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Borobudur: Commodification Within A Poor Knowledge Conservation

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Abstract

This paper takes Borobudur as a showcase in the promotion of an artifact with poor knowledge management. It indeed, one of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites since 1991, but it has been presented merely as a physical appearance. What makes it interesting is its grandeur as the largest Buddhist temple in the world during the glory of the Sailendra Kingdom in Java for five centuries, instead of the landmark of science and technological advance which should have advanced Indonesia's achievement by now. The commodification has led Indonesia to turn Borobudur as a magnet for foreign tourists. There are numerous Buddhist sites in Indonesia which are part of the tourist destinations to trace Buddhist civilization in Indonesia, such as Buddhist temple in Jambi (Sumatra), Sleeping Buddha Statue in Mojokerto (East Java), and other Buddhist temples in Java and Bali. Yet, Borobudur has not been presented as the trail of Buddhist Civilization given the absence of knowledge conservation, let alone knowledge reproduction. Borobudur signifies the fact that Buddhism is the earliest religion that heavily influenced the incoming dominant religion later on. Much of its intangible aspect of the heritage has lost and forgotten given the poor knowledge management in the country. Ministry of Education needs to recover and reinvent the lost knowledge to make the commodification go along with meaning-making.

Keywords

Borobudur, knowledge management, physical heritage

1 Introduction

1.1 Genealogy, Sedimentation, and Reactivation of the Discourse of Borobudur as a Heritage

Borobudur as the largest Buddhist temple in the world during the glory of the Sailendra Kingdom in Java for five centuries, Borobudur has been promoted as one of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites since 1991. To turn Borobudur as a magnet for foreign tourists, there are numerous Buddhist sites in Indonesia which are part of the tourist destinations to trace Buddhist civilization in Indonesia, such as Buddhist temple in Jambi (Sumatra), Sleeping Buddha Statue in Mojokerto (East Java), and other Buddhist temples in Java and Bali. Borobudur has also been a part of the Trail of Buddhist Civilization because Buddhism is the earliest religion spread in Indonesia after the Hindu religion and Borobudur temple is a reflection of the peak of Buddhism glory in ancient times.

Nevertheless, there is a contradiction in the strategies to attract foreign tourists to visit Borobudur Temple. In the implementation of tourist management strategy by the Ministry of Tourism, the intention in 2019 is targeting 2 million from 250,000 foreign tourists last year, in addition to 4.3 million domestic tourists. This is equal to an average of 17,250 visitors per day. This number is inconsistent with the policy of visitors' restriction issued by Borobudur Conservation and Heritage Center that limits 1,850 visitors per day for a ten-operational hour. Oftentimes, during the Eid Al-Fitr holiday, there are more than 50,000 tourists a day.

Too many visitors are feared to burden the temple that has aged thousands of years. Currently, the temple stairs have eroded because of tourist footwear. Additionally, many domestic tourists throw trash carelessly, throw away cigarette butts, video shoot without permission, and even urinate in the temple area. Without an in-depth assessment between stakeholders of Borobudur (central and local government,

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business, and local communities), the proposed strategies would only be trial-and-error and it is feared that the age of the temple will not last long.

This paper aims to elaborate on how such heritage tourism management strategy is based on a rather narrow-minded view and superficial knowledge about Borobudur and heritage tourism and its sustainability. In doing so, this paper initiates the discussion with the elaboration on the discourse of Borobudur and its status as a heritage. The latter is closely related to the discourse of the conservation and tourism industry where the two are irreducible one to another, yet simultaneously constitutive to the discourse of heritage. The problematization on the heritage tourism this paper puts forward is the hegemony of the tourism industry in characterizing our understanding of both heritage and its conservation. This hegemony implies the modification and/or exclusion of some elements which are vital if we are to make the heritage tourism sustainable.

The current heritage tourism that takes place in and around as well as puts Borobudur as its object is based on the discourse of Borobudur as a heritage. In order to specify the meaning of Borobudur as a heritage, heritage here can be defined as: "features belonging to the culture of a particular society, such as traditions, languages, or buildings that were created in the past and still have historical importance". Considering the status of Borobudur as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site, it is also important to refer to what cultural heritage is as defined by UNESCO. For that purpose, the full passage on the definition of cultural heritage from Article 1 of the Convention (UNESCO & United Nations Educational, 1972) is quoted below.

