

Borobudur as a Symbol of Religion and Culture (Sociocultural study of Nyadran and Sedekah Bumi Traditions among Central Javanese Buddhists)

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ABSTRACT

There are three results of this research, (a) the role of Borobudur as a symbol, Borobudur Temple is not only a Buddhist religious site but also a cultural symbol that connects spiritual values with the local culture of Javanese society. Borobudur has a broader meaning in a socio-cultural context, as a center of cultural identity that unites religion and local traditions, (b) harmony of the Nyadran and Sedekah Bumi traditions with the symbolic meaning of Borobudur. The Nyadran and Sedekah Bumi traditions are in harmony with the symbolic values of Borobudur which are reflected in the relationship between humans, nature and ancestors. Nyadran as a ritual of respect for ancestors contains moral and spiritual values that are in line with Buddhist teachings about karma and enlightenment. Likewise, Sedekah Bumi expresses gratitude towards nature, reflecting awareness of the importance of maintaining balance between humans and the environment. (c) harmonious integration between Buddhists, Buddhists and local culture. The tradition of Nyadran and Sedekah Bumi carried out by Buddhists in Central Java shows a harmonious integration between Buddhist teachings and local culture, thus making Borobudur a symbol of social cohesion and diversity. These two traditions have experienced cultural adaptation to become post-traditions. namely maintaining the tradition of Nyadran and Sedekah Bumi to the earth in the modern era accompanied by entertainment, but still maintaining its core meaning

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1. Introduction

Borobudur Temple is a religious site that has high aesthetic value. Besides being known for its architectural beauty, Borobudur is a spiritual center and cultural symbol of the community. The greatness of Borobudur reflects the progress of civilization of the Syailendra dynasty in the eighth century. Borobudur experienced various dynamics, including site burial, rediscovery, restoration processes, and its use as a religious tourism destination. Borobudur represents Buddhist teachings that can be interpreted through multiple contexts, such as ritual, art, and environmental conservation (Yatno, 2024). Therefore, in the modern era, Borobudur has three main functions, namely spiritual, educational, and tourism (Yatno, 2022). Research on Borobudur and culture has been researched by Ongthong (2019) entitled A Model of The Creation of a Dance from Borobudur's Architectural Design, which explains that postmodern dance works can be created and developed using symbols in the structure of Borobudur Temple, such as *Kama Bhumi*, *Rupa Bhumi*, and *Arupa Bhumi*, according to individual talent and experience. Another research by Yatno (2024) The Symbolic Values of Borobudur in the *Tribuana Manggala Bakti* Tradition states that the *Tribuana Manggala Bakti* tradition which consists of amisa puja procession activities, devotional puja, animal release, tree planting, and performing arts is in harmony with the symbolic value of Borobudur's relief symbols. Based on this, it can be indicated that the symbolic value of Borobudur Temple can be reinterpreted as a religious and cultural symbol. In the context of Indonesia which is rich in cultural diversity, Borobudur as a cultural heritage has an important role in building shared values that respect differences and strengthen unity.

This research was conducted on Buddhists in Central Java, especially in *Temanggung* and *Jepara* Regencies. The uniqueness of Buddhists in these two areas lies in their ability to adapt to Javanese culture, including through the traditions of *Nyadran and Sedekah Bumi*. Demographically, these two areas are close to Borobudur Temple. Demographically these two areas are located not far from Borobudur Temple, which is one of the important cultural heritages in the area. Borobudur not only has religious significance for Buddhists but has also become an important symbol in the social life of the people of Central Java. Even though it is physically a Buddhist religious site, Borobudur's existence has long been

integrated with local traditions and beliefs. This shows that Borobudur functions as a cultural center that combines religion and social values. Although the traditions of *Nyadran* and *Sedekah Bumi* are not directly related to Buddhist teachings, this research seeks to reveal the harmonious relationship between local beliefs and Buddhist teachings. Through sociocultural studies, this research aims to explore Borobudur from a spiritual perspective and local traditions. The focus of this research is to understand Borobudur as a religious and cultural symbol, as well as explore its symbolic value in the traditions of *Nyadran* and *Sedekah Bumi*. This research will also discuss sacredness, symbolism, and post-tradition phenomena that have developed over time.

