sanjaya families must have stemmed from a competition for political status, but probably had no effect on religious practices. Religion has never been a source of contention or conflict among the Javanese. The two families intermarried with the result that the children could give their loyalty to either the

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<sup>62</sup> John Miksic, Borobudur, p.24.

Sailendra or the Sanjaya.<sup>63</sup>

Pak Herlambang went on to question if I know why there are currently no Buddhists found around Borobudur, even though during the Sailendra Dynasty, most of the residents residing around Borobudur were Buddhists. I shrugged and pretended that I do not the answer (even though I had read from academic books that it was due to the arrival of Islam) as listening to his narratives is one of my research objectives. He then assertively told me that not many people know that all the Buddhists residing in the Magelang area had been wiped out due to the eruption of Mount Merapi. He had also told me that the current Indonesian Buddhists, who are *all* Chinese, reside only in Jakarta, Padang and Medan. If I had not known any of my Buddhist friends in Indonesia and derived information from them, I would have taken most of what Pak Herlambang told me as the “truth”. It is unimaginable that most of the visitors visiting Borobudur and who engaged the guiding service would be misinformed about the current situation. As I am writing this thesis, I suddenly feel a surge of emotion, it is this strong conviction that there is a need to continue doing research, and inform people about current happenings and some of the “hidden” situation which many do not know.

Pak Herlambang also told me a little about his personal life. He is a Muslim who grew up staying at the Magelang province. He mentioned that many villagers who are staying at such close proximity to Borobudur do not really bother to read up more about the monument. Before Borobudur achieved its park status in 1992, most villagers treated Borobudur as just a “playground”, or even a park, where most children would just be

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

playing on their own around the monument, or the villagers would find Borobudur a relaxing spot after a day's toil.

Pak Herlambang had jokingly told me that when one is poor, one has no concern for things like arts, conservation or preservation. These things are for the "orang kaya" (rich people), he said with a grin and in a matter-of-factly tone.

"One only thinks about money", he continued. Indeed, the bread and butter issue is of topmost concern for Pak Herlambang and many others who are struggling to make ends meet. Pak Herlambang told me that he could not adequately express his sentiments in words, but since young, he felt a special affinity to this monument that he grew up with. He had an urge to learn and know more about Borobudur since years ago. He said that he felt strange not knowing anything about this monument when it is situated at such close proximity to where he resides. There is just this strong interest to know something so near yet so far even till today. He also eagerly reads up more about its history although he admits that the collection of books written on Borobudur is "sangat terbatas" (very limited). He feels that Borobudur has a very rich history, but unfortunately, no standard "official history" is given by government. I thought that is both a good and bad thing. Good in a way that there are indeed many ways in which one can write about history, some view history from "below" (i.e. from the perspectives of ordinary people) while others prefer an "elitist" (i.e. from the perspectives of scholars or government officials) type of approach. But there could also be a problem when there is no standard "official" history based on archaeological findings which the guides could follow. This means that some guides might narrate the history of Borobudur according to their fancies, not based

on some archaeological evidences. Pak Herlambang told me that the guides themselves have to read up different books or brochures that they could get hold of on their own, contrary to what Heidi Dahles's had mentioned in her book. Pak Herlambang said that apart from his interest which motivates him, the other motivation is money. As a freelance guide, he works from 6am-4p.m. He receives a basic fixed salary which he describes as "lumayan" (normal). But in order to have a better purchasing power, he had to take on another job after 4p.m. The advantage of being a guide is that some tourists give a lot of tips if they think that the guides had provided a good service. Pak Herlambang said cheekily that tour guiding can be considered quite a profitable job if a guide meets up with a rich tourist.

After injecting a little humour into the guiding session, Pak Herlambang told me that a few of the bas-reliefs panels of Borobudur showed Lord Buddha as an advocate for family planning. He then continued saying that the idea of "family planning" was first initiated by the Gautama Buddha. He brought me to one of the relief panels which showed the Lord Buddha with some human beings. Pak Herlambang told me that the Lord Buddha encourages neither a childless family nor a big family with many children as that spells trouble. Pak Herlambang contended that a childless family, according to the Buddha, means an imperfect family, while a family with too many children requires much resource and may impoverish a family. Also, raising children requires disciplining them. When one has too many children, disciplining them becomes a big challenge. After being in touch with Buddhism for so many years (I have been introduced to the teachings of Buddhism about ten years ago by a Sri Lankan Buddhist reverend who happens to be a

close friend of my family), it is the first time I have heard of such things about Buddhism.

I do not know how others would have reacted upon hearing this, but I really feel that it sounds quite absurd. My Indonesian friend, Ita, who is a Christian, followed me on the guiding session for a leisure trip and told me that it is the first time she is in touch with Buddhism. She exclaimed that she is very impressed with Buddhism after hearing Pak Herlambang's narratives as there is not much opportunity to learn about Buddhism. She agrees very much with Pak Herlambang's description of the Buddha's teachings, like opting to have a small family as a wiser choice. Ita expressed that in Indonesia, many of the big families are suffering due to lack of resources. Ita then told me that she has a new understanding of Borobudur and the interpretations of its bas-reliefs. As a lecturer in the University specializing in Cultural Exchange Programme, she mentioned that she now has more information on Borobudur to share with students of other countries. When Ita told me that, I do not know whether to feel happy for her because I do feel a little worried. I pondered for a moment if Pak Herlambang had interpreted the bas-reliefs on his own, rather than reading up books about the relief. Nowhere have I heard of any teachings of Buddhism which advocates a small family! That Buddhist reverend from Sri Lanka once told me that the Buddha's teachings do not interfere in anyone's decision making, especially with regards to family planning. It is all up to the individuals to decide what kind of life they want to lead, but ultimately, the Buddha reminds us that we have to take full responsibility in all our actions no matter which path we choose in our lives.

I did not tell Ita my own experience concerning Buddhist teachings and how I felt that Pak Herlambang might have interpreted Buddhism on his own to make his narratives

sound more unique and interesting, because I do not feel close enough to her to reveal something sensitive, especially when both Ita and Pak Herlambang are Indonesians, and on top of that, she seems impressed with him. As a “student”, I am really not in a position to tell Ita that Pak Herlambang’s narratives were questionable.

Many might have thought the best of the tour guiding profession as tour guides are the ones who are in most direct contact with tourists, thereby assumed to disseminate the “correct” information about the history and culture of their country. But similar to what Ms Nunuk mentioned in our previous meet up session, my experience from the fieldtrip shows that it is true that many licensed guides have only very basic knowledge of Borobudur. At times, certain narratives given by them about Borobudur could be inaccurate or based on groundless assumptions. Sometimes, narratives came to a point of being absurd. It came as quite a shock to me how the narratives given by some tour guides, especially the licensed ones, could be so different from academic books written by the renowned archaeologist from Singapore such as Professor John Miksic and Indonesian archaeologist Dr. R. Soekmono. Honestly, I could not categorise guides as “mentor-type” or “path-finders” as I feel that they fall into neither of the categories. I doubt if the licensed guides really received proper training or have done enough reading on reference materials from archaeologists or historians. I think certain things told to me by the licensed guides seem hard to believe, partly because I have never read about them in any academic books. But at the same time, I am also thinking that everyone has different experiences with the same thing or issue. Perhaps, what sounds absurd to me may be totally logical to the others.

**31 May 2005**

**Guide liars' narratives – using Borobudur as a tool to express personal gripes**

The unlicensed guides are another group of people whom I am interested to understand and talk to. This morning, I managed to engage a few unlicensed guides, or guide liars. However, Mas Ali and Mas Johnny, left me with the deepest impressions as their narratives of Borobudur are the most absurd or perhaps the most imaginative ever! At the first instance of hearing their “stories” of Borobudur, one knows that they are just out to humour or entertain tourists for some quick money. The unlicensed guides or commonly known as the guide liars waited outside the entrance of Borobudur for potential tourists to buy them tickets to enter Borobudur. Mas Ali and Mas Johnny’s narratives of Borobudur and Buddhism are interesting in a way that Borobudur has become a tool, manipulated by them to express their personal gripes about life in Indonesia. Both Mas Johnny and Mas Ali are in their twenties and they told me that everyday, they would be standing near the entrance of Borobudur without fail, hoping that tourists would engage them (since their services supposedly cost much lesser than the licensed guides, but many times these guide liars jack up their fees).

