Borobudur saujana: as far as you can(not) see

Saujana, which literally means as far as you can see, is the Indonesian translation for the UNESCO category acknowledged in the World Heritage Convention (WHC) as cultural landscape (CL). The term is defined in the Indonesian Charter for Heritage Conservation as the inextricable unity between nature and manmade heritage in space and time. Unfortunately, of the 66 designated world cultural heritage landscapes, only one is located in Indonesia. This is despite the fact that Cls in Indonesia have the same outstanding characteristics when compared with others on the UNESCO list: Borobudur Temple Compounds (central Java, Indonesia) – a World Heritage Site since 1991 is an ‘outstanding’ example of how ineffective is the application of the WHC in Indonesia, as it does not take into account the local notion of saujana.

Sara Guagnini

DURING MY FIELDWORK in the summer of 2014 I was astonished by the interconnections between the landscape and human settlements established around the Borobudur complex. Perceiving this interaction has been given just to the temple itself, while Borobudur’s surroundings have not been extensively studied nor promoted as an attractive destination. Local activists believe that the government does not consider the temple’s surroundings as heritage, because it would then be expected to solve the ‘disturbances’ in the tourism management and share with them the funds. The residents, meanwhile, are calling for a more responsible and integrated management of the temple and its surroundings that prioritizes cultural and educational values instead of finance.

My research is in line with previous studies on the imbalance of the geographic distribution of sites recorded as Cls on the World Heritage List (WHL). Akagawa and Sirisrisak discuss this imbalance by applying numerical data, criticizing the Eurocentric nature of the WHC and questioning the etymological meaning of cultural landscape as an outstanding worldwide value. According to these authors, WH nominations depend on the efforts of each nation-state, which means that political and economic factors play a key role in safeguarding heritage. I have found that the Indonesian government, by disregarding the landscape as the contextual setting of the Borobudur Temple Complexes, has endangered the site’s conservation, to the detriment of its living culture. The situation is quite common among former colonies, in which governments – involved in nationalist politics – are likely to ignore the on-going relationships between heritage and local cultural traditions. In defence of Cl, this article argues that “the notion of cultural landscape gives one of the frameworks to manage a place by embracing a place in its wider context”. Cl takes into account the inextricable legacies between people, heritage, and landscape and opens up the way to a more democratic management of heritage sites.

The notion of ‘cultural landscape’ In 1992, the World Heritage Convention (WHC, founded in 1972 to recognize and protect the world’s natural and cultural heritage of ‘outstanding universal value’), became the first international legal instrument to recognize and protect cultural heritage of ‘outstanding universal value’, became the first international legal instrument to recognize and protect cultural heritage of ‘outstanding universal value’. The WHC Committee defines Cl as the “combined works of nature and of man”. Unfortunately, the category of landscapes.3 The WHC Committee defines Cl as the “combined works of nature and of man”.3

Eurocentric perception that man and nature are two separated landscapes.4 In 1992, the World Heritage Convention (WHC, founded in 1972 to recognize and protect the world’s natural and cultural heritage of universal value), became the first international legal instrument to recognize and protect cultural heritage of ‘outstanding universal value’.

Even though the ancient lake has disappeared, you can still see Borobudur floating like a lotus. Photo reproduced under a Creative Commons license courtesy of Indra Kurniawan on Flickr.

Borobudur Temple Compounds, added to the WHL in 1991 as a “masterpiece of monumental art”, is a telling example of how the WHC has been misused in Indonesia. In order to develop the temple compounds as a tourist destination, the nearby villages of Ngaran, Krajain and Kenayan, were forced to move. In 1991, a presidential decree assigned a number of local/national government groups and state-owned companies to manage the preservation of the compounds. Borobudur’s inhabitants were not convinced and believe the government and companies to be ignorant and corrupt. Instead of cultural integrity, these authorities are accused of undertaking national objectives at the detriment of local populations. Marginalized in both economic and spatial terms, the local inhabitants of Borobudur district do not share in any of the profits from mass tourism, yet they are forced to suffer the negative impacts, such as increased pollution, depletion of natural resources (especially water) and the degradation of the natural environment. Regrettably, Soeroso,5 Kham,6 village chiefs, heritage activists and members of the NGO JAKER (Jaringan Kekayaan Weboorobudur – Borobudur Tourist Network) have all put forth that heritage tourism at Borobudur could in fact be turned into an asset for conservation and economic development for the whole district, if only the tourism management integrated the inhabitants and acknowledged the values of the landscape.

To differentiate from the static images of ancient Buddhist temples, promoted through touristic brochures, these groups argue for a ‘dynamic’ conception of heritage. They explain that the Borobudur compounds listed as world heritage sites represent the center of a mandala – an integrated cosmological representation of the world organized around a unifying center. The mandala is a Buddhist concept and a Japanese philosophical basis on the achievement of a harmonious relationship between humans, nature and God. According to the local activists, Borobudur is now a ‘broken mandala’, which needs to be fixed in order to achieve harmony once again. The Borobudur compounds are at the center of an integrated system, from which energy is dispersed into the surroundings. In this system, all the stakeholders are given a specific position and power within the mandala, and all of them will have to share responsibility to achieve balance. They argue that the notion of a mandala could be integrated in the description of Borobudur as a cultural landscape. They explain that tourism programs and area bounded by the mandala would help to grow the local economy in the temple’s surroundings. Only then will local inhabitants have the means to preserve their environment – no longer being compelled to sell their land to developers who build luxury resorts that disrespectfully exploit natural resources. Hence, the harmony will be restored.