Borobudur is not only a spiritual symbol of Buddhism but also a meeting point between religious traditions and local culture, as the *Nyadran* and *Sedekah Bumi* traditions show the synergy of religious and cultural values to create social harmony and strengthen cultural identity. Stuart Hall's theory of syncretism states that the combination of religion and culture creates a new system in the context of religious architecture in Indonesia (Clarke, 2003; Hall, 1997; Rahman et al., 2022; Tahir et al., 2020; Akhmar et al., 2023; Jariah et al., 2022). Hall further stated that cultural identity can be seen as a stable form (its essence), and as a "process of becoming" that is constantly changing. Cultural identity is seemed as a representation of the history and culture of the region of origin (Dewi, 201; Abbas et al., 20237). Cultural identity is not static but dynamic, formed from historical, political, and cultural processes, as the *Nyadran* and *Sedekah Bumi* traditions are not only religious but respect ancestral and natural values. Stuart Hall argues that identity is always involved in a "process of becoming" or formation as Buddhists in Central Java view Borobudur as a spiritual representation and symbol of strengthening beliefs

Hall's representation theory forms collective understanding through cultural construction and identity (Radja and Sunjaya, 2024). In this case, Borobudur is a symbol that unites Buddhists from various social and cultural backgrounds, providing a sense of belonging to tradition and history. This collective identity is not only spiritual but also cultural and historical, as Hall said that historical experience is included in collective consciousness (Walid, 2020; Rahman et al., 2023; Akhmar et al., 2022). Tradition is a religious system formed by collective consciousness. Durkheim stated that there are at least five elements of religion, namely belief systems, religious instruments, religious emotions, religious ceremonies, and religious groups (Meko, 2021). Tradition cannot be separated from a symbol, Turner sees symbols as the instrumentality of physical, economic, moral, political, and so on forces that operate and can change social relations, while Geertz sees symbols as part of the cultural system. Turner studied symbols as found in rituals, but Geertz innovated by arguing that culture is not something private, hidden within individuals but manifested in public symbols. Geertz sees religion as sacred symbols that function to synthesize the ethos of society (Hoskins, 2015). The new contribution in this research is to see how the *Nyadran* tradition and *Sedekah Bumi* can be adapted and developed into a post-tradition, to be further interpreted with the value of the Borobudur symbol

2. Methodology

This research uses qualitative methods with an ethnographic approach and symbolic analysis to explore the meaning and role of Borobudur Temple as a religious and cultural symbol in the *Nyadran* and Earth Alms traditions of Buddhists in Central Java. Data collection through interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation. This research was conducted in Central Java covering Jepara, Temanggung, Semarang, Surakarta and surrounding districts. Through an ethnographic approach, researchers can directly understand the socio-cultural life of Buddhists related to local traditions. In this way, researchers can gain an in-depth understanding of how Borobudur is not only viewed as a religious site but also as a cultural center that integrates Buddhist religious values with the social practices of Javanese society. In addition, symbolic analysis using a semiotic approach is used to interpret the various symbols in Borobudur Temple and how these symbols function in the context of traditions such as *Nyadran* and *Sedekah Bumi*.

3. Result and Discussions

3.1. Borobudur as a Symbol of Religion and Culture

The temple is an architectural and religious representation, the Borobudur as a temple building has the main function as a place for spiritual rituals and a symbol of royal power and greatness (Antari, 20223). Borobudur is a symbol reflects the unique dualism between the sacred and the profane, where it is not only understood as a place of worship but also as a cultural site that holds many memories of the life of the ancient Javanese people. Borobudur is the result of a combination of Buddhist teachings and local beliefs, this can be seen from the construction process as the result of acculturation between Buddhist teachings, beliefs, and Javanese cultural values. Even though the Borobudur Temple is an artifact, it is a Buddhist temple, and elements of Javanese cosmological and spiritual traditions are also reflected in its architecture. One form of acculturation can be seen in the structure of Borobudur. In Buddhist cosmology, the structure of

Borobudur forms a mandala (Zaluchu, S., & Widjaja, F, 2019). Borobudur consists of ten levels that symbolize the Dasa Bumi Bodhisattva, the mandala as a symbol of the cosmos is used as a reference for behavior (Yatno, 2022b). Each level has a symbolic meaning representing a spiritual stage, starting from worldly life to reaching Nirvana. Borobudur as a cultural monument is a reflection of the intellectual and spiritual past of Javanese society (Situngkir, 2018).