Guides liars could be found along Malioboro Street or just outside any of the tourist attractions like Borobudur, Prambanan, and the Kraton. Several guide liars whom I have met are usually young men in their twenties or thirties. They are usually on standby from early morning so as to be in time to catch the tourists who are visiting Borobudur during sunrise. Guide liars are usually more appealing to backpackers or

budget travelers who wish to know more about a tourist attraction or any particular site which interest them, yet unwilling to shell out too much money to engage a guiding service. The service for an unlicensed guide costs about 10000 to 15000 rupiah (about 2-3 Singapore dollars), depending on how the negotiation goes on between the tourist and the guide liars (bearing in mind that one has got to pay for the guide liar's entrance fees to a site as well if that site has been designated as a "tourist attraction"), service for a licensed guide costs around 40000 rupiah, but the fees does not go to the guides direct. The fees go to the travel agency which is managing Borobudur, which is the HPI.

Instead of me taking the initiative to approach the guide liars for their service, I would say that they were the ones who approached me. Perhaps even using the word "approach" is too mild and polite; "pester" would be more apt. Yes, they pestered me as if I could give them millions and billions of dollars. Initially, Mas Ali and Mas Johnny each wanted 50000 rupiah from me for their guiding service, but I did not relent as that is total absurdity. I was only ready to pay about 15000 rupiah only for each of their services. There was a matter-of- factly "take-it-or-leave-it" look on my face and they did not have much of a choice. In the end, they agreed, albeit terribly disappointed. Today is a weekday and there is no crowd. "Business" to those guide liars is considered bad and it is already quite fortunate for them to have met me. If finding out the narratives of the guide liars is not part of my research agenda, I would never have engaged them, even for 1000 rupiah! Instead of beginning to narrate about the history or the architectural aspect of Borobudur to me, the conversation started with Mas Johnny asking me what I would love to hear about Borobudur. He went on saying that he would tell me anything just to

make me happy. I then proceed on to ask him about the historical aspect of the monument. He pondered for a while with a look of uncertainty, then explained to me in broken English that Borobudur is a Buddhist temple and the Buddha teaches people to be kind. He continued saying that the function of Borobudur is for prayers to be conducted and the teachings of Buddhism is to encourage the rich to help the poor, hinting blatantly at how I should help him in an unabashed manner since he kept addressing me as “orang kaya” (the rich). That was so much that he knew, and I could not help but feel that Borobudur is just a tool for him to get money. He later told me that he would be glad if I could be his girlfriend. He volunteered to take me for sightseeing, but stated that I have to pay for everything. It was clear-cut that all he was after was my money.

Of course, the answer is obvious -- I refused him point-blank. When Mas Johnny realized that he could not succeed in extorting money from me, he tried his last resort -- to sell me a book on Borobudur which was a mere few pages. It is not even an informative book, just a colored photocopied book with a publisher unheard of. Yet, he had the cheek to ask me pay 50000 rupiah for it! When I refused him right away, he felt antagonized this time round. He raised his voice at me and said that I am rich enough to buy a ticket to visit Indonesia, yet unwilling to help him by buying something “so cheap”. I really pitied him in a way that a man like him, as able-bodied as any young men out there, had to resort to such means to make ends meet daily. But at the same time, I was really annoyed then because he really has no self-respect, and respect for Borobudur as a religious site. He could sink so low to “sell” Borobudur to visitors, hoping to make a pile out of them. The experience makes me very upset even till now.

When Mas Ali saw how Mas Johnny's plan fell through, he tried using a "soft approach". When we were viewing one of the relief panels which featured some beggars, he explained to me that the Buddha was very kind and helped the beggars. He then told me that there is a Buddha in every one of us, and that they, the Indonesians, are the "pengemis" (beggars) and should be helped. I was flabbergasted, but still, I refused to relent. The guide liars' understanding of Borobudur is very limited, and it is quite obvious that they made up their own "stories" about Borobudur. From what I have observed, Borobudur meant nothing cultural, religious or artistic to them. In fact, my observation is that Borobudur meant only as source of money to them. It is very sad but true. Several other overseas tourists whom I have met at Borobudur told me that they are very put off by the persistent harassment of the guide liars who are touting for the guiding business. The presence of the guide liars has affected their mood in an unpleasant way and they are apprehensive about visiting Borobudur again.

## **23 July 2005**

### **Acara<sup>64</sup> Sejuta Pelita Sejuta Harapan and neon lit Borobudur**

Shortly after the celebration of upacara Waisak by WALUBI, I attended another major event held at Borobudur. My Buddhist friends from SANGIN had told me sometime in late May during my first fieldtrip that their organization, together with MBI

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<sup>64</sup> "Acara" refers to "program"

(both organizations are under the umbrella of KASI) would be holding a major event called the acara Sejuta Pelita Sejuta Harapan (A million lights, a million hopes) at Borobudur on the 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2005. My friend, Dewi, from MBI, had reminded me not to miss this event, not only because this event is held once every 50 years, but also due to the very fact that this event is going to be held at Borobudur, the ‘supposed’ central Buddhist site and one which the government of Indonesia places much attention and emphasis on. Like I have mentioned earlier, even though there are many other Buddhist monuments and temples besides Borobudur, Borobudur has been “constructed” by the Indonesian government as one of the most important monuments of Indonesia, and such a grand event held at Borobudur would undoubtedly be featured by the media. Thus, Buddhist organization like KASI finds this one of the best opportunities to advocate Buddhism to the rest of the world, and at the same time, one of their agendas is to recruit Buddhist membership to their existing organisation. One also has to bear in mind that membership does not mean only participation in a particular religious activity, but financial contribution and assistance to the maintenance and building of new viharas as well. As I have discussed in my writings earlier, the Indonesian government does not set aside any fundings for the building of viharas, therefore many Buddhist councils depend very much on the good will of their Buddhist fellows to donate some fundings, and since different councils have different aspirations and visions on Buddhism, they would need, to a certain extent, compete for membership.

Commemorating the Buddhist celebration of Asadha, the Buddhist community is to hold the Sejuta Pelita Sejuta Harapan (SPSH) procession at Borobudur. Asadha

celebrates the first rotation of the Buddhist Dharma wheel when Buddha first spelled out his teaching to five Buddhist monks. The objective is to pray for the safety of the nation and of the world, at the same time this celebration was also intended to greet the 60th anniversary of Indonesia's independence.<sup>65</sup> I am glad to be able to join in the celebration of the event. Although the SPSH event is held to commemorate the Buddhist celebration of Asadha, representatives from other religions, such as Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism and Hinduism also participated in it. All of them joined in the procession, walking around Borobudur, praying for the safety of the nation. Various traditional performances including gamelan and “traditional” dances from across the country were performed during the opening ceremony held ahead of the candle-lit procession.

According to Dewi, this is the first time that MBI is organizing such an event of offering lights (a million lights) held in Borobudur. Talking about lights, there is something interesting about attending the upacara Waisak and SPSH event. During both events, Borobudur was lit by neon. The monument really looked like a discotheque from afar. I remember reading a book by Tiziano Terzani. In his book, he wrote about his own experience and lamented that the very special and “sacred” aura of the Dalai Lama’s palace temple in Tibet was lost ever since the Chinese government, in their act of facilitating tourist access, installed neon-lights on it. To quote him, “neon kills everything, even the gods.”<sup>66</sup> After attending both upacara Waisak and the SPSH event, I feel that Borobudur is like a “modernized” open-air performance theatre. While most of

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<sup>65</sup> “Buddhist ‘Asadha’ to be observed”, Jakarta Post, 22 July, 2005.

<sup>66</sup> Tiziano Terzani, *A fortune-teller told me: earthbound travels in the Far East* (London: Flamingo, 1997), p.21.

the Buddhists are there primarily to give thanks to the Buddhas, the younger ones told me that Borobudur is also a “hip” place to hang around whenever there are major events and festivals because of the “modern” lightings.



