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Competing interests and heritage conservation: examining the political economy of tourism at the Borobudur World Heritage Site

Devi Roza Krisnandhi Kausar, College of Tourism, University of Tabuk, Tabuk, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; Faculty of Tourism, Universitas Pancasila, Jakarta, Indonesia

Marcus L. Stephenson, Edge Hotel School, University of Essex, Essex, UK

Alexander Trupp, Department of Geography, University of Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria

Janianton Damanik, Center for Tourism Studies, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Daud A. Tanudirjo, Department of Archaeology, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This study examines the context and implications of prioritizing tourism in managing the Borobudur World Heritage Site (WHS), one of Indonesia's designated 'super priority destinations'. Based on semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders from organizations involved in the preservation of the cultural heritage site and the management of the priority destination, on-site observations, and go-along interviews with local community leaders, this research uses a political economy lens to investigate the tension between tourism-driven economic goals and the preservation of cultural heritage. The study centers on three core themes: (1) competing interests; (2) tourism as a political economy decision; (3) power dynamics that favor tourism over preservation. Findings reveal a lack of shared vision and coordinated strategy among stakeholders, strongly emphasizing physical infrastructure development over sustainable and locally meaningful tourism. The study highlights the critical need for accountable and inclusive leadership to balance economic ambitions with heritage conservation, advocating for approaches that integrate local narratives and sustainable development practices.

KEYWORDS

World Heritage Site management; priority destinations; tourism; political economy; Indonesia

Introduction

Tourism has been one of the highest contributors to Indonesia's foreign exchange earnings, particularly before the COVID-19 pandemic (Supriyadi & Kausar, 2017). The sector has shown a strong recovery, with nearly 12 million international tourist arrivals in 2023 (The Jakarta Post, 2024). In 2015, the Government of Indonesia identified ten priority tourism destinations as part of its efforts to diversify the tourism market beyond the domination of Bali as a major Indonesian tourism destination, aiming to stimulate economic growth across the country (Cabinet Secretary, 2015). Among these destinations is Borobudur in Central Java, a World Heritage Site (WHS) inscribed in 1991. This site, dating back to the 8th century, is the largest Buddhist temple in the world, situated within predominantly Muslim neighborhoods. Following the designation of Borobudur as a priority tourism destination in 2015 and later as a super-priority destination in 2019, the site experienced a significant increase in visitors. Before the pandemic, Borobudur attracted approximately 3.7 million domestic visitors and 250,000 international visitors annually, averaging around 10,800

visitors daily. This number greatly exceeds the ideal capacity of 128 visitors at any time within the temple structure or 523 people in the temple courtyard (Borobudur Visitor Management Plan, 2020).

Previous studies on Borobudur have discussed various issues, including limited socio-economic impacts on the surrounding rural areas (Kausar, 2014), challenges associated with transitioning from a monument-centered conservation approach to one involving community participation and broader landscape protection (Nagaoka, 2014), and the top-down approach to planning and coordination challenges among various involved stakeholders (Kausar & Nishikawa, 2010; Wall & Black, 2005). Moreover, existing research highlighted the pressures for development and the lack of awareness regarding the negative impacts of tourism (Hitchcock & Darma Putra, 2015; Susilo & Suroso, 2015). However, recent developments following Borobudur's designation as a priority destination have not been fully addressed in existing research. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the impact of these developments on the management of the Borobudur WHS and its rural localities.