Borobudur in a sociocultural has an important role in building cultural identity, the first, Borobudur as Buddhist spirituality. Borobudur Mandala represents the cosmos, the natural world of *Kamadatu*, *Rupadatu*, and *Arupadatu*. The mandala is a sacred place, a symbol of the universe, purpose of the mandala is for enlightenment or a better life (Kusumowidagdo, 2021). The stupas and reliefs that decorate the temple walls tell moral teachings as guidelines for thinking, speaking and acting. Borobudur in Buddhist cosmology symbolizes the path to achieving ultimate freedom or Nirvana. Buddhism teaches that the nature of suffering, karma and liberation is depicted visually in the structure of Borobudur. Second, Borobudur is a spiritual reflection of Java, where the mandala concept is in harmony with local ancient Javanese beliefs, namely the belief in Mount Meru as the center of the universe (Yatno, 2020).

Mount Meru is a sacred place that connects the human world, the world of spirits, and the gods. In ancient Javanese traditional cosmology, Mount Meru is considered the axis mundi or axis of the world that connects the three main realms, namely the realm of the gods, the realm of humans, and the underworld (Osup, 2014). Mount Meru is a sacred place where the physical and spiritual worlds meet. The peak of Mount Meru is believed to be the residence of the gods, and the bottom of the mountain is where the underworld lives. Mount Meru for the people of Ancient Java is believed to be a symbol of balance in the universe and a place for humans to get closer to the Transcendental. Thus Mount Meru is considered a sacred space, this is influenced by the syncretism between animism, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

Mount Meru as the central mountain in Hindu Buddhist cosmology was adapted into the Javanese belief system as a symbol of the power of the cosmos that regulates the balance of nature and life. In Ancient Javanese cosmology, the universe was seen as a multi-level structure centered on Mount Meru, the peak of the mountain was inhabited by the gods, the slopes of the mountain represented the human world, and the base of the mountain represented the underworld. This is in line with the pyramid-shaped design of Borobudur Temple, which symbolizes *Kamadatu*, *Rupadatu*, and *Arupadatu*. In ancient Javanese belief, Mount Meru is a representation of the macrocosm which depicts human balance in creating harmony between the physical and spiritual worlds. The macrocosm in the Javanese mind is the attitude and outlook on life towards the universe which contains supernatural powers, while the microcosm is the attitude and outlook on life towards the real world (Yana, 2012). This is in line with the concept of macrocosm and microcosm in Buddhist cosmology, where the structure of Borobudur as a representation of the universe is a macrocosm, while the inner world of individuals who must go through each stage of achieving enlightenment is a microcosm. Thus, Borobudur is a combination of Buddhist and Javanese cosmology. The existence of Borobudur as a cultural heritage is a source of pride and a symbol of Indonesia's cultural richness.

3.2 The Value of Borobudur Symbols in the *Nyadran* Tradition

Nyadran is a tradition that is part of Indonesian identity, especially in Javanese society. This tradition has religious value that has been passed down from generation to generation. The current era of modernization is a challenge for Indonesian people to maintain their ancestral culture (Saputri, 2021). There are two forms of *Nyadran* ceremonies in Central Javanese society, namely *Nyadran* graves and *Nyadran* rivers. Both of these traditions are rooted in local and spiritual values. *Nyadran* eating is a ritual to honor ancestors, while *Nyadran* Kali is a form of respect for nature. *Nyadran* eating is a ritual that contains spiritual value, as Buddhist teachings in the Sigalovada Sutta explain that praying for ancestors is an obligation, this is a manifestation of filial piety towards ancestors. In Buddhism, respecting ancestors is a good deed and is believed to bring good karma (Yatno, 2019).

In practice, the *Nyadran* tradition is a form of ritual resulting from syncretism between religion and culture. The time for carrying out *Nyadran* in each region varies according to the results of a joint agreement, such as in the month of Suro in the Javanese calendar. Central Javanese Buddhists realize that this time is sacred time, as stated by Eliade that humans continuously try to express the most original perception of sacred time by creating new myths and symbols (Kusumawati, 2013). When carrying out the *Nyadran* ritual, people bring offerings such as food, drink, water, and flowers which are believed to be symbolic offerings to their ancestors and are believed to be able to bring blessings to the surviving family. In a social and spiritual context, *Nyadran* graves have the meaning of respect for ancestors, mutual cooperation, and solidarity. The *Nyadran* eating tradition not only focuses on cleaning graves and praying together, but also contains symbolic values regarding human relationships with ancestors, nature, and spiritual forces.