(Offering a million candles and neon lights installed at Borobudur)

This idea of organizing the SPSH event had come about from the Buddhayana Youth Fellowship (in Indonesia this organization is called Sekber PMVBI- Sekretariat Bersama Persaudaraan Muda-Mudi Vihara-Vihara Buddhayana Se-Indonesia (Sekber PMVBI).

Dewi had told me that the application for permission to use the premises of Borobudur to host SPSH is a tedious one; it also manifests one thing -- that Borobudur is no longer an asset of the Buddhists, but an asset of the Indonesian government. In my opinion, it seems really ironical how a Buddhist monument is not directly managed by the Buddhist Sangha, but by the government which is formed by a Muslim majority.

Currently, the situation is that since 1992, Borobudur, Prambanan, and the smaller Ratu Boko Complex have been run by PT Taman Wisata (Borobudur Tourist Park Limited), an Indonesian government enterprise. At Borobudur, a Management Plan was formulated jointly by Gadjah Mada University and JCIP consultants. The Borobudur site was divided up into five zones and an archaeological park set up between 1983 and 1989.

Since 1992, it has been run as the Tourist Park of Borobudur, Prambanan and Ratu Boko.<sup>67</sup> Zone 1, the “sanctuary zone”, comprises the actual monument itself, and the immediate area is landscaped with the trees and grass. Zone II, the “archaeological park zone”, includes the main entrance ticket offices, restaurants, souvenir shops, and the large car and coach parks. Zones I and II are managed by the central government, whereas zones III to zone V<sup>68</sup>, the surrounding zones are privately owned and include hotels, art galleries, more souvenir shops and hotels. PT Taman Wisata Borobudur is responsible for managing zone II. The Directorate General for Culture is responsible for conservation and maintenance of the temple (Zone I); and the Directorate General for Tourism is responsible for the maintenance of the tourist facilities in zone II.<sup>69</sup>

Dewi had kindly explained to me the procedure for application. First of all, the MBI committee had to apply to both the Directorate General of Culture and Tourism, specifically to the History and Archeological Division for permit to the first zone in Borobudur Temple and to PT. Taman Wisata for the second Zone. The committee members of MBI have also met up with the Minister of Religion, Minister of Culture and Tourism as well as the Governor of Central Java. Fortunately, their plan of hosting SPSH was cordially welcomed.

Dewi had also reiterated to me that WALUBI is not involved in the SPSH event and that the SPSH event is something like MBI and SANGIN’s “brainchild”. Dewi had also emphasized to me that their organization, MBI, is not part of WALUBI but KASI,

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<sup>67</sup> Hampton, "Cracks in the honey pot", p.212.

<sup>68</sup> The remaining zones are Zone III, the “land use regulated zone”; Zone IV, the “historical scenery preservation zone” and Zone V, the “national archaeological park zone”. See *Ibid.*, p.219.

somehow giving me the feeling that she had wanted to make sure that I had internalized the fact that WALUBI and KASI have nothing much to do with each other, and that WALUBI is not the only organisation which possesses the capability to host a grand event at Borobudur. Dewi had also urged me to invite my friends in Singapore to join in the celebration of acara SPSH, the programme which she had described to me as something “spectacular”. In all honesty, I could feel that the SPSH event or any other events of religious significance were all intended out of the good will of the religious groups to confer prosperity and blessings to the human kind, but to some extent, I could not help but feel that there is inherent competition and tension between KASI and WALUBI.

I am really touched by the way the committee members put all their heart and soul in making sure that this whole event turned out to be a success. I have never really witnessed such a grand event run so smoothly (if someone were to ask me for my frank opinion, I would not hesitate to say that the SPSH event is much more well-coordinated than the upacara Waisak, no offence, merely a personal opinion). Even though the SPSH event was some sort of like a “modernized” performing arts event, the event did move me in some ways. I was really awed into silence that very day, and there was a sense of peace that I never quite felt all my life. I am especially impressed by the fact that goodie bags, filled with lots of foodstuffs, were distributed to all who were present.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p.212.



(Indonesians, regardless of religion and ethnicity, queuing up to get goodie bags loaded with foodstuffs.)

I feel that the act itself was a display of unconditional love for humankind, regardless of race, religion and ethnicity. Those goodie bags from GARUDA Food Company might have helped some families who are struggling to make ends meet, at least for a week or more. The smile of contentment and happiness on the faces of all who received the foodstuffs is deeply etched in my heart. It was also a moment when I witness for myself something very different from what I have learnt about the Pribumi Indonesians and the Chinese Indonesians all along. It is very heartening to find out how both Pribumis and Indonesians of Chinese origins could work hand in hand together for a common purpose, especially more so with the knowledge of their history and the inherent conflicts involved between them. I must admit that this fieldwork has allowed me to view the situation of these two ethnic groups from a different angle.

As an overseas visitor, I am indeed impressed. I enjoyed very much talking to the Buddhists from all over Indonesia that very day. Before the start of the SPSH ceremony, most of them were sitting on the grass patches around Borobudur, some brought along straw mats to sit on, while others prepare sandwiches and drinks to share with their Buddhist friends. At that moment, I could liken Borobudur to some kinds of parks in

Singapore, and nobody seems to be concerned that Borobudur was meant to be or perhaps, still is a religious monument. When they knew that I had made a trip all the way to attend the festival, they were all so ready to help me and to contribute whatever information they knew. I could instantly feel that kind of warmth and love that transcended all boundaries. For a moment, I felt that Borobudur is not just any normal place where people just come and go, but that Borobudur is rejuvenated by the warmth and special bond shared among human beings. It is precisely this bond of friendship or love between human beings which adds to the “sacred-ness” of Borobudur. Of course, on the other hand, I have not overlooked the fact that politics, economy and religion are intertwined to some degree and that there are always two sides of a coin. On one hand distributions of promotional samples of GARUDA Company’s merchandise to all people present at the SPSH event could be seen as a display of the quality of selflessness of Buddhism. On the other hand, I was told that GARUDA Company’s CEO (chief executive officer) is also the chairperson of MBI. I suppose it is inevitable that some may regard him as using religion as a tool for publicity of his products. By distributing promotional food items to the people, it is probable that he may be viewed as someone who is creating for himself a noble image in order to garner the support and respect of the people who would, in turn, make purchases for his products. Well, there are always many ways to view an issue; one is entitled to think the best or worst of a person.

## **5 August 2005**

### **When there's a will, there's a way**

I have successfully completed my fieldtrips to Borobudur. To me, it is something worth celebrating. It is a significant achievement or even a dream come true for me.

Very often when a researcher is being questioned on their challenges regarding fieldwork, they would most likely talk about the difficulty in data collection or the limitation in the existing scholarly literature as their primary concern. However in my case, the biggest challenge, I would say, is my health condition. To be honest, I have never dreamt of traveling to Indonesia even though this maritime island is close to Singapore. After battling against cancer in 1997-1998 and finally “winning the battle” in 1999, my body still feels too “beaten up” for any long-distance traveling even after a span of 6 years. I would liken the process of writing a thesis to that of battling against cancer. At times, I find the inspiration and courage to do so much, yet at other times, I simply hit a blank wall and could not find the motivation to carry on. By revealing a little about my past illness is a way of expressing how a personal trial has made me feel much more appreciative of my fieldwork. Doing any kinds of field research is no mean feat for every researcher, and I must admit that the going, in some ways, gets tougher for someone who is physically challenged like me. Adapting to the scorching weather, unclean food, having to be on guard at all times especially when one is a female researcher are very “real” issues I have to deal with throughout my research journey. I fell sick very often during my field research and I remember countless times, I was so worn out chasing after

my informants from day to night, I simply lay by any grass patches available and took my forty winks. Despite all, I am just very glad that I persevered on to complete what I have endeavored to achieve, albeit a very humble one. One thing I have learnt for myself is to trust one's own intuition and emotions. This piece of writing is definitely not a "cause-and effect" logic kind of conventional narrative representation, but one written out of my personal experience.

I am sure many would have questioned the sufficiency of my field research, since I did not spend years, or even months in Central Java, to be precise, only about three weeks. I do have my constraints, one of the reasons is due to the fact that I am still seeking medical treatment and I cannot afford to stop my treatment for too long a period of time. However, what I really want to say is that, though this may not be the best thesis or most "professional looking" thesis, it is nevertheless, one that is written to the best of my ability, given all the constraints that I am facing.