Borobudur's classification as a 'priority destination' implies an anticipated increase in tourist arrivals, arguably becoming a destination objective as tourism in Indonesia recovers following the COVID-19 pandemic, where under-tourism prevailed due to the international lockdown. This designation also entails the involvement of multiple ministries, each allocating funds through diverse programs, which have not always been closely coordinated. In 2018, the World Bank assisted the Indonesian Government in developing an Integrated Tourism Master Plan (ITMP) for Borobudur (The World Bank, 2018). Led by an international consultant, this project primarily fell under the purview of Indonesia's Ministry of Public Works and Housing (PUPR), focusing on infrastructure-centric development. Consequently, Borobudur, which has traditionally been regarded as a (religious) tourist destination site (Hermawan et al., 2016) rather than a cultural heritage site, faced renewed pressure for commercialization due to the costs associated with the beautification of its surrounding environment and infrastructure-led development. Furthermore, establishing the Borobudur Authority Board (BOB) in 2017 conferred the mandate to oversee a 309-hectare tract of land designated for creating a distinctive tourism enclave open to investor participation (Kausar et al., 2024). While this enclave does not border the temple directly, the name Borobudur is strategically invoked to enhance its appeal. Some of these recent developments have caused concern for preserving Borobudur's Outstanding Universal Values (OUV), which is why the site was initially inscribed as a WHS. Moreover, the ITMP was introduced before a formal management plan for the site as a World Heritage had been renewed. Despite the need for an updated management plan, the outdated Borobudur Prambanan National Archaeological Park Master Plan developed by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in 1979 was utilized. Although an integrated management plan for Borobudur Area was prepared in 2010 by the Directorate General of History and Archaeology at the Ministry of Tourism and Culture (though this Directorate General is now located within the Ministry of Education and Culture), the plan was never implemented. However, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology commenced formulating the Borobudur Temple Compounds Management Plan in 2021 (Kausar et al., 2024). This initiative engaged experts from diverse fields to address the long-standing need for an updated management framework. Subsequently, the finalized document was submitted to UNESCO within the same year (World Heritage Committee, 2021).

Deploying a political economy perspective to tourism development and heritage management offers a lens through which to analyze complex political and socio-economic dynamics. Bianchi's (2018) work on the political economy in tourism underscores the need to understand the power relations and socio-economic forces inherent in the production and commodification of resources, which often engender structural conflicts and inequalities. This perspective aids in understanding the complexities surrounding decision-making processes and policy formulation within the broader context of tourism development and heritage management. In developing countries like Indonesia, tourism emerges as a tool for economic growth and global market integration (Dolezal et al., 2020;

Khan et al., 2020). Vorlaufer (2003) notes the need for states to leverage their cultural and natural assets to attract tourists and stimulate economic development, which often necessitates sustainable conservation efforts. However, pursuing sustainable tourism can be fraught with challenges, as Dale (2013) highlighted, where neoliberal practices may exacerbate socio-economic disparities and privatize conservation areas, undermining long-term sustainability.

Hall and Lew (2009) note the relationship between high and low levels of scale in the tourism system. In other words, the study explores how policies formulated at the national level influence changes and developments observed at local and regional levels. It thus aims to analyze the impacts of Borobudur's designation as a super priority tourism destination, considering the socio-economic, managerial, and cultural heritage implications of these developments. Specifically, this research seeks to answer the question: 'How have recent policy-driven developments and infrastructure-focused investments influenced the management of Borobudur's World Heritage status and its surrounding rural communities?' By addressing this question, our research contributes to the political economy perspective of tourism, which has been evolving, albeit modestly, in the tourism studies literature (Bianchi, 2018; Nunkoo & Smith, 2013; Yrigoy, 2023) and even less so in the political economy of tourism development and cultural heritage management within emerging economies.

While this study primarily focuses on organizational and institutional actors, i.e. those directly involved in policy formulation, governance, and management of the Borobudur World Heritage Site, it also includes insights from local business stakeholders engaged in tourism and heritage-related enterprises. Their experiences offer valuable reflections on how national and institutional decisions materialize within local economies and cultural practices. Hence, the study situates the political economy of tourism not only at the macro and policy level but also in the meso- and micro-realities of those whose livelihoods intersect with the site's evolving tourism landscape. This design allows the paper to trace how state-driven tourism priorities reverberate through community-level experiences while maintaining focus on the structural decision-making processes that shape them.

The context: Borobudur Temple compounds

Borobudur Temple (Candi Borobudur), built in the 9th century in Magelang Regency (Central Java, Indonesia), is one of the largest Buddhist monuments in the world (see Figure 1). It takes the form of six square stone platforms surmounted by three circular ones, the highest of which supports a large dome, i.e. a huge bell-shaped stupa (Hitchcock & Darma Putra, 2015). On the walls and balustrades of the temple's lower structure, one of the largest ensembles of bas-reliefs in the world is carved with a description of the life of Buddha and includes Buddhist stories. On the four sides of the terraced pyramid, running up through its center to the circular terraces, are stairs and gateways framed by ornaments. The Borobudur Temple experienced a large-scale restoration intervention from 1907 to 1911 and, more recently, from 1973 to 1983 (Nagaoka, 2014). The restoration of Borobudur Temple from 1973 to 1983 was under the coordination of UNESCO, which involved a national executive agency and an international supervisory committee. The compounds of Borobudur were inscribed as a World Heritage Site in 1991, recognizing its role as a 'historic monument' and representing an outstanding example of a masterpiece of Buddhist architecture and monumental arts (Miura, 2022).