For the purpose of this Convention, the following shall be considered as "cultural heritage" monuments: architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings and combinations of features, which are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science; groups of buildings: groups of separate or connected buildings which, because of their architecture, their homogeneity or their place in the landscape, are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science; sites: works of man or the combined works of nature and man, and areas including archaeological sites which are of outstanding universal value from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological point of view.

Closer examination on both definitions of 'heritage' involves the element of 'value' that is assumed to be embedded in the corresponding heritage. In the case of Borobudur, its value as 'heritage' as we know it today is a relatively modern invention. The last statement implies that the 'value' embedded in the corresponding heritage is neither given nor permanent, but socially constructed and contingent. The 'value investment' itself is not a neutral process but political in nature. The 'value investment' process takes place in a situation where the 'value' cannot be equally distributed to all would-be-candidates and candidates of heritage, but only to a few of them. It involves selection where there must be, simultaneously, inclusion and exclusion, thus therefore it is political. This political origin of Borobudur as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site is still fresh in our memory as such status was attained through series of campaigns and in the selection process, Borobudur excluded some other candidates that also competed for the status. The enumeration of aspects that highlight the political character of the constitution of Borobudur as a reality as we know it today could go endlessly, but the main point here is that its existence as a reality for us comes into being through a political process and amidst contingent situation. The denial of the two underlying factors for the constitution of Borobudur as we know it today greatly contributes to the narrow-mindedness of our understanding of it as a heritage and, thus, its conservation through heritage tourism.

The genealogy of the discourse of Borobudur as a heritage presented in this introductory section aims to reactivate the political origin of its constitution that is intended to shed light on various exclusionary moments and, thus, foreground the contingency of its meaning. The foregrounding of the contingency of the meaning of Borobudur as heritage is intended as an invitation, or provocation, to rearticulate it and incorporating various elements previously excluded in the hegemonic discourse. Such a move serves to enrich the knowledge with regards to Borobudur as a heritage; including adding its dimensions as a heritage and help us to formulate a more sustainable conservation strategy through heritage tourism.

It is not an exaggeration if we argue here that 'Borobudur' is a modern invention. Of course, 'Borobudur' here does not refer to its physical existence as a mega-structure standing on top of a hill in a green valley in Central Java. 'Borobudur' as a modern invention here refers to what Borobudur means to us, as a heritage. The name 'Borobudur' stems from the name 'Boro Bodo', that appears in Raffles' The History of Java. The name 'Boro Bodo' apparently is a combination of 'The Candi Bodo', a modification of Buda or Buddha, and its specification based on its location, in the Village of Boro (Raffles, 2013, p. 50). This is the earliest record with this Buddhist temple complex that is mentioned with the name 'Candi

Boro Bodo' that later turns into 'Borobudur' as we know it today. Prior to Raffles's exploration, there are only a few records that allude to this temple complex and each comes with different appellation in their reference. The 1365 AD Mpu Prapanca's Negarakertagama only vaguely mentions it as "the temple in Budur".

Much of the knowledge with regards to Borobudur is gained through conjectural approximation. No written document directly mentions the exact time and intention of its construction. The commonly held and accepted hypothesis of the time or period of its construction, around the mid of 8th to 9th century AD, under the rule of Sailendra Dynasty is based on the similarity of the feature of the inscription found on the temple with the scripts commonly used in royal charters issued around that time period (Soekmono, 1976, p. 9). Its fall into abandonment is just as shrouded in mystery as its construction. There are two hypotheses of when it was abandoned. One argues that it started to fall into abandonment around the 10th century AD following the shift of the political center further to the Eastern part of Java. The other hypothesis argues that its abandonment started around the 15th century AD, following the spread of Islam and the conversion of many Javanese into Moslems (Soekmono, 1976, p. 4).