## **13 January 2006**

### **Borobudur – a desecrated monument?**

In the midst of typing this thesis, my supervisor told me about Pak Budi's (also one of my lecturers) Myanmarese Buddhist friends who saw Borobudur as too commercialized and "un-sacred". Those Myanmarese Buddhists had recently visited Borobudur and mentioned that even the biggest Buddhist temples in Burma and Thailand

still retained some religious functions but Borobudur does not. Well, I suppose what the Myanmarese Buddhists were trying to say is that there are no daily rituals such as the chanting of prayers or offering of joss-sticks to the Buddha statues at Borobudur. The only activity performed there currently is the annual Waisak ceremony. But I think that the absence of daily rituals at Borobudur does not denote the monument “un-sacred” as this issue is definitely much more complex and it depends on who is judging it.

On the one hand, heritage is seen as a way of passing cultural mores and landscapes on to the future generations, but on the other hand, heritage is associated with the ‘conscious manipulation of history designed to create something which people will consider worth visiting and spending money on’.<sup>70</sup> Some 2.5 million tourists visit Borobudur every year, and in the year 2002, the temple contributed total revenue of nearly Rp 12 billion.<sup>71</sup> In 1973, the New Order Government in Indonesia requested the government of Japan to grant technical assistance for tourism development planning in Central Java and Yogyakarta. The Japanese government entrusted the Overseas Technical Co-operation Agency (OCTA) with the project.<sup>72</sup> Their survey resulted in a Master plan for the development of the archaeological sites in the area as tourism attractions: Borobudur, complexes of Prambanan and the Dieng Plateau. The basic concept was an archaeological park, ‘an open-air museum nestled in nature’s midst’. Visitor facilities, like restaurants and rest areas, toilets, a children’s playground were built in the parks. A number of local people obtained license to run a souvenir shop or food stall on the

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<sup>70</sup> Daniel H. Olsen, “Heritage”, p.3.

<sup>71</sup> “Local people sidelined from benefits of tourism”, Jakarta Post, 12 July, 2003.

<sup>72</sup> Heidi Dahles, Tourism, p.72.

premises, but it seemed there was a certain lack of control as these stalls and vending activities tended to spread and a kind of slum was emerging.<sup>73</sup> In the 1990s, a major expansion of the Borobudur guesthouse was underway, including amenities such as a swimming pool and tennis courts. Heidi Dahles lamented how the observance of the Buddhist and Hindu religion has disappeared from Borobudur and Prambanan.<sup>74</sup>

Besides this plan, the Governor of Java also proposed an art market to be built near Borobudur.<sup>75</sup> However, strong pressure from the Indonesian architects and heritage activists against the plan finally caused the authorities to buckle temporarily. They feared the plan would decrease the temple's sacred value. They strongly felt that showing respect to it is a must for a civilized nation and Indonesians have to protect it from uncivilized commercial interests. However, the Governor defended himself by arguing that his stance is to benefit the community. He argued that the commitment to preserve Borobudur cannot just end up by leaving it alone as an antique that can only be watched and enjoyed or seen as a dead monument.

Also, the Borobudur International Festival was organized in an attempt to make Central Java into the country's main tourist destination. According to chairman of the festival's organizing committee Mardjiono, as many as 200 foreign participants including 115 arts and cultural foreign envoys from Vietnam, South Korea, Japan, Belgium, Malaysia, India, Singapore and the U.S. took part in various activities, like cultural performances, seminars, travel mart and the mountain bike open championship. The

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.,p.74.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> "Art market construction plan faces strong opposition", Jakarta Post, 8 February, 2003.

Borobudur race was a cross-country event covering four kilometers on the Dagi Hills inside the Borobudur Temple conservation area.<sup>76</sup> The governor of Java did not seem to take into consideration if such an event would be regarded as affront to a religious site like Borobudur.

Another incident which happened in 2002 was that the governor of Java was seriously considering allowing a three storey shopping mall to be built adjacent to Borobudur. An Australian tourist wrote to the press to express his horror and dismay on learning about this news. He was in complete disbelief that such a culturally inappropriate and insensitive notion as building a shopping mall at Borobudur could be given a moment's serious consideration.<sup>77</sup>

In the beginning of this thesis, I used the word "asset" in my reference to Borobudur. I had so conveniently used the term "asset" and have never given much thought to whether there is any connotation behind the usage of this term. If one reads any books on "cultural resource management", one realizes that this term is used so commonly. But my supervisor explained to me that the term "asset" sort of implies that certain things could be controlled, thus, in the case of Borobudur, it implies that the monument is under the control of someone or an organization. I feel that his comment is a perceptive insight. Thinking back, throughout my correspondence with people and friends from Indonesians, they have been telling me consistently that Borobudur is an asset of the Indonesian government, but like I have mentioned earlier, I have never gave

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<sup>76</sup> "Indonesia's mountain bike race attracts foreign cyclists", Xinhua General News Service, 8 May, 2003.

<sup>77</sup> Shopping mall near Borobudur?", Jakarta Post, 9 April, 2003.

much thought to it. To quote Agus, a committee member of SANGIN, “Borobudur adalah aset/milik pemerintah Indonesia. Jadi untuk semua candi-candi yang ada di Indonesia adalah merupakan tanggung jawab dari pemerintah karena semua di anggap sebagai peninggalan sejarah, maka bila umat Buddha mau melakukan kegiatan di sana, harus ada ijin dari pemerintah.” (Borobudur is an asset of the government, because all the temples/ruins in Indonesia are the responsibility of the government since they are all a historical legacy. If the Buddhists want to carry out any activities at Borobudur, they need to ask for the permission from the government).

When I talked to Dewi, the committee member of MBI, regarding her views on visitors climbing onto the stupa and touching the feet of the “Lucky Buddha”, Dewi replied, “Sebenarnya MBI tidak punya wewenang untuk membuat peraturan seperti dilarang memanjat stupa di candi, karena yang mempunyai wewenang adalah pemerintah, Borobudur langsung dikelola oleh pemerintah. Memang, perbuatan untuk naik dan menginjak stupa bisa merusak stupa, tapi kebanyakan orang masih suka hal seperti itu, seperti percaya pada pengharapan yang bisa dikabulkan. (Actually, MBI does not possess the authority to impose rules such as the prohibition of climbing the stupas, because the one who has the power is the government. Borobudur is directly managed by the government. Indeed, this act of trampling on the stupa could damage the stupa, but, many people still like to do it, they believe that by doing so (climbing onto the stupa to touch the Buddha’s foot) could make them realize some of their dreams.

Indeed, the word “asset” implies power and control. Since the government is now

the “rightful” owner of Borobudur, it implies that the destiny of Borobudur is very much controlled by the state, not by any of the Buddhist organizations. Dewi once told me that MBI and SANGIN have visions of Borobudur becoming a very religious place like Jerusalem. But I do wonder when that time will come, or if it will ever happen. The way the government presents Borobudur to the public also affects the way the public sees or treats the monument. With the Indonesian government constantly trying to implement activities with no religious significance at Borobudur, it is tough to imagine how Borobudur could one day become another Jerusalem. At times, my personal experience at Borobudur was also one of shock. I do not approve of certain acts of visitors climbing the Buddha images, sit on them or posing ostentatiously in front of them for photos. However, there is nothing much which I could do, as I feel that everyone views the same issue differently. Religion has always been a controversial issue, because a divine being is “real” to some, but “unreal” to others. Many times when someone asks me, if I do believe in the existence of a “higher order” (meaning Jesus Christ, the Buddha or Allah etc), my respond will always be “I don’t deny their existence”.