Nagaoka (2014) reported that prior to its inscription, there was a significant attempt in the 1970s to preserve not only the architectural features of the temple but also the broader connected landscapes surrounding Borobudur. Unlike the European-dominated discourse of heritage, which is largely a monument-centered approach, the landscape approach sought to define and manage the wider cultural landscapes of Borobudur in Central Java together with community participation (Nagaoka, 2015). The plan was developed by Japanese heritage practitioners and culminated in the 'Borobudur Prambanan National Archaeological Parks Final Report, July 1979', hereafter



Figure 1. Borobudur Temple World Heritage Site. Source: Borobudur Heritage Conservation Institute.

referred to as the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Master Plan (JICA, 1979). Prambanan Temple dates back to the 10th century and is dedicated to Hindu divinities. It was also inscribed as a WHS in 1991. The main objectives of the plan concern the conservation and preservation of heritage, the development of archaeological parks for the conservation of the historical legacy and its cultural landscape, traditional village improvement, and the promotion of cultural and educational tourism (JICA, 1979). In an endeavor to achieve these goals and develop the area around Borobudur Temple, various supporting facilities were established in the form of museums, conservation and research centers, an audiovisual theater, kiosks and stalls, an area for cultural performances, and parking spaces for cars and coaches. However, despite the original plan for an archaeological park, the park evolved into a recreation park built in 1985 to accommodate visitors (Setiadi, 2013). Turning an archaeological park into a recreational park marked the reorientation towards profit through tourism activities.

The organizations involved in managing Borobudur WHS and its surrounding area are stipulated in the Presidential Decree No. 1/1992, which regulates the management of Borobudur Temple Recreation Park (and Prambanan Temple Recreation Park). Borobudur is thus separated into three zones managed by three separate entities. Accordingly, the Borobudur Heritage Conservation Institute (BKB) has authority over Zone 1, i.e. the main temple. A state-owned company named PT. Taman Wisata Candi Borobudur, Prambanan dan Ratu Boko is assigned to manage Zone 2, the Borobudur Temple Recreation Park. The Local Government of Magelang District manages Zone 3, involving the areas outside the recreation park where the community resides and where two other temples – Pawon and Mendut Temple – are situated.

However, in 2017, the Borobudur Authority Board (BOB – in Indonesian) was established under the auspices of the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy (MoT), particularly in response to the designation of the area as a ‘super priority destination’. Borobudur is one of five such designated destinations in Indonesia, alongside Labuan Bajo in East Nusa Tenggara, Mandalika in West Nusa Tenggara, Likupang in North Sulawesi, and Lake Toba in North Sumatra, with the intention of the government to accelerate economic growth and establish equity beyond the popularized destination

of Bali (ITB Berlin New, 2023). The BOB is not involved in the day-to-day management of the site and its surrounding area. Nonetheless, it has an authoritative mandate to manage an area of 309 hectares located around 12.5 km from Borobudur WHS for investment by the private sector (interview with an official from BOB, November 12, 2022). The Board has also been tasked to coordinate tourism development in areas stretching from Yogyakarta in the south to the Karimun Jawa Islands in the northern part of Central Java. Nonetheless, this is hard to realize as tourism is largely among the affairs of local governments (Wulandari & Indrayanti, 2020).

Political economy of tourism and World Heritage Site management: conceptual framework

According to Bianchi (2018, p. 88), 'Political economy comprises the study of the socio-economic forces and power relations that are constituted by the production of commodities for the market and the divisions, conflicts, and inequalities that arise from this'. Therefore, one of the significant concerns with political economy relates to the problem of the commodification of resources, which is orchestrated in the configuration of stakeholder power. The political economy is driven by socio-economic forces and the power relations of actors formed in the commodity production process, which often triggers conflict and inequality (Bianchi, 2018). In the production process, there is a problem of choice: what commodity is needed, who decides to produce it, and whose interests are prioritized (Logan & Molotch, 2007). This also concerns deciding whether to take action or the policies chosen and the political process involved (Drazen, 2000). The main content of political economy in policies is considering the interests behind commodities in the commodity production process.