This does not mean that the knowledge of the existence of this temple complex prior to Raffles' note was totally absent. Soekmono describes how the Javanese locals retain their knowledge about the existence of this temple complex. It is mentioned several times in the Babad Mataram on the passages about how some rebel groups against the Sultanate of Mataram made their last stand and get defeated around this hill and how a crown prince met his demise following his visit to this area. Soekmono points to a certain value that formally, or even majority, Javanese locals invested in this complex as a 'bad luck' (Soekmono, 1976, pp. 4-5). Such values and the accompanying knowledge started to wane and transform only after archeological and excavation expeditions conducted by Raffles and Cornellius (Soekmono, 1976, p. 5) and the Dutch archeologists who continued the excavation and restoration in the following years.

The discourse of Borobudur as a heritage and its conservation came along with these series of excavations and restorations. Raffles' expedition, represented by Cornellius; a Dutch architect who personally visited the site by the order of Raffles, was soon followed by more excavation and restoration expeditions. Soekmono mentions the name of Hartman, a Dutch resident of Kedu; the administrative region where the site is located, as one of the government officials who paid special attention to the site and conducted the clearing of the temple complex from its cover. This project was finished in 1835 (Soekmono, 1976, p. 5). Further detail recording projects were taken up to the 1870s, involving experts such as Wilsen, Brumund, and Leemans, through numerous ups and downs in the process. By 1873, a compilation of all available materials on Borobudur was available to the public. The information provided was designed as complete as possible so, in Soekmono's words, "Chandi Borobudur could never again disappear into oblivion" (Soekmono, 1976, p. 6).

The relatively stable meaning of 'Borobudur' as a heritage worthy of conservation effort did not last long. With its growth in fame and renown across the globe, it has a huge symbolic power that soon incorporated in the growing discourse of Indonesian nationalism. It becomes a representation of Indonesia, not Java; an important feature that we will discuss soon, and its glorious past. This becomes an important part of the discourse of Borobudur as a heritage and its conservation all the way to the period when Indonesia has become an independent state.

There are at least two crucial twists in the discourse of Borobudur as a heritage and its conservation along this way. First, the discourse of heritage and conservation was initially articulated as part of the discourse of modernization that, whether acknowledged or not, negatively portrays the then native people and its rulers as unable to conserve the wonders bequeathed by their ancestors. The discourse of Borobudur as a heritage and its conservation, it is necessary to reiterate here; by the Western colonial rulers is the articulation and reiteration of the sacred mission that the colonial rulers claimed to bring to the colonies who had been degenerated into its dark ages. However, along the way, parallel with the growth of the discourse of Indonesian nationalism, this discourse of heritage and conservation that it entails was re-articulated to become the rallying point for the formation of new identity and mobilization of corresponding identification that was directed against the colonial system and rulers that initiated the discourse of heritage and conservation in the first place.

Second, in this twist or re-articulation, Borobudur gains new meaning as it no longer becomes a representation of a certain dynasty and its civilization in the past or certain religious group, in this case, Buddha, or certain ethnic group, in this case, Javanese. Nonetheless, it becomes a representation of a nation that includes more people and broader geographical areas previously unarticulated in the discourse of Borobudur. As mentioned above, Borobudur is shrouded in mystery in terms of its originality with regards to the time or period of its construction and its abandonment and the motive of its

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construction. Thus, much of our knowledge about Borobudur nowadays is based on hermeneutics rather than exegeses. The latter in many regards lead us rather to conjectural hypotheses than well-tested knowledge or paradigm on what Borobudur was. While this may limit the discourse and practice of heritage and its conservation in some sense, it has been proven that this limitation did not prevent the growth of such discourse and practice to become hegemonic in the case of Borobudur. This is possible exactly of the uncertainty of what Borobudur was and, thus, uncertainty on what is supposed to be conserved from Borobudur.

In such a situation of uncertainty or instability of what the meaning of Borobudur was in its specific socio-historical context, stabilization becomes more relevant than ever. This is exactly what the local Javanese did and so did the Western explorers and archaeologists; the Indonesian nationalists and so on. The red thread that connects what they do with Borobudur is that they create meanings out of it. The meanings created or constructed may differ, and they do differ, one to another but it does not change its nature as meaning which is discursively constructed. The pattern found in these two twists is comparable to the pattern found in the initiation of the discourse of Borobudur as a heritage worthy of serious and comprehensive conservation effort described by Soekmono. The articulation of this discourse was preceded by and simultaneous with the deconstruction of the previously commonly held belief or discourse of Borobudur as a site of 'bad luck' and referred with fear.