Borobudur’s mandala’s outstanding values Although the idea that the Borobudur Temple Compounds represent a mandala has received great scholarly attention,7 the volumes dedicated to Borobudur have not stressed the link between the temple architecture and the surrounding landscape. Borobudur lies in the Kedu Plain, embraced by four volcanoes: Merapi, Merbabu, Sumbing and Sundoro. The nearby Setumbu Hill is the ideal place from which to observe Borobudur from a distance; in the early morning the temple appears to rise out of the mist, like a floating lotus.

Sirisrisak discuss this imbalance by applying numerical data, criticizing the Eurocentric nature of the WHC and questioning the etymological meaning of cultural landscape as an outstanding worldwide value. According to these authors, WH nominations depend on the efforts of each nation-state, which means that political and economic factors play a key role in safeguarding heritage. I have found that the Indonesian government, by disregarding the landscape as the contextual setting of the Borobudur Temple Complexes, has endangered the site’s conservation, to the detriment of its living culture. The situation is quite common among former colonies, in which governments – involved in nationalist politics – are likely to ignore the on-going relationships between heritage and local cultural traditions. In defence of Cl, this article argues that “the notion of cultural landscape gives one of the frameworks to manage a place by embracing a place in its wider context”. Cl takes into account the inextricable legacies between people, heritage, and landscape and opens up the way to a more democratic management of heritage sites.

Sirisrisak discuss this imbalance by applying numerical data, criticizing the Eurocentric nature of the WHC and questioning the etymological meaning of cultural landscape as an outstanding worldwide value. According to these authors, WH nominations depend on the efforts of each nation-state, which means that political and economic factors play a key role in safeguarding heritage. I have found that the Indonesian government, by disregarding the landscape as the contextual setting of the Borobudur Temple Complexes, has endangered the site’s conservation, to the detriment of its living culture. The situation is quite common among former colonies, in which governments – involved in nationalist politics – are likely to ignore the on-going relationships between heritage and local cultural traditions. In defence of Cl, this article argues that “the notion of cultural landscape gives one of the frameworks to manage a place by embracing a place in its wider context”. Cl takes into account the inextricable legacies between people, heritage, and landscape and opens up the way to a more democratic management of heritage sites.

Sirisrisak discuss this imbalance by applying numerical data, criticizing the Eurocentric nature of the WHC and questioning the etymological meaning of cultural landscape as an outstanding worldwide value. According to these authors, WH nominations depend on the efforts of each nation-state, which means that political and economic factors play a key role in safeguarding heritage. I have found that the Indonesian government, by disregarding the landscape as the contextual setting of the Borobudur Temple Complexes, has endangered the site’s conservation, to the detriment of its living culture. The situation is quite common among former colonies, in which governments – involved in nationalist politics – are likely to ignore the on-going relationships between heritage and local cultural traditions. In defence of Cl, this article argues that “the notion of cultural landscape gives one of the frameworks to manage a place by embracing a place in its wider context”. Cl takes into account the inextricable legacies between people, heritage, and landscape and opens up the way to a more democratic management of heritage sites.

Sirisrisak discuss this imbalance by applying numerical data, criticizing the Eurocentric nature of the WHC and questioning the etymological meaning of cultural landscape as an outstanding worldwide value. According to these authors, WH nominations depend on the efforts of each nation-state, which means that political and economic factors play a key role in safeguarding heritage. I have found that the Indonesian government, by disregarding the landscape as the contextual setting of the Borobudur Temple Complexes, has endangered the site’s conservation, to the detriment of its living culture. The situation is quite common among former colonies, in which governments – involved in nationalist politics – are likely to ignore the on-going relationships between heritage and local cultural traditions. In defence of Cl, this article argues that “the notion of cultural landscape gives one of the frameworks to manage a place by embracing a place in its wider context”. Cl takes into account the inextricable legacies between people, heritage, and landscape and opens up the way to a more democratic management of heritage sites.

Borobudur saujana: as far as you can(not) see

Saujana, which literally means as far as you can see, is the Indonesian translation for the UNESCO category acknowledged in the World Heritage Convention (WHC) as cultural landscape (CL). The term is defined in the Indonesian Charter for Heritage Conservation as the inextricable unity between nature and manmade heritage in space and time. Unfortunately, of the 66 designated world cultural heritage landscapes, only one is located in Indonesia. This is despite the fact that Cls in Indonesia have the same outstanding characteristics when compared with others on the UNESCO list: Borobudur Temple Compounds (central Java, Indonesia) – a World Heritage Site since 1991 is an ‘outstanding’ example of how ineffective is the application of the WHC in Indonesia, as it does not take into account the local notion of saujana.

Sara Guagnini