The political economy of tourism explains how tourism is commodified as an economic resource by various actors with different interests. Bianchi (2014) examines social relations of power that cause inequalities in tourism development as reflected in the configuration of certain ideologies and institutions. Several manifestations of the political economy of tourism development include state-managed capitalism, neoliberalism, unequal economic organization, and speculative investment into strategically situated land assets by landowners, developers, and constructors in alliance with amenable public authorities (Bianchi, 2018). This implies that tourism development has the potential to generate economic inequality, depending on which actor has the strongest power in making decisions and in the decision-making process, which often depends on the complex relationship between the state and other actors (Mosedale, 2016). As acknowledged by Mosedale (2016), the state exists in a complex relationship, including diverse partnerships and involving multi-level governance, together with other tiers of state regulators and other bodies.

One of the interesting issues in tourism development in developing countries is the mobilization and commodification of resources, especially natural and cultural resources, particularly in an endeavor to convert these resources into economic assets (Shepherd, 2002; Trupp et al., 2023). Utilizing Karl Marx's political economy perspective, Hermann (2021) emphasized that commodification can be conceived as a process by which exchange-value dominates use-value. The basis for evaluating goods or services in this process concerns commercial rationale where exchange triumphs (Lavesque, 2015). The element of transforming tangible and intangible goods and services into commodities is a very important force in a liberal economic system. Tourism, rivers, beaches, views, ideas, and experiences are all tourism attractions (Yrigoy, 2023) and are thus treated as commodities to accrue economic benefits and gain social recognition. Young and Markham (2022) highlighted the true function of space as a place to live and represent routine activities for local residents, which can transfigure into a tourism destination when people who live elsewhere visit for a limited time. In addition, capital investment as an effective instrument for commodification also comes externally and forms itself into tourism entities (e.g. accommodation, attractions, and transportation) (Fitchett et al., 2021).

As a primary actor in tourism development, the state plays a central role in pursuing pro-foreign exchange policy instruments and other pro-tourism ventures. Amid adverse foreign trade balance problems, rising unemployment rates, widening regional inequality, and scarcity of capital investment to build economic infrastructure, states representing developing countries are conditioned to utilize all available resources for tourism development (Vorlaufer, 2003). The availability of unique cultural and natural diversity, supported by the strengthening demand for the global tourist market (Barrowclough, 2007), has encouraged developing countries to seize tourism opportunities (Khan et al., 2020). Accordingly, tourism is arguably one of the easiest and most effective ways to reach global markets, attract investors and promote economic growth (Lee & Chang, 2008). In view of this, targeting the quantity of tourists is common in many destinations, even in destinations with fragile cultural heritage sites (Cros, 2008).

The orientation to make tourism a pillar of the country's economy has prompted governments to step up sustainable and area conservation campaigns. The theme of cultural tourism and ecotourism is often promoted to balance economic growth orientation with culturally and environmentally sustainable tourism (Duffy, 2006). Accordingly, the desired target for international institutions concerns supporting states in capacity building, especially to provide technical and financial assistance as well as global recognition so that governments become serious about implementing sustainable tourism directives and policies (Dale, 2013). However, the sustainable-based strategy tends to be double-edged as, on the one hand, it can increase awareness about the importance of conserving natural and cultural assets as a tourism attraction. However, on the other hand, it also strengthens the practice of neoliberalism in tourism development through increasing tourism impact, encouraging the marginalization of residents (Dale, 2013), and furthering the privatization of conservation areas (McElwee, 2006; Wieckardt et al., 2022). Su et al. (2018) emphasize that for protected areas to be involved in commercial activities, conservation and sustainable development will be challenging. These authors reference the observation that local and domestic capital and the interplay between tourists and locals can transform a town (or even a site or area) for tourists' consumption. In this case, however, transformation ignores long-term impacts such as the high density of people, acceleration of physical damage, and dissatisfaction among tourists (Damanik & Yusuf, 2022).

Methodology

This research mainly employs a qualitative approach, using both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data was collected through a combination of three qualitative methods. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four key stakeholders representing institutions involved in the governance of the cultural heritage site and the broader super-priority destination. Second, on-site field observations provided insights into the practical implementation of policies and the interactions among various actors. Third, go-along interviews were carried out with five informants, consisting of three community members and two conservation staff. This multi-method approach ensures a comprehensive analysis of the competing interests shaping the governance and sustainability of Borobudur WHS. Although the research design privileges institutional perspectives to trace decision pathways and policy coordination, we also incorporated local voices from tourism-oriented enterprises (e.g. craft and performance-based studios) to illustrate how macro-level developments are interpreted and experienced by local actors. These narratives complement rather than balance the elite interviews, grounding the analysis in everyday realities.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted between November and December 2022, with additional interviews in March 2023. A total of four key informants were interviewed, each representing one of the main institutions involved in the management of the site: the MoEC, BKB, BOB, and UNESCO. These informants were selected based on their senior roles and direct involvement in the conservation and management of Borobudur. All interviews were conducted in Indonesian, lasting approximately one hour, and were guided by semi-structured questions (see Table 1).