Nyadran is in line with the concept of *pattidana* in Buddhist teachings. *Pattidana* is an activity of praying for ancestors as a form of the values of devotion and love (Yatno, 2019). If we look more deeply, the *Nyadran* tradition reflects the symbolic values of Borobudur. The structure of Borobudur as a symbol of Buddhist cosmology (*karmadatu*, *Rupadatu*, and *Arupadatu*) symbolizes humanity's spiritual journey towards enlightenment. Respect for ancestors through the *nyadran* tradition is similar to the spiritual meaning in the structure of Borobudur, where humans need to accumulate good deeds or *parami* to achieve the highest enlightenment, one of which is through the practice of respecting a journey by respecting tradition and heritage. It can be concluded that Borobudur and *Nyadran* have symbolic similarities that reflect the journey to a higher state, where *Nyadran* is a *parami*. The *Nyadran* ritual is a cultural practice that helps create social and cultural harmony because these two traditions are not only followed by Buddhists but also people across religions. *Nyadran* acts as a social glue, where people unite to create social solidarity and harmony. The *Nyadran* tradition for the people of Central Java has become a spiritual and humanitarian homecoming culture, togetherness is enshrined in the philosophy of *mangan ora mangan kumpul* (eating or not eating, the important thing is to stay together). Togetherness requires patience and sincerity so that the spirit of *rame ing gawe* will become a strength (Yana, 2012).

Another harmony between the *Nyadran* and Borobudur traditions is spiritual reflection. Through *Nyadran*, humans can introspect, and reflect on the goodness of their ancestors that can be internalized within themselves. This contemplation is part of a meditation practice that is closely related to the symbolic value of Borobudur. Each level of Borobudur is a visual record of the human spiritual journey and the reliefs that decorate it depict Buddhist teachings about life, karma, and enlightenment (Laurent, 2024). The grave is a sacred space that is believed to have positive energy that can influence the lives of generations, just as Borobudur as a temple building is a sacred space that has positive energy for its visitors. *Nydran* eating ancestors is a real reflection of the symbolic values of Borobudur, where the behavior of respecting ancestors, the relationship between humans and the universe, the importance of living in harmony, and together carrying out religious rituals all contain philosophical and symbolic elements of Borobudur.

Apart from being a spiritual center, Borobudur is also a symbol that reflects the harmonious integration between Buddhism and the local culture of Javanese society. Central Javanese society is a heterogeneous society consisting of various religions and beliefs, but Buddhists create social cohesion through the *Nyadran* tradition. Borobudur's spiritual and cultural values are used as a basis for Buddhists to harmonize life with nature and maintain social solidarity in society. In this context, Borobudur becomes a meeting point between religion and culture through traditional practices. This shows that there is a syncretism between Buddhism and local belief systems.

3.3 The Value of the Borobudur Symbol in the *Sedekah Bumi* Tradition

Almsgiving to the earth is a tradition in rural communities that depicts natural fertility and reflects prosperity (Prakoso, 2020). Prosperity is a state of fulfilling basic human needs, as during the construction of Borobudur Temple, the people in the kingdom at that time were prosperous and upheld spirituality (Yatno, 2020b). *Sedekah Bumi* is a form of gratitude for the fertility and produce of the earth that supports life (Sari, 2024). Although the *Sedekah Bumi* tradition is not explicitly rooted in Buddhist teachings, agricultural activities, farming, and other activities of agrarian communities are depicted on the reliefs of Borobudur. The values that emerge in the *Sedekah Bumi* tradition include gratitude to nature, prosperity, respect for ancestors, spirituality, and mutual cooperation. These values show the philosophy of life of the people of Central Java which values balance between humans and the environment and the importance of cooperation to maintain mutual prosperity.

The people of Central Java consider the earth to be Mother Earth. The earth is considered to have an important role in supporting human life, Buddhists realize that natural resources need to be protected for the next generation as implied in the *Vanaropha Sutta* that the act of caring for nature is the path to happiness (Yatno, 2024). Based on this, Central Javanese Buddhists have a responsibility to protect, care for, and respect nature. In the *Sedekah Bumi* tradition, Central Javanese Buddhists make offerings to nature as a form of gratitude for the harvest provided. This indirectly places hope that future agricultural products will be better than today. This concept of reciprocity between humans and nature is in line with the concept of karma depicted in the Borobudur temple. The Borobudur reliefs depict the daily life of an agricultural society, including farming activities and ceremonies related to harvests. *Sedekah Bumi* in Central Java is participated in by all levels of society, regardless of religious background, which shows an attitude of togetherness and harmony as implied in the symbolic value of Borobudur.