This meaning-making practice corresponds with knowledge production practice. This is probably most apparent in the re-construction of the historical knowledge with regards to Borobudur following its initial exploration by Raffles and Cornelius. However, we could guest that even prior to the exploration, when before the eyes of the Javanese locals, Borobudur, or its ruin, was perceived as 'a source of bad luck', the construction of such meaning also involved knowledge production and accumulation that support as well as embedded in the meaning production itself. Knowledge here should not be perceived in its rather narrow sense of scientific knowledge, but in its broader sense that Foucault defines as 'regime of truth'. Regardless the difference in parameter, norms, mechanism, and practice the meaning-making practices conducted by the Javanese locals and the modern Western and Indonesian archaeologists and experts on Borobudur involve the constitution of certain structure that serves as the mechanisms to define what could be expressed and what could not; what could be the legitimate candidate of truth and what could not; etc. This 'regime of truth' is the structure that is constituted, reciprocally, by and through the meaning-making process that serves to partially solve or stabilize the uncertainty or instability, even though it can never totally and permanently do so (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). The rupture of the meanings and knowledge that support them between the discourses of Borobudur among the Javanese locals and Western and modern historians who come after demonstrates the partiality and temporality of every 'regime of truth'.

The use of the term 'regime' indicates that 'power' must be involved in its constitution and its nature as 'political'. The rise of the discourse of Borobudur as a heritage and, thus, deserves conservation effort did not take place in a vacuum but embedded in the constitution of the Western colonialism regime in Indonesia and the regime of the modern state of independent Indonesia continues such regime though it alters or modifies it by adding or cutting out some elements as its internal moments. This is also the situation that we are facing. The discourse of Borobudur as heritage and its conservation is closely articulated with Borobudur as an object of tourist attraction. In this discourse, heritage-conservation and tourism are articulated in one breath as if they inherently belong one to another. This covers the fact that each of them is not irreducible one to the other and the potentials of conflict among them are ever-present. Yet, in the current context, each cannot totally eradicate the others either as they also need each other to justify the legitimacy of its hegemony. For example, if the regime of truth that gives primacy to the aspect of Borobudur as heritage is to be sustainable, it needs conservation that necessarily requires resources. The provision of the required resources cannot fully rely on voluntary sources or the state budget. It is always potentially possible that things might go out of hand and those sources have other priorities. Therefore, the discourse of heritage and conservation of Borobudur, as well as many other world heritage sites, is often articulated also as an object of commerce – mostly in the form of heritage or history tourism. Such dependency indicates the incompleteness of the hegemony of the discourse of Borobudur as a heritage. The fact that it requires the discourse of tourism to justify and maintain its status as a heritage and its conservation indicates the ever-present possibilities of its overturn as a superordinate signifier into a subordinate one.

The practice or regime of conservation of Borobudur as an object of 'heritage tourism' that this paper problematizes is an example of the manifestation of such overturn from potentiality into actuality. By setting the target for the visitor to the site that could endanger the site itself, while justifying such practice or regime in the name of conserving heritage foreground the political nature as well as the

incompleteness of the hegemony of meaning of Borobudur among these three elements of heritage, conservation, and tourism.

Such potential of antagonisms among these three core elements of Borobudur and some other heritage sites conservation practices are not alien and has been an object of many other studies. Many of these studies have offered alternative solutions to reconcile their antagonism or, at least, reduce their tensions and make them more compatible with each other. The antagonisms so far have presented some sort of impasse especially in the field of heritage tourism management because the core elements seem to be canceling each other and any proposed and adopted formula inevitably reduces and subordinates one or two elements to the other. The apparently persistent instability and uncertainty on 'the ideal' formula for heritage tourism are exactly presented by the term 'Sustainable Heritage Tourism'. For some who critically reflect this term and discourse, it represents an idealized fantasy that covers as well as signifies what is absent or lacking. Based on the elaboration above on the case of the discourse of Borobudur as a heritage and its constitution that has been based and made possible exactly on uncertainty and instability, the alternative that this paper offers are centered around this uncertainty and instability which is actually the condition of possibility for meaning-making.