I remember a Buddhist reverend using the metaphor of the wind to describe his understanding of the “higher order” -- one does not see it, but one can feel its presence. Until today, it remains a challenge to prove or disprove the “unknown” -- at least in my personal opinion. But my point is, one does not need to believe in something to respect it. What is required of every one of us is not about believing that the Buddha exists at all. It is about giving respect to those who believe that the Buddha exists. Hence, I feel that approaching the Buddha statues and stupas at Borobudur with more sensitivity is

necessary. I think that the multi-cultural and multi-religious environment in Singapore is beneficial to me in a way that I learn to respect the religions of others, be it Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Taoism, Sikhism or Buddhism. I do not need to believe in those religions to respect them. To me, respecting something or someone is within everyone's means. For example, I find it a hassle to remove shoes when I enter a Buddhist or Hindu temple, or for some stricter Buddhist temples which I have been to, I am allowed to wear only long pants and long sleeve shirt. Initially, I find these rules and regulations really strict. And it does not help when one has to over-dress since the weather in Singapore is already so hot. However, I still follow these regulations, not because I am afraid that I will be driven out of the religious compound, but simply because that I do not wish to make anyone upset and I understand how much my adherence to these rules means to the devotees.

In the case of Borobudur, it is time to realize that striking the Buddha statues as though they are some form of toys, pinching the ears of the Buddha statues or climbing onto the Buddha images as if they are slabs of stones are not appropriate actions. I believe it is acceptable to take pictures with the Buddha statues, but each and every one of us should handle the monument with more sensitivity and respect.

## **13 March 2006**

### **Contemplating a trip to Ayutthaya**

Towards the last leg of writing this thesis, I wonder if ancient religious ruins are slowly but surely losing their religious significance and functions in this contemporary world. Just as I am thinking about this issue, a few friends of mine related to me the current situation of the temple ruins of Ayutthaya which they have just visited. Their account on the temple ruins of Ayutthaya enthralled me. My friends, who had been to both Borobudur and Ayutthaya, told me that even though both the temples of Ayutthaya and Borobudur are considered as ancient ruins, the temples of Ayutthaya are, in every sense, “much more sacred” than Borobudur. When I asked them to further describe what they mean by “more sacred”, they replied that it is largely due to the way the locals and overseas visitors treated the religious monuments and behaved around the monuments. After hearing about the big difference in their travel experiences, I decided it best if I can make a trip to Ayutthaya to experience this former ancient capital of Thailand for myself.

## **14 March 2006**

### **A rough idea of Ayutthaya**

Before I make a trip to Bangkok and Ayutthaya, I had a talk with my Thai Buddhist friend, Mingkwan. She recounted her trips to Ayutthaya previously during her

school days. Like many other students trained in the mainstream public school, studying the “nationalist” version of Thai history, she thinks of Ayutthaya as symbolizing her nation's "glorious" past. Mingkwan also mentioned to me that there are numerous temples in Ayutthaya, but many have suffered the misfortune of being ruined since the time the Thais were defeated by the Burmese. Even so, the state of ruination of the temples did not lessen Mingkwan’s reverence for the monuments. To quote what she said, “temples are temples, no matter how ruined they are.” That sentence left me with a deep impression as it reflected the immense respect she has for Ayutthaya as a religious site even though many of the temples have been reduced to ruins.

Also, from the way the Tourism Authority of Thailand introduces Ayutthaya, one can have an idea of how the Thais in general perceive the temple ruins. Looking at the choice of words or captions the Tourism Authority of Thailand uses, the religious importance and sanctity of Ayutthaya’s temples ruins are obviously picked out. Ayutthaya is honored with the term “Auspicious”, and the temples, though some of which are considered ruins, are classified under the category of “sacred sites”.

#### **AUSPICIOUS AYUTTHAYA**<sup>78</sup>

*The legendary island city of Ayutthaya in Ayutthaya province (officially known as Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya province) is home to the Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya Historical Park, designated a UNESCO Cultural World Heritage Site in December 1991.*

*The ancient capital of the Siamese kingdom for four centuries from 1350 to 1767, in its heyday, all who set their sights on the thriving riverside capital as they sailed upriver to Ayutthaya were captivated by its majestic splendour.*

*Once upon a time billed as the most glorious city of the Orient, Ayutthaya boasts a rich cultural and artistic legacy. Magnificent temples, historical landmarks, ancient monuments and ruins, archaeological, religious and ancestral sites and shrines dominate its lowland landscape.*

*Merit-making acts are considered to be a vital part of religious rituals performed to seek blessings on auspicious occasions. As the Thai nation celebrates the auspicious occasion of the Sixtieth Anniversary of*

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<sup>78</sup> Tourism Authority of Thailand. Please view [www.tourismthailand.org](http://www.tourismthailand.org)

*His Majesty the King's accession to the throne, the return of Ayutthaya Mahamongkhon (Auspicious Ayutthaya) for the ninth consecutive year is timely. A special programme jointly developed by Ayutthaya province, the Provincial Administration Office and the Tourism Authority of Thailand, Ayutthaya Mahamongkhon reflects an effort to spark greater public interest in ancient and ancestral sites of historical, cultural and religious significance and encourage pilgrimages to sacred sites and holy shrines during important events in the Buddhist lunar calendar, particularly Visakha Puja and Khao Pansa, which marks the beginning of the Buddhist Lent. Vesak Day, the holiest day of the year for Buddhists all over the world, falls on the full moon day of the sixth lunar month. It commemorates the birth of Lord Buddha, his enlightenment and passage to Nirvana — freedom from suffering. The three incidents took place on the same day but in different years. This year, Visakha Puja falls on Friday, May 12, and Khao Pansa on July.*

#### **SACRED SITES IN AYUTTHAYA PROVINCE**

*Ayutthaya Mahamongkhon highlights 60 sites of religious significance and cultural and historical interest. According to ancient belief, a pilgrimage to pay homage at nine sacred sites is deemed to be an auspicious merit-making act through which an individual will receive blessings.*

However, for the case of Borobudur, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism has introduced Borobudur to the rest of the world as if it is an entertainment centre or a resort Borobudur is categorized under “Cultural site”.

#### **BASKING IN BEAUTIFUL BOROBUDUR<sup>79</sup>**

*One of the 7 wonders in the ancient world, Borobudur is located near Magelang. Borobudur, a Hindu-Buddhist temple, was built in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. This temple has Gupta architecture of India's influence. Constructed on a hill about 46 meters high, Borobudur has about 55,000 m<sup>3</sup> of stones. Borobudur's design symbolizes the structure of the universe. This design influences temples in Angkor, Cambodia. This temple was found in 1815, under volcanic ash. About 41 kilometers northward from Jogjakarta, Borobudur offers spectacular sight in this modern world.*

##### **Getting There**

*Borobudur is only 1 hour away by car from Jogjakarta. You can either join a tour or rent a car to this spot.*

##### **Where To Stay**

*Inns and hotels in Jogjakarta.*

##### **Moving Around**

*You'll explore this site on foot. Climb this magnificent temple and marvel at various carvings on the stone around you.*

##### **Dining Guide**

*You can bring your own food or buy them around this site.*

##### **Souvenir Tips**

*Souvenirs related to Borobudur can be bought in Jogjakarta. You can buy silver Borobudur's miniature (silver plated ones are also available), keychains, and many more. T-Shirts and postcards with an overview of Borobudur are popular as keepsakes.*

##### **Other Things to See or Do**

*Marvel at the magnificent view. For better understanding of this temple, you can join a tour or hire a licensed tour guide here. Climb the temple to reach the top, where you can see an vacant space signifying*

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<sup>79</sup> Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Republic of Indonesia. Please refer to website: [www.budpar.go.id](http://www.budpar.go.id)

*emptiness as completion. There's a superstition saying that if you climb this temple with one wish deep in mind, try touching Buddha's figure inside the stupa, which is bell-like in structure. If you're able to touch the Buddha, your wish will come true. Take note of the stone carvings. There are many stories in these stones.*

**Travel Tips**

- *Dress lightly and comfortably.*
- *Hire a licensed tour guide, so you'll get better information.*
- *Wear a hat or an umbrella. Bring along a raincoat, just in case.*

All these guidelines given by the Indonesian tourism board are so different from the temple guidelines in Thailand. For example, a Thai relative of mine once told me that one should not dress lightly in a temple, wearing shirts with sleeves is a must. Putting on hat or wearing a sunglass is considered impolite to the Buddha statues. Also, it is definitely a taboo to climb the temple ruins in Thailand or touch the Buddha statues as if they are some toys or artifacts.