3.4 Sacredness, Symbolism, and Post-Tradition

The *Nyadran* and *Sedekah Bumi* are Central Javanese traditions are a combination of religion and culture. These two traditions reflect the views of Central Javanese people about the relationship between humans and nature and their

ancestors. This tradition is symbols such as offerings, flowers, food, and rituals that symbolize respect for nature and ancestors. Apart from that, social symbols are also reflected in the role of community leaders and religious leaders who strengthen relations of solidarity between community members. The integration between religion and culture, especially Buddhism, can be seen in the *Nyadran* and *Sedekah Bumi* traditions. The noble values in Buddhism, such as compassion, wisdom, and detachment from suffering are integrated with the culture of *Nyadran* and *Sedekah Bumi*. These values are implied in the Karmawibhangga reliefs and the Jataka of Borobudur Temple.

The cultural adaptation of *Nyadran* and *Sedekah Bumi* in the modern era cannot be avoided. *Nyadran* and *Sedekah Bumi* in Central Java is a tradition rich in spiritual and social values which developed into a post-tradition, where this tradition was originally a sacred ritual but is now more open to adapting to the life of modern society and external cultural influences without losing its core value. Cultural adaptation can be seen from the existence of entertainment events such as sound *horeg* carnivals, *tayub*, *kuda lumping*, *wayang kulit*, and other arts which function as entertainment and respect for guests by creating a festive and happy atmosphere. In the context of post-tradition, the purpose of entertainment in the *Nyadran* and *Sedekah Bumi* traditions is not merely to entertain, but also to maintain the relevance of tradition in the lives of modern society. Post-tradition entertainment functions as a medium that brings these rituals closer to the younger generation and wider society. Apart from that, entertainment also functions as a bridge between old values and the needs of modern society, namely keeping the traditions of *Nyadran* and *Sedekah Bumi* alive without losing their cultural values.

The post-tradition of *Nyadran* and *Sedekah Bumi* in Central Java is a process of cultural identity formation as stated by Hall. This tradition has become a medium for Buddhists in Central Java to build collective consciousness through practices passed down from generation to generation. *Nyadran* and *Sedekah Bumi* are not just rituals but also have a symbolic dimension. Clifford Geertz identified symbols in this tradition as part of a cultural system, where each symbolic element conveys deep meanings about humans' relationship with nature, ancestors, and social life. Apart from that, this tradition also plays an important role in building social solidarity as stated by Durkheim, through joint participation emotional bonds are created that strengthen unity and togetherness in society. Thus, *Nyadran* and *Sedekah Bumi* do not only function as cultural celebrations but also as a means of maintaining the values of solidarity and identity of Buddhists in Central Java. In the midst of this tradition, the Borobudur Temple has become an important symbol representing the spiritual heritage and cultural greatness of Buddhists in Central Java. Borobudur is not only a monument but also a representation of the values of life, spirituality, and the achievement of cultural collectivity. Thus, *Nyadran* and *Sedekah Bumi* not only function as cultural celebrations but also as a means of maintaining the values of solidarity and identity of the Buddhist community in Central Java, which are firmly rooted in the symbolic value of the Borobudur

5. Conclusion

Borobudur as a religious and cultural symbol is a reflection of a unique dualism between sacred and profane, namely the result of adapting Buddhist culture to local Javanese cultural values and beliefs. Cosmologically, the Borobudur structure is a symbol of humanity's spiritual journey towards enlightenment, the Borobudur is a representation of the balance of the cosmos with the concepts of *Kamadatu*, *Rupadatu*, and *Arupadatu* which are rooted in the belief in Mount Meru as the center of the universe. The symbolic value of Borobudur can be seen in the ritual practices of Central Javanese Buddhists such as *Nyadran* and *Sedekah Bumi* which combine Javanese traditions and Buddhist teachings. The *Nyadran* tradition has values of togetherness, respect for ancestors, and mutual cooperation, while *Sedekah Bumi* symbolize gratitude for the fertility of nature. Both reflect the spiritual meaning of Borobudur. In the modern context, these two traditions have developed as post-traditions, adapting to the modern era while maintaining their core values of sacredness. The *Nyadran* tradition and *Sedekah Bumi* are in harmony with the symbolic value of Borobudur. Borobudur is a symbol of harmonious integration between religion and culture, as well as a legacy that continues to strengthen community solidarity.

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