

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.¹ 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 compounds. Nonetheless, the government’s attention has been given just to the temple itself, while Borobudur’s surroundings have not been extensively studied nor promoted as a touristic destination. Local activists believe that the government does not consider the temple’s surroundings as ‘heritage’, because it would then be obliged to involve the district residents in the tourism management and share with them the profits. 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 geographical distribution of sites recorded as CL 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 Compounds, 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”.² 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 landscapes.³ The WHC Committee defines CL as the “combined works of nature and of man”. Unfortunately, the category of CL has turned out to be rather problematic; perhaps because summing up such a broad concept through categories and sub-categories weakens the concept itself, resulting in wasted efforts? Or, perhaps because the fluidity of the term CL makes it extremely difficult to translate into an effective practice? And surely, each landscape is relevant for and valued by somebody? So how then to give significance to any one particular landscape? In addition, the categories of ‘cultural’ and ‘natural’ heritage enounced in the WHC date from 1972, when the Convention was first signed, and reflect the Eurocentric perception that man and nature are two separated entities. As a result, the preservation of monuments has often led to the marginalization of the people who live in and/or around heritage sites. I would like to see ‘man and nature’ inextricably linked and thus argue for the revision of the management system for those WH sites where people, heritage and nature can be considered as a whole.

An ‘outstanding mistake’

Borobudur Temple Compounds, added to the WHL in 1991 as a “masterpiece of monumental art”, is a telling example of why heritage sites should be considered in their wider context. In order to develop the temple compounds as a tourist destination, the nearby villages of Ngaran, Krajan 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 to 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,⁴ Rhami,⁵ village chiefs, heritage activists and members of the NGO JAKER (*Jaringan Kepariwisata Borobudur* – Borobudur Tourism 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 Javanese philosophy based 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 targeting the 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,⁶ 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.

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.

At the center of the Borobudur area, we find two Buddhist compounds, Mendut and Pawon, which together with the main temple were listed as world heritage sites in 1991. The area also contains other Hindu and Buddhist archeological remains (Selogriyo, Ngawen, Asu and Gunungsari). The land comprises dry fields, gardens, plantations and human settlements; nine varieties of bamboo, raw materials for medicines, and the planting patterns found in the area still adhere to Javanese traditions. Many of the activities carried out by Borobudur’s inhabitants relate to the landscape; besides farming, people use natural resources for pottery making, crafts and traditional cooking. The integration between nature and humans is also seen in local traditions and ceremonies, such as traditional dances, music and visual arts. The value of Borobudur’s landscape appears in the diversity of its natural beauty, rural scenery and its inhabitants’ livelihoods, which are all connected and cannot be understood as separate entities.

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According to the Indonesian Charter for Heritage Conservation, Indonesian heritage is the legacy of nature, culture and *saujana* [lit: ‘as far as you can see’], which is a weave of the two. However, because heritage originally related to only historical remains or natural areas, the management of the combination of the two – *saujana* – lacks effectiveness. For instance, the Borobudur state-sponsored preservation is focused just on Borobudur Temple, which is classified as a ‘masterpiece of monumental art’, but not as a cultural landscape. This omission prevents one from recognizing how Borobudur temple is at the center of a bigger structure, of which the inhabitants and their daily activities are integrated parts. Embracing the temple compounds in its wider context and recognizing the role of its inhabitants are crucial steps if integrated conservation wants to be accomplished. After all, who can better express the outstanding value of a place, if not a person who is part of the place itself? These people do not yet have a voice, and are consequently marginalized in the name of development. Along with their identity, the ‘outstanding’ value given to some heritage sites by the WHC vanishes.

References

- 1 Indonesian Network for Heritage Conservation and International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) “Indonesian Charter for Heritage Conservation” <http://www.international.icomos.org/charters/indonesia-charter.pdf>
- 2 Akagawa, N. & T. Sirisrisak. 2008. ‘Cultural Landscapes in Asia and the Pacific: Implications of the World Heritage Convention’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 14(2):176-191
- 3 Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), a human geographer, first used the term *kulturlandschaft* [cultural landscape] to describe the role played by local communities in shaping landscapes. Naturalist philosopher, Carl Ritter (1779-1849), later expanded the meaning to include the ways in which the natural environment influences the evolution of human civilizations.
- 4 Soeroso, A. 2009. *Valuing Borobudur’s landscape heritage: Using multi-attribute environmental economic frameworks to enact ecotourism policy*, Yogyakarta: UGM
- 5 Rhami, D.H. 2014. *The Outstanding Value of Cultural Landscapes: Borobudur as World Heritage Cultural Landscape*, paper presented at the conference ‘ICIAP 2014: Space for the next generation’, Yogyakarta: UGM
- 6 Gifford, J. 2011. *Buddhist Practice and Visual Culture: The Visual Rhetoric of Borobudur*, NY:Routledge