Religion in Indonesian Folklore

Field Observations of Borobudur, Prambanan, and Roro Jonggrang

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Abstract

During my trip to Indonesia, I explored how Hindu and Buddhist traditions continue to appear in Indonesian folklore and cultural heritage. I focused on Borobudur, a Buddhist monument, Prambanan, a Hindu temple complex, and the Javanese legend of Roro Jonggrang. My research question was how religious traditions shape folklore and how stories connected to earlier religious periods remain meaningful in a predominantly Muslim society. I approached the project through site visits, architectural and photographic observations, a brochure collected at Prambanan, informal conversations with people I met while traveling, and follow-up research into the monuments' histories. One conversation with a young woman on a train showed me that Roro Jonggrang was familiar beyond my visit to the temple itself, although one conversation cannot represent the views of all Indonesians. I also examined the effects of colonial-era collecting and later restoration at Borobudur, which raised questions about how a damaged monument can retain its historical identity. I argue that folklore and monuments can preserve and reinterpret religious history long after a society's religious makeup changes.

Introduction

Before traveling to Indonesia, I had only a limited understanding of Indonesian folklore and the country's religious history. I was drawn to the subject partly because I am Buddhist and already had a personal connection to one of the religious traditions represented in the region. Hinduism was also important to the project because Hindu and Buddhist traditions both shaped the history, art, and religious life of Java. I wanted to understand how those traditions appeared not only in historical monuments, but also in stories that people continue to remember. My project examines the relationship between religion, folklore, and cultural memory through three connected subjects: Borobudur, Prambanan, and the Javanese legend of Roro Jonggrang. I ask

how Hindu and Buddhist traditions influenced the stories and visual culture of Indonesia, and how parts of that earlier religious history remain visible in a country that is now predominantly Muslim. I do not approach folklore as a direct record of historical events or as a simple explanation of religious doctrine. Instead, I consider it a way that communities can preserve, reinterpret, and pass along ideas about their past. The project also considers the physical preservation of religious heritage. While visiting Borobudur, I learned about Buddha heads and other sculptural pieces that had been removed from the monument and dispersed into collections. I also saw the results of restoration and weathering. These experiences led me to ask a second question: when a monument is damaged, dismantled, or reconstructed, how much of its original historical identity can be recovered?

Research Approach and Scope

I developed this project through exploratory field research during my trip to Indonesia. My main sites of observation were Borobudur and Prambanan. At both locations, I paid attention to the scale of the architecture, the arrangement of the temples, religious statues, stone reliefs, carvings, and inscriptions. I photographed the buildings and details that stood out to me, and I collected a visitor brochure at Prambanan. I also brought home a wayang puppet that I understood to represent a monkey character from the Ramayana. I also spoke with people I met while traveling. Although these conversations were not formal interviews or a representative survey; they helped me understand how the folklore was recognized and discussed by individual people.

One particularly memorable conversation took place on a train. I was unsure which station was next, and a young woman noticed that I was confused and helped me. As we talked, I explained that I was researching Roro Jonggrang. She recognized the story and told me that it

was well known. She was a young student-athlete, and she also helped me with the pronunciation of the name. I cannot use one conversation to make a claim about how all Indonesians understand the legend, but it made me consider how a traditional story can remain familiar to younger people beyond the temple site itself. After returning from the trip, I began comparing my observations with historical and heritage sources, including UNESCO descriptions of both temple compounds, research on Borobudur's Buddha heads, and writing about the Durga statue and its association with Roro Jonggrang. This combination of observation, informal conversation, collected material, and published research forms the basis of this preliminary paper.

Borobudur and the Buddhist Heritage of Java



Borobudur was one of the most personally meaningful places I visited. It is a major Buddhist monument in Central Java, built during the eighth and ninth centuries under the Syailendra dynasty. Its design rises through square terraces to circular platforms and a central stupa. The monument includes extensive narrative reliefs and 72 perforated stupas containing Buddha statues. UNESCO explains that the temple's three levels relate to Buddhist understandings of the universe and the path toward enlightenment (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-a). Because I am Buddhist, I experienced Borobudur differently from an ordinary historical site. I felt connected to my own religious background, and some of the imagery and ideas gave me points of reference that I could share with my peers. At the same time, the visit taught me how much I