## **12 May 2006**

### **D) Another perspective of the “living” monument.**

When I first arrived at Ayutthaya today, I had the pleasure to meet up with some academics from Ayutthaya Rajabhat University who were willing to guide me with some informations on Ayutthaya. The first thing which the few Professors did was to hand me a book on Buddhism in Thailand. They had wanted me to take some time to read through that book. The Professors told me that understanding the temple or temple ruins of Thailand means understanding Buddhism. It is therefore important for me to have a basic understanding of Buddhism's role in Thailand before I visit the temples. That piece of

advice made me realize how important or “sacred” Ayutthaya still is to the Thais in the present-day.

What I have learnt about Ayutthaya is that it was formerly the Thai capital before the palace was moved downstream to Bangkok, a distance of some 85 kilometers. Since the mid 14<sup>th</sup> century, Ayutthaya had been one of the principal cities of Southeast Asia. It enjoyed a period of almost unbroken prosperity that lasted 417 years through 35 reigns. This impressive heritage has become the bedrock of Thai society and has shaped the Thai way of life as it exists today.<sup>80</sup>

One of the professors, Dr Nitaya, told me that the current Grand Palace at Ratanakosin, Bangkok, is modeled after the former Grand Palace in Ayutthaya. The architectural plan of the new Grand Palace is almost identical in every detail to that of the Royal Palace in the former capital of Ayutthaya. So, it is evident that Ayutthaya has been and still remains the bedrock of Thai Society.

With a culture and civilization so outstanding and timeless, Ayutthaya was designated a UNESCO Cultural World Heritage Site on 13 December 1991. Although Borobudur and Ayutthaya are similar in the sense that both have been designated as World Heritage site and tourist destinations, the way that the respective governments introduce them to the rest of the world is very different.

I have a deeper understanding of the word “living” today after I had a discussion session with some of the lecturers from the Ayutthaya Rajabhat University. During the discussion, Assistant Professor Sutham Chatasingh mentioned to me that a

“living” temple or a “living” monument means having residing monks in them, it is not so much about having religious activities or religious ceremonies at that particular religious site, unlike what I have always thought. Another Professor, Wanit Sutharut, told me that several temple ruins in Ayutthaya are considered “living” because of residing monks in those temples. But of course, there is an exception like Wat Phra Kaew (Temple of the Emerald Buddha) in Bangkok where there is an absence of residing monks. However, Wat Phra Kaew is considered “living” because of the King’s association with the temple. The King of Thailand changes the robes of the Emerald Buddha statue three times a year at the start of each season. It must be noted that these robes are ceremoniously changed by *only* the King himself at the start of each season. One of the lecturers, Ajarn Riamjan, explained to me how a temple or temple ruins could be considered “non-living”, or “dead”. She gave the example of one of the temples of Ayutthaya --Wat Phra Ram. This prang has been reduced to groups of crumbling ruins. However, Ajarn Riamjan maintained that though Wat Phra Ram no longer serves any religious function that does not mean that Wat Phra Ram is “un-sacred”. Like Mingkwan, Ajarn Riamjan asserted, “A religious site will always remain religious no matter what happened.”

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<sup>80</sup> Prayun Uluchada, Ayutthaya, the former Thai capital ( Bangkok: Muang Boran Publishing House, 1985),p.5.

In Ayutthaya, even though some of the Buddha statues are ruined, groups of crumbling ruins and rows of headless Buddhas could be seen, the temple compounds are still awe-inspiring even in disrepair and a visit here is certainly memorable. It is so amazing to see those Buddha statues still saffron-robed in Ayutthaya, unlike those Buddha statues at Borobudur. In fact, I have also heard much about the importance and “sacred-ness” of Ayutthaya’s temples as it is highly associated with the present King. One of the lecturers from Ayutthaya Rajabhat University told me that she had heard news about the “Nai Luang” (this term refers to the present King Bhumibol Adulyadej) visiting Ayutthaya’s temples late in the night to practise meditation when nobody is present.

## **II) Visakha Puja ceremony in Ayutthaya**

I have specially planned my trip to coincide with the Visakha Puja day today, also commonly known as the Vesak Day. Since my friends had told me about how “sacred” temples in Ayutthaya are as compared to Borobudur, I would like to find out if the way the Thais conduct major religious festivals such as the Visakha Puja is also very different.

This year’s Visakha Puja at Ayutthaya is chosen to be held at one of the temple ruins in Ayutthaya, Wat Maheyong<sup>81</sup>. According to Dr Nitaya, who is a Buddhist, Wat Maheyong is being designated as one of the sites in Ayutthaya to host Visakha Puja this year because of the great popularity of the Buddhist resident monk, Phra Ajarn Surasak.

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<sup>81</sup> There are a hundred over temples in Ayutthaya. According to Dr Nitaya, Visakha Puja is also held at another temple ruin, Wat Senasanaram. But Wat Maheyong is more accessible as most residents live around the site, and the celebration at Wat Senasanaram is only a meditation class held late in the night.

Another reason is because Wat Maheyong is situated nearer to residential areas, and the temple is much more accessible to most of the residents living around there.



(Wat Maheyong)

When I reached the entrance of Wat Maheyong this evening, I started feeling rather doubtful as it was unusually quiet. Maybe because when I attended upacara Waisak at Borobudur, things were so rowdy and uncontrolled, therefore, I had the presumption that things might more or less be happening in the same way over in Ayutthaya.



(Buddhist devotees dressed in white and meditating)

To my surprise, there was already a large congregation of Buddhist devotees dressed in white. They were either meditating around the temple ruins, or helping out in the preparation of offerings to the Buddha statues. Everyone looked solemn, and

everyone seemed to focus all their energy on meditation. The devotees at Wat Maheyong often walked with their bodies slightly bent forward (like the position of bowing) when approaching the Buddha statues so that they could bow to the Buddha before they walk past the Buddha statues. Such was the sincerity displayed at Wat Maheyong. Everyone, including some overseas visitors who came with their cameras, took shots of the Buddha statues with great tact. Even before they snap a picture of the Buddha statues, they had bowed to the Buddha statues to show their respect.

Another thing which caught my attention was the restrooms at Wat Maheyong. Restrooms, in general, are the least looked after place. But those at Wat Maheyong are treated with respect and are really clean. This is totally unlike the restroom at Borobudur, where I had to hold my breath whenever I use them. One of the Buddhist devotees told me that all of us should treat any place within the temple compound with respect, just like Buddhism emphasizes purity. I was really impressed beyond words! At that moment, I could totally feel the big difference in my experiences between Borobudur and Wat Maheyong. And it is not just Wat Maheyong, a few other temples which I have visited in Ayutthaya are kept really clean, even the restrooms!

The devotees who arrived at Wat Maheyong brought flowers, candles, and incense to pay respect to the Triple Gem, i.e. Buddha (the Great Teacher), the Dhamma (the Truth) and the Sangha (the community of followers). At about 8 pm in the night, the devotees took part in candle-lit processions and walk around the main chapel of the temple three times. In the procession, each person carried flowers, three incense sticks and a lighted candle. There is also another way of making merit. It is Bhavana or

development of the mind. In English, Bhavana is usually translated as meditation. The Visakha Puja procession at Wat Maheyong is simple. No dances, no music, no neon lights, only Buddhist talks by monks from Thailand and England. The ambience was very peaceful. Everyone just sat around the temple compound to listen to the sermon. Currently, there are no rituals or festivals held in temples of Ayutthaya on a daily basis. Religious talks would be given by monks held at selected temples in Ayutthaya only on special occasions such as the Magha Puja Day, the Visakha Puja Day, the Asalha Puja Day and during the weekends. According to Dr Nitaya, the vision of the Thai Buddhists for temples of Ayutthaya is simple; their objective is to attract more people to come to Ayutthaya to experience a short term monkhood or to attend a meditation course at certain selected temples. In a nutshell, the vision for the temple ruins of Ayutthaya is that it would be a centre of propagation for Buddhism in the near future, and meditation seems to be at the core of the religion. To me, this vision of the Thai Buddhist devotees for the temples of Ayutthaya is definitely achievable.