1.2 Meaning Making: Sustainable Heritage Tourism

We can easily find in works that present the dilemma of heritage tourism, the tensions between conservation on one hand, and tourism on the other. In order to tackle and address this dilemma, it becomes more common to find the term or concept of 'sustainable tourism' or 'sustainable heritage tourism'. Similar to the situation and the use of similar concept in the field of environmental politics with 'sustainable development', the term 'sustainable' here gives us the image as if we have a clear view of what is to be sustained and how to do so. It serves the function to reduce the tension and to some extent break up the impasses faced in both fields because it gives the image of unity among the opposing discourses and their proponents since they use and talk the same term. The situation is aptly described as 'sustainable whatever becomes a flag under which any ship could sail'.

Closer examination, however, sustainable heritage tourism is rather a vague hybrid term. For us, it strongly indicates what is being absent or lacking in the existing practices or regimes of heritage tourism. While the usage of this term of sustainable heritage tourism has become more prevalent and gained the aura as if it is a mantra that may effectively address any actual dilemmas on heritage tourism, it is important to see that it has been articulated differently in each discourse. Kind of general example, the discourse that gives primacy on the 'conservation' aspect articulates the 'sustainable', as a signifier to further highlight and reiterate the primacy of conservation and in order to ensure that 'sustainability of the conservation effort'. The tourism aspect becomes relevant as an internal moment of this discourse as long as it positively contributes to the cause of 'conservation'. On the contrary, the discourse that gives primacy to the aspect of 'tourism' gives the emphasis on the 'sustainability' of the tourism element. Conservation is subordinated and relevant only as long as it positively affects tourism.

It is important to underline here that in practice the boundaries of the two discourses are not well-defined. It can also be said that their boundaries are permeable and dynamics. Therefore, it is important to evade the 'problem of subsumption' (Glynos & Howarth, 2007) where each of the discourses is reified and treated as fixed categories to classify certain practices or regimes analyzed as belonging to either of the categories. Thus, in the analysis presented in this paper, the discourses are not treated as reified fixed categories but as logics that compete in an endless game to hegemonize the practices or regimes analyzed. Following Laclau that Glynos and Howarth also refer to, the term logic here is equal to discourse. It becomes a structural rule that the subject follows in their articulation if communication is to take place, which reciprocally constituted through the very practice of articulation itself (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). In order to make it easier to understand, referring to Saussure's categories of langue and parole, this approach gives primacy to the latter in contrast to Semiotics or Semiology that focuses on the former. The grammar or the language structures the articulation, the parole, while on its turn it is the articulatory practice that constitutes the grammar as grammar. Such a view or understanding of the relations between logic or discourse and articulatory practices is in line with the point of view that sees uncertainty and instability as constitutive for the discursive constitution of realities and its political nature.

The paradoxical yet reciprocally constitutive nature between discourse and articulatory practice is exactly the manifestation of the lack that always plagues the structure as well as the subject. The structure or grammar owes its being to the submission of the subject performed by adhering to the rules it sets in articulation. The subject submits itself to the structure in order to be able to represent its

demands into desires and in doing so the subject requires its subjectivity. In other words, the subject becomes a subject by performing articulatory practice adhering to a certain structure and not prior to it.

In such perspective, our critical explanation on the current practice or regime of heritage tourism on Borobudur is focused on investigating and examining what logic dominantly characterize it and foreground its political nature. If the current practice or regime has been dominated by certain logic and it has been seen as something normal, foregrounding its political nature is related to the re-activation of the contingency and instability that made such domination and normalization possible. By doing so, it becomes possible to constitute new meanings alongside the already existing ones which are considered as a norm. This does not mean that the already existing meanings are dismissed altogether. They are still perceived as legitimate meanings. This perspective and the approach that it entails aim to deconstruct is their claims as the only valid and legitimate meanings. Such an approach necessitates a re-examination of the logics underlying the constitution of those dominant meanings and how they engage with other logics in the hegemonic game. Some of them have been done in the introductory part of this paper which foregrounds the contingency, incompleteness, and the conjectural nature of knowledge underlying the currently dominant discourse of Borobudur as heritage and its conservation.