did not know. The scale of the monument was striking. As I climbed the stairs and moved through its levels, I imagined the people who had built and used the temple, including the religious communities and monks who may have gathered there. It was meaningful to think about the monument not only as an old structure, but as a place where people once practiced their religion and organized parts of their lives. My visit also raised questions about loss and preservation. A guide explained that Buddha heads and other pieces had been removed from the temple over time. I saw empty spaces and damaged or incomplete sculptural elements, which made the explanation tangible. Later research helped me understand that the history is complicated. A 2022 provenance report by Marieke Bloembergen and Melle Monquil identified Buddha heads in the collection of the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands that were described as originating, probably originating, or being in the style of Borobudur. The report traces how some heads entered Dutch collections, while emphasizing that the precise circumstances of removal are not always known. It also discusses how Buddha heads and other objects from Borobudur became dispersed among museums and collections in different countries (Bloembergen & Monquil, 2022). This research supports the broad point made by my guide, but it also adds an important qualification: not every head or fragment in a European collection can be definitively identified as having come from Borobudur, and not every missing piece was necessarily removed in the same way. The provenance of individual objects matters. The report also makes clear that the movement of artifacts was part of a wider colonial-era practice in which old Javanese sculptures were taken from temple sites and sent to the Netherlands or elsewhere. The removal of a sculpture changes more than the appearance of a monument. It separates an object from the architectural, religious, and community setting that once gave it meaning.

Prambanan, Hindu Art, and the Legend of Roro Jonggrang

Prambanan offered a different but equally important perspective on Java's religious history. The main Prambanan temple is a Hindu complex dedicated to Shiva, with major temples dedicated to Shiva, Vishnu, and Brahma. UNESCO describes the complex as a group of monuments that also includes nearby Buddhist temples such as Sewu, Lumbung, and Bubrah. The broader archaeological landscape therefore reflects a history in which Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions existed alongside one another. UNESCO also identifies the Ramayana reliefs carved on the Hindu temples as an important part of the complex (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-b). One of the most recognizable stories associated with Prambanan is the legend of Roro Jonggrang. In a commonly told version, a princess named Roro Jonggrang is pressured to marry Bandung Bondowoso, the prince who has defeated her father. She gives him what she believes is an impossible condition: he must build one thousand temples in a single night. With the help of supernatural beings, he nearly completes the task. Roro Jonggrang and her attendants create the appearance of dawn, causing the spirits to leave before the final temple is finished. Bandung Bondowoso discovers the deception and curses the princess, turning her into stone. The legend is commonly connected to the Durga statue in the Shiva temple at Prambanan (Indonesia Travel, n.d.). During my visit, I knew the statue was Durga Mahishasuramardini, a Hindu goddess, rather than simply assuming it was a statue of the princess. The distinction is important. The statue has its own Hindu religious identity, while the Roro Jonggrang story provides a folklore interpretation that connects the image to the temple's local cultural memory. A 2025 article by Maulana, Ijas, and Wibowo examines this connection between the Durga statue and the Roro Jonggrang legend, showing that the association is a subject of contemporary research as well as popular storytelling. I want to treat the two identities carefully: the sculpture represents

the goddess Durga, while the legend explains why many people associate that stone figure with Roro Jonggrang (Maulana et al., 2025). My own interpretation of the legend focuses on female autonomy and resistance to forced marriage. Roro Jonggrang does not want to marry Bandung Bondowoso, and she attempts to use her intelligence to avoid a marriage she has not chosen. I read her actions as a form of resistance against a powerful man who believes he is entitled to her. In this interpretation, the story can speak to questions of consent, independence, and a woman's ability to make decisions about her own life. This is my reading of the legend, not a claim that it is the only interpretation or that it represents the views of everyone who knows the story.

The ending makes the story especially complicated for me. Roro Jonggrang resists the marriage, but the punishment is that she is turned into stone. The story can therefore be read as both an account of resistance and a tragic ending in which the woman's freedom is taken away. I find that tension part of what makes the legend memorable. It also shows how a traditional story can invite new interpretations when people revisit it from the concerns of their own time.

Colonialism, Restoration, and Historical Authenticity

My visit to Borobudur also made me think about the relationship between colonialism and the preservation of cultural heritage. I had initially understood the missing Buddha heads as objects that had been taken to the Netherlands and possibly distributed among European museums or private collections. The provenance research confirms that some Buddha heads associated with Borobudur entered collections in the Netherlands and that related objects are held in museums in several countries. However, the documentation is incomplete in some cases. For some objects, researchers can trace a museum donation or a collector but cannot determine exactly when, how, or under what conditions the object left the temple (Bloembergen & Monquil, 2022). The history of restoration is also more complicated than I first understood.