## **13 May 2006**

### **Factors contributing to the “sacred-ness” of a religious site**

After I have visited Ayutthaya, I could have a better understanding of comments and sentiments of my friends who have visited the religious site, and I also had a better understanding to how and why Borobudur is treated or handled differently from the temple ruins of Ayutthaya.

One reason which could account for this is that, apart from the fact that Borobudur is situated in a predominantly Muslim country, the way which Borobudur is being treated is also highly related to how the Indonesians themselves have been taught to handle the monument since they were young. So far, my Indonesian interviewees have been telling me that even though they were often brought to visit Borobudur several times during their school days; their teachers made no mention about Buddhism nor educate them about any “inappropriate” behaviour at the site. As students, Indonesians were allowed to run around Borobudur, laze around, play hide-and seek, or just relax at the monument.

One of my Indonesian friends, Sherly, shared with me that since school days, she and her peers were taught in school that Borobudur is a monument from the past, something that is left behind by Indonesia’s predecessors. Nothing about Buddhism is taught to them. Now that Sherly is a teacher herself, she often brings her students to Borobudur as a form of cultural excursion, and a place to take breathtakingly beautiful photographs. It is interesting how, not only she, but many other Indonesians whom I have communicated with, talked about Borobudur as if the past and the present is disconnected. The feeling I get is that, while it is true that Borobudur is a much treasured “antique”, its religious significance has ceased to become relevant or important presently. According to my Indonesian Buddhist friends, Borobudur is now regarded by the Indonesian government and the relevant authorities as a world wonder “left behind” from the past. Even Dr Soekmono reiterated this fact that Borobudur has taken on a different

role as a “pusaka”.<sup>82</sup>

According to Dr Soekmono, a pusaka is a sort of sacred heirloom which lends strength to a family, or in this case, the Indonesian people. Main importance of a candi in the present setting has little to do with the underlying religious concept-Hindu or Buddhist-of its builders. It seems that Borobudur, in the eyes of most Indonesians, has become a much cherished and treasured piece of object placed in a museum for public display just like any other treasured objects. The only thing is that this “museum”, which is in the form of a historical park, is one of an open concept type, instead of the conventional kind of enclosed air-conditioned museum. From the way Indonesians relate to me about Borobudur, I get the feeling that Borobudur has not only been conserved, but “preserved” too.

However, in Ayutthaya, things are totally the opposite. One obvious reason is that the temples ruins of Ayutthaya is situated in a predominantly Buddhist country. In a book written by Phra Brahmaganabhorn, a Thai Buddhist abbot, he expounded that the history of Thailand is also the history of Buddhism. This sentence already proved how important Buddhism and the Buddhist sites are. The Thai nation originated over 2000 years ago. Also in that same period Buddhism came and has played an important part in Thai history ever since. Buddhism is still the state religion in Thailand. Under the Constitution, the King, as a symbol of the nation, although protector of all religions, must be a Buddhist. According to the latest census, the total population of Thailand is over 60 million. Out of this number, approximately 93.4% are Buddhists. Buddhism has had a

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<sup>82</sup> R. Soekmono, Borobudur : A prayer in stone (Singapore: Archipelago Press, 1990), p.26.

deep influence in Thai arts, traditions, learning and the character of the people. It has modeled their manner of thinking and acting. In short, it has become an integral part of Thai Life.<sup>83</sup> Unlike in Borobudur where the Buddhist community has no power over the monument, in Thailand, at the central level, the Supreme Patriarch, who is appointed by the king, as head of the Buddhist Order, is responsible for all affairs of the Sangha. He has absolute power to govern the whole monk community and to direct all ecclesiastical affairs.<sup>84</sup>

I have also learnt that the idea of “sacred-ness” regarding the temples and Buddha statues has been deeply ingrained in the Thais since they were young. The Thais were taught the “appropriate” behaviors when entering the temple compound, such as the proper way to sit and to pray to the Buddha statues. According to one of my Thai friends, Ben, the inculcation of this habit begins from the family. Ben shared with me that most Thai children will be brought to the Buddhist temples by their parents at least once during their growing up years. Their parents would then educate them the “proper” behaviors at a temple, for example, to wear shirts with sleeves and pants or skirts beyond the kneecap. When praying to the Buddha statues, the feet must be refrained from pointing at the Buddha statues and so the feet have to be tucked under the body. Also, the only pose one should strike for photography with the Buddha statue is to stand straight, nothing ostentatious. When tourists or visitors visit the temples in a foreign land, they would very often take the cue from the locals, and so, many of the tourists or visitors at Ayutthaya

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<sup>83</sup> Phra Brahmaganabhorn, Thai Buddhism in the Buddhist World (Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2005), p.14.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p.29.

did not dare to touch the Buddha statues.

It is indeed rewarding that a short trip to another religious site could make me understand my research work on Borobudur even better. It also proves that the research process should not only be confined to our chosen site; it should go beyond that to encompass other related sites so that some compare and contrast could help us understanding certain issues in a more in-depth manner. After my trip to Ayutthaya, I have also come to realize that it is more fruitful to understand the different meanings of “sacred-ness” and how different people perceive it rather than to label a place as “sacred” or “un-sacred”.

If someone is to ask me if the temples of Ayutthaya are more “sacred” than Borobudur, I would say that both places are equally sacred to me. To me, once a religious site, always a religious site and a religious site will always be “sacred” no matter what. It is just a very strong feeling which I find hard to put into words. I believe that there will always be something about a place that we do not like. But that does not necessarily take away the “sacred-ness” of a place, especially when a religious site is concerned. For example, I dislike the irritating guide liars and the street vendors at Borobudur. I do not approve of the way some visitors touch the Buddha statues at Borobudur with complete disregard for those religious figurines. It annoys me to some extent seeing children running about and screaming their heads off at Borobudur. At some temples in Bangkok and Ayutthaya, I do not consider Buddhist devotees affixing gold leaves on the Buddha statues as something appropriate -- an act believed by Thai locals to earn merits and bring fortune. Gold in the form of a thin leaf is an item valued for its purity as a religious

offering and for its power to placate spirits and request favors. Postage-stamp-size booklets of gold leaves are always on sale along with incense, flowers and candles at temples and shrines for use as daily offerings. Although I find this act rather “inappropriate”, the Thai locals assured me that this will not desecrate the Buddha statues. I think the idea of “sacred-ness” has a lot to do with individual’s experiences and the way they make sense of the world around them. The interesting thing is that, to some, the idea of “sacred-ness” does not exist in their vocabulary at all.

## **29 May 2006**

### **Saddening news and what lies ahead for Borobudur?**

Saddening news broke today that Yogyakarta experienced a deadly earthquake which resulted in the deaths of many. While Borobudur escaped unscathed by the quake unlike the disastrous fate of a nearby Hindu monument, Prambanan, I cannot help but worry about the current economic situation and future of the residents of the Magelang Province since the Magelang Province is situated at close proximity to Yogyakarta. After all, those residents depend so much on the tourist dollars for their livelihood. While I really dislike the idea of thinking about Borobudur as a source of income to some Indonesians, it is an indisputable fact. The earthquake has certainly instilled a sense of fear in many and I do wonder how long it takes for the tourism industry in Yogyakarta and Magelang to pick up. The possible eruption of Mount Merapi compounded the

already bad crisis. My Indonesian friends wrote me emails to express their distress over what had happened and their worry about the threat of tourism's downfall looming on the horizon. I also worry if Borobudur will once again suffer the fate of desertion or destruction by natural calamities, but we can only pray and hope for the best.

For those who have yet to visit Borobudur, it is my hope that this thesis will inspire them to pay a visit at the world's most awesome Buddhist monument. This thesis does not have any conclusion, because I believe that there will never be one, especially for the case of Borobudur. I am very certain that new events will continue to take place at Borobudur; its destiny will change according to many factors such as economic, religious political and even geographical ones. As such, it is important for researchers to update regularly the latest happenings at Borobudur and its landscape. If I may add a point to my earlier understanding of the term "living" monument, I would like to think that Borobudur continues to be a "living" monument not only because it exists till today, but because its existence continues to influence and be influenced by the world.