Such perspective and approach enable us to critically investigate and examine the practice and regime of heritage tourism in Borobudur and its manifest and latent tensions with the logic of conservation without being caught in the impasse when facing certain practices which are part of the normal regime of practices but cannot be merely reduced into the underlying dominant logic. For example, when we judge that the heritage tourism in Borobudur is dominated or hegemonized by the logic of market and, based on this, we generalize that every actual practice is structured by that logic, we may find difficulties to explain why there are moments when Borobudur is closed off and only certain groups of people are allowed access to it, such as during the 'Vesak Day', the Buddhists sacred day where its adherents from different places carry their ritual in Borobudur. Using such logic as a reified category would pose some challenge to explain this moment as structured by the logic of market or tourism industry. Yes, it is still possible to do so, but it requires the articulation of that moment with other signifiers, such as the gathering of a bigger crowd of potential sellers and consumers beyond the celebrating Buddhists that enhance the chance for actual economic transactions to take place. But this, once again, proves that none of the practice, as a signifier, has meaning in and of its own. Their meanings and their specificity are contingent on their articulation.

Without the deconstruction of the reification of the currently dominant meaning of Borobudur as a heritage and the conservation practice that it entails, it is almost impossible to constitute new meanings without taking the risk of being labeled as 'heretical'. One example is the recently hotly debated about the claim that Borobudur was built by the Israelite King Solomon. While some people, especially on the base of religious believe this alternative narrative, some other, if not the majority, consider this as a hoax, deliberately spun to confuse the public and reinforce the ideological commitment of some people to a certain interpretation of Islam. Without intervening further into the substantive debates on this issue, what this paper aims to highlight is the contingency of the meaning of Borobudur that was foregrounded during such moment and how it is constitutive for meaning-making. During such moment of instability when the contingency of the meaning and identity of Borobudur come to fore, it incites re-examination of knowledge related to Borobudur during which new knowledge and a new desire for or will to knowledge on Borobudur was produced and reinvigorated. A similar pattern can be found in the case of polemics on Srivijaya, another ancient empire based in Sumatera, in which one Indonesian public figure questions its facticity. His statement soon drew a lot of responses, mostly countering his argument that Srivijaya is fictitious, based on re-examined and also some new knowledge with regards to Srivijaya's historical facticity.
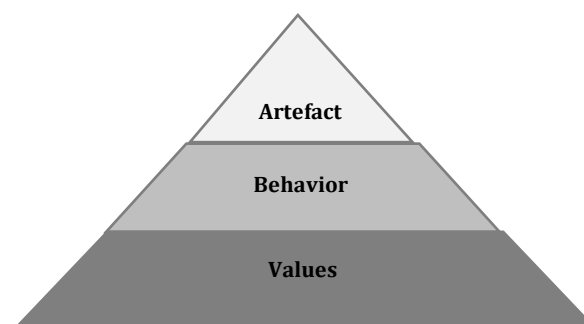

Fig. 1 Element of Culture

The currently dominant discourse or logic that characterizes the practice of conservation of Borobudur, known as heritage tourism, is rather reluctant or even denies the contingency of the meaning and identity of Borobudur. While the lack or incompleteness of knowledge on and related to it often come to the fore at various points, the current regime almost totally disregards them and the ever-present potentiality. The strategy taken to suspend the instability and the contingency is by putting the least contingent aspect of Borobudur, which is the physical temple complex and site itself. Therefore, when visiting the site, it is easily recognized how the dominant or hegemonic narrative on Borobudur was centered around its physical aspect and less about the other less tangible aspects of it. Referring to aspects of culture that is comprised of artifact, behavior, and value (see **Fig. 1**). The current regime of conservation still gives primacy to the aspect of Borobudur as an artifact. Such articulation is in line with the logic of market or tourism industry which at the moment still sells the 'stability' of Indonesian greatness, represented by the magnificent of this mega temple complex, as its main commodity. Since the focus is on the physical or artifact aspect of Borobudur, it is not surprising that in situ presence becomes the main commodity of the tourism industry that operates in Borobudur. This is where the dilemma comes to the fore, as the targeted number of visitors potentially exceeds the site's supporting capacity.

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