Borobudur underwent an early major restoration led by Dutch engineer Theodoor van Erp between 1907 and 1911, followed by a much larger restoration carried out by Indonesia with UNESCO assistance between 1973 and 1983. During the earlier restoration, excavations around the monument recovered many loose pieces, including twenty Buddha heads. Even after this work, the restoration account notes that not all Buddha statues could be recovered and returned to their original niches (UNESCO, 2005). This is important because it shows that some missing pieces were recovered from the site itself, while other objects had been removed or could not be located. I also learned that a yellow-ochre coating had been applied to the reliefs during the early restoration period to make their color more even for photography. Later examination found that the coating contributed to peeling on some softer stone surfaces. This is close to what I remembered from my guide's explanation, although the documented account describes yellow ochre rather than white paint and identifies photography as the reason for the treatment (UNESCO, 2005). The detail made me realize that restoration is not always a neutral process. Even work intended to document or improve a monument can change the material that survives for future generations. The later restoration project also raises questions about reconstruction and authenticity. UNESCO describes Borobudur as having been restored with substantial use of original material, alongside additions needed to improve stability and drainage (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-a). The conservation work required specialists to identify, document, dismantle, preserve, and reassemble parts of the structure. This work helped protect the monument, but it also made me think about the limits of reconstruction. If a temple has lost some of its original pieces, if objects have been separated from their original locations, and if later conservation changes the arrangement or surface of the stones, can the present monument ever be exactly the same as it was when it was first used? I do not think this question means that

restoration is pointless. Without conservation, a monument can deteriorate further or disappear. Instead, I see a tension between preserving a structure so that people can continue to experience it and preserving every trace of its earlier condition. Restoration can recover much of a monument's form, but it cannot always recover the full history of every stone, statue, or religious practice that once belonged to it. The empty spaces I noticed at Borobudur made that limitation visible to me.

Folklore, Religious Change, and Cultural Memory

Looking at Borobudur and Prambanan alongside the Roro Jonggrang legend helped me understand that religious influence does not disappear simply because the religious makeup of a society changes. Indonesia is predominantly Muslim today, but its earlier Hindu and Buddhist history remains visible in its historic monuments, art, and folklore. The Prambanan complex is particularly useful for thinking about this history because UNESCO describes Hindu temples and Buddhist temple sites within the same wider archaeological landscape, a reminder that the region's religious past was not made up of only one tradition (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-b). Research on Borobudur's later history also notes that a majority of Java's population had converted to Islam by the sixteenth century, after the monument had fallen out of use (Bloembergen & Monquil, 2022). This regional history helps explain why the continued presence of Hindu and Buddhist sites and stories is significant, without suggesting that present-day Indonesians all relate to them in the same way. I do not mean that all Indonesians relate to these places or stories in the same way, or that the presence of a monument means that everyone practices the religion associated with it. My conversation on the train was brief, and it cannot stand in for a larger study of Indonesian public opinion. Still, the woman's recognition of Roro Jonggrang made me think about how folklore can remain familiar

across generations and outside the place where a story is most closely associated. The story may be remembered as a cultural legend even by people who do not practice Hinduism. For me, folklore can preserve religious and cultural ideas without requiring every person who hears the story to share the original beliefs. A legend may be passed down because it is entertaining, tragic, morally meaningful, connected to a famous place, or simply part of what people learn growing up. Its meaning can also change as people interpret it in new ways. My reading of Roro Jonggrang through the idea of female autonomy is one example of how a traditional story can speak to contemporary concerns while remaining connected to its religious and cultural setting. The same idea applies to the monuments. Borobudur and Prambanan are not only architectural remains from earlier periods. They continue to be visited, studied, photographed, protected, and discussed. Their meaning includes the original religious purposes for which they were built, the histories of abandonment and restoration, the colonial movement of objects, and the ways people engage with them today. In this sense, cultural memory is not fixed. It is maintained through preservation, storytelling, education, and reinterpretation.

Conclusion

My time in Indonesia changed the way I understand the relationship between religion, folklore, and cultural heritage. Before the trip, I had limited knowledge of Indonesian folklore and only a general understanding of the region's Hindu and Buddhist history. Visiting Borobudur and Prambanan gave me a physical connection to that history. Borobudur felt especially personal because of my Buddhist background, while Prambanan helped me examine Hindu religious imagery and the folklore associated with it. Through the Roro Jonggrang legend, I explored how a story connected to a Hindu temple can continue to be remembered and interpreted in

contemporary Indonesia. Through Borobudur, I considered how colonial-era collecting and later restoration affected the survival and interpretation of religious heritage. Together, these examples suggest that folklore and monuments can preserve parts of a society's religious history even as religious practices and demographics change. They also show that preservation is not only about keeping buildings standing. It involves questions of ownership, historical evidence, interpretation, and the experiences of the communities connected to the past. This paper is a preliminary account based on a short period of fieldwork, personal observations, informal conversation, and initial historical research. I would like to expand it by examining more on Javanese folklore, comparing different versions of Roro Jonggrang, and researching the histories of specific Borobudur artifacts and restoration decisions. The experience also strengthened my interest in documenting places and people through photography and film. I left Indonesia with a broader understanding of its cultural history, but also with new questions about how stories and monuments allow people to remain connected to the past.

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