## **1 September 2006**

### **Reflections on Borobudur from year 2004-2006**

I have finally decided on the title of my thesis today. To me, it is a significant and important process because I had wanted the title to reflect my writing style, and at the same time arouse the interest of potential readers. After much contemplation, I have

decided to refer to Borobudur as “a mass of stones”. I must clarify that I not do see this metaphor as something derogatory, as my love for Borobudur is unequivocal. The reason why I use this metaphor is because whenever I tell people that I am writing about Borobudur, their immediate reactions would be, “Oh, you mean that mass of stones in Indonesia?”

Indeed, the journey of understanding and experiencing Borobudur is one of excitement and surprises. If readers have read through my thesis consistently, or just by browsing through the ‘Contents page’, it is evident that entries made in this thesis are arranged erratically and since this piece of work is intended as a form of diary, I do not deliberately stipulate a certain length of writing for a particular date. I think that writing is not only about presenting facts and figures, it is also about the journey, and to me, the journey encompasses both “normal” days, when nothing much happened, and also more memorable and significant days when special events took place. On certain days, there are new discoveries to my research topic and there are so much to pen down that writing could go on and on. However, there are also days when I simply hit a blank wall and only stared at the computer screen stoned-faced for several hours without typing a single word. I would like the readers to understand the process of my writing the thesis; such as how the topic of this thesis was conceived, the challenges I encountered along the way, the various approaches I adopted in order to help me gain an understanding of the monument, how friendships or relationships were forged with people who crossed paths with me during the research process as well as the impacts which the monuments had on me and others.

When I first encountered Borobudur through Professor John Miksic's book, I only thought of this monument as a "static" object, an art piece studied and visited by many who are only interested to take a snapshot of the monument and always leaving in a hurry to catch another "not-to-miss" destination. Shelly Errington echoes my initial perception that "monuments are usually too large to be collected, too large to be transported and displayed in museums. But they can be claimed, thus "collected" in the larger sense of possessed, with the symbolic act of closure by a power that has the right or ability to enclose. At the same time, the enclosing of Borobudur makes it into a museum and art object simultaneously, for having a neutral space drawn around it isolates it from use and performance and thereby allowing the visitor to recognize that *this thing being visited is art, not life*.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Shelly Errington, The death of authentic primitive art and other tales of progress (Berkeley: University of California Press, c1988), p.248

However, after spending much time researching on Borobudur, I feel that Borobudur is no longer a “static” object which I initially assumed to be. On the contrary, even though Borobudur is being “made” into a museum and art object by the state, Borobudur “lives” and could “tell” many stories if one puts his/her heart and soul to observe it. By spending much time around the monument and its landscape, interacting with people and talking to them, participating in festivals and guided tours, I have gained much insight to the inside of Javanese/Indonesian society. Another point made by Shelly Errington strikes a deep chord with me. Errington mentioned how it is possible and easy to regard Borobudur as moving from a pre-modern configuration of use to a modern one. In the modernization narrative, unidirectional change toward something called “modernity” is built into the structure of time itself, hence it is inevitable.<sup>86</sup> This story, she argued, could be told regretfully; in a way that praises the purity and glory of the past but sadly states that time marches on and that the religious and local must be swept aside for the universal, secular and global. However, Errington cautioned readers that the story of modernization is too unidirectional, too Eurocentric, and most of all, without human agency or state power.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, in my opinion, it is more fruitful to approach the “modernization” of Borobudur by understanding the dynamics of change in the way the monument is used and its significance.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.,p.262.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.,p.263.

Through the upacara Waisak conducted at Borobudur, I learnt of how a supposedly “holy” festival could turn out to be quite a chaotic scene like a pasar malam (night market). It reminded me of what my supervisor had written on Javanese wayang kulit performance and how he had likened the performance to a pasar malam.<sup>88</sup> Quoting what he said in his article, “in small-scale performances, there are usually three or four stalls selling refreshment, cigarettes, and toys, while in the large-scale events, one often finds dozens of these stalls.” Indeed, the upacara Waisak’s celebration at Borobudur resembled the large-scale wayang kulit performance. While the “pilgrims” were supposed to walk in quiet contemplation for a long distance from the Mendut temple to Borobudur, along that journey, many “pilgrims” behaved like “tourists”, they were distracted by the roadside vendors, some stopped by out of curiosity to look at the knick-knacks on sale, others decided to quit the “pilgrimage” as they were too tired.

They simply bought a drink, sat by the roadside, and started to talk and laugh loudly with their fellow “drop-out” “pilgrims”. It is interesting to note that some of the “pilgrims” had something of the “tourist” in them, such that the boundary between the pilgrim and tourist is blurred. This reminded me of what my university Professor told me about his pilgrimage to Santiago, Spain.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Jan Mrázek, “Javanese Wayang,” p.115.

<sup>89</sup> Personal communication with Professor Reynaldo C. Iletto.

Professor Iletto shared with me that the last 100 kilometres of the camino was a bit disappointing for him due to the many walkers and cyclists who were just having a fun day trip, talking loudly and rushing to destination for free accommodation. He expressed that it seemed as if the notion of a pilgrimage had been entirely lost. And what astonished him was that very few people he had conversed with had religion in their minds.

Perhaps, the notion of a “pilgrimage” today has been re-defined by many, such that it is no longer the “long and difficult path” as defined by the Cambridge dictionary, but one which many regard as a leisure fun walk. I think one of the most interesting activities which I have undertaken at Borobudur was engaging the tour guides, who told me so much more beyond Borobudur and its facade. It is interesting how they still believe that all Buddhists in Indonesia are of Chinese descent, and they revealed a fact which is very real in today’s Indonesia society – that there is widespread racism in Java/Indonesia. This issue connected my thoughts to an article written by my supervisor. In his article, he talked about a dancer, Didik, who was of Chinese-Javanese descent. Didik related how Indonesians of Chinese descent who have lived in Java for many generations are still considered “un-Javanese” because they are deemed unable to manage the subtleties of Javanese language or follow conventional Javanese etiquette, and there is a widely believed stereotype of the Chinese as being un-trustworthy and only interested in money and business.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Jan Mrazek, “Masks and Selves in Contemporary Java. The Dances of Didik Nini Thowok”, Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 36, 2 (June 2005), pp. 247-269.

Through observing, interacting and engaging in the activities held at Borobudur, I have learnt about a multitude of ways in which individuals or groups perceive the monument. It is such an irony that while the Indonesian government tries to assert its symbolic presence as the new owner and the owner's right to control the space by enclosing Borobudur, the Indonesian government has, on the other hand, allowed and invited visitors and people to read this space in new ways by promoting tourism. No matter how well the government tries to control the monument, they can never fully control the people who are present at the monument, their actions, speech and thoughts.

Although Borobudur is supposedly to represent an esteemed and distinguished "national culture", there will always be people like the licensed guides or the guide liars who undermined the much contrived state notion of an Indonesian "high culture". It is necessary to acknowledge the fact that pictures of serenity and peace of Borobudur are just part of what Borobudur is today. The dirty restrooms, the "pasar-malam" style upacara Waisak and "fake" monks, the annoying gigolo-cum-charlatan guide liars, the schism among Buddhist rivalry groups, the lesser known Pribumi Buddhists and the poor Magelang residents who depend on the tourist dollars to make ends meet, together make up what Borobudur is today.

Just a few days ago, my friend came by my house and asked me, "Alice, how is your writing on that mass of stones progressing?"

"Very well, almost a 30,000 words thesis", I replied.

She told me that she could not believe that I could write so much on just a mass of stones, but I told her that this is only somewhat like an introductory beginning. There is

still so much more to write about, and I have not told my friend about the bizarre scenes I encountered there. I am sure that all my friends are never going to view this “mass of stones” in the same light again.

As I think about Mas Ali and Mas Johnny, I rolled my eyes while trying to imagine how they must be weaving ridiculous tales/stories from the bas-reliefs of Borobudur now, provoking and annoying some of the tourists. I wonder if they have managed to con some naive lass (especially tourists) into being their girlfriends. The looks of disgust of some tourists due to the guide liars’ incessant pester during my last trip still vividly stayed in my mind. The bizarre scenes, interweaving with the looks of serenity and calm of the Buddha statues, are what made Borobudur and its landscape so special in our present time.

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