Table 1. Key questions during interviews.

No.	Semi-structured Interview Questions
1.	Explain the position of the agency you represent in managing Borobudur
2.	Can you describe the relationship between agencies involved in managing Borobudur, particularly in terms of main tasks, objectives, and coordination activities?
3.	What is the impact of determining Borobudur as one of the priority / super priority destinations for tourism and conservation activities?
4.	What are the main obstacles faced in managing the Borobudur Temple Area (KCB) as a world heritage site? Why do these obstacles arise?
5.	Why does Borobudur need to be managed by four different government agencies (Conservation Agency, state-owned enterprise PT Taman Wisata Candi Borobudur, Borobudur Authority Board, and the Magelang Regency Government)? What factors facilitate the process of managing such a destination's difficulties? And what difficulties arise (or are involved) in the process of managing such a destination?
6.	Who/which party takes priority in making decisions in managing KCB? What are the advantages of such prioritization?
7.	What are the issues and difficulties of coordinating stakeholders in executing regulations related to KCB?

They were held via online video conferencing, recorded with the informants' consent, and supplemented with field notes to capture key insights. These in-depth interviews provided rich qualitative data on the motivations, institutional interests, and decision-making processes that influence World Heritage Site governance within a broader political economy context.

On-site field observation was carried out in October 2023, coinciding with the 8th Borobudur International Experts Meeting. The Meeting, held every five years and initiated after the completion of the second restoration of Borobudur Temple in 1983, gathers specialists from diverse disciplines to discuss the conservation and preservation of this UNESCO World Heritage site (BKB, 2023). Serving as a vital platform, the meeting facilitates the exchange of information, insights, and expert opinions to evaluate the temple's current condition and management across various aspects. Its goal is to develop strategic recommendations that ensure the long-term sustainability and preservation of this cultural landmark. Field observations during the meeting included visiting the temple grounds to observe visitor management practices. Additionally, visits were made to surrounding villages to explore innovative initiatives, such as the Kinnara Kinnari Dance Studio, which showcases dance movements inspired by the temple's reliefs, and a *batik* studio that designs patterns reflecting the artistic motifs of the temple's carvings.

The third method, go-along interviews, was conducted with a total of five informants during the October 2023 field visit. These included three community members from tourism-oriented villages and two conservation staff involved in visitor management at the temple. As Bartlett et al. (2023) note, go-along interviews allow researchers to better understand participants' lived experiences and spatial behaviors within their environment, a point also emphasized by Cao et al. (2019). In this study, the method allowed informants to share firsthand perspectives on how tourism-driven infrastructure and policy changes are reshaping their urbanized rural landscape. This approach yielded localized and contextualized insights into the socio-spatial dynamics and perceived impacts of the super-priority destination development. More specifically, this technique elicited more reflexive and place-anchored responses compared to the semi-structured online interviews with institutional actors. For example, during walks through vendor areas, new ornamental gates, and along the access roads leading to the Balkondes and craft workshops, participants pointed out recent infrastructural changes and shifting community spaces, discussing how these developments affected visibility, income, and everyday interactions with tourists. Such observations generated spontaneous and emotionally nuanced reflections that would likely not have emerged in an online format or spatially fixed setting.

Moreover, the study involved the systematic use of secondary data, including government-based documents pertaining to existing government regulations, such as the Borobudur Visitor Management Plan (BVMP) that was written as part of the formation of the ITMP, recommendations from Borobudur Expert Meetings, and the Borobudur Management Plan that was submitted to UNESCO.

The qualitative data was analyzed through thematic analysis, in which researchers closely examined the data to identify common themes. Thematic analysis is a method for analyzing qualitative data that involves searching for recurring ideas (referred to as themes) in a data set (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016). From the transcripts of the interviews, the main codes generated were 'tourism', 'tourists', 'World Heritage Site', 'conservation', 'interests', 'planning', 'integrated tourism planning', 'development', 'projects', 'investment', 'coordination', 'policy', and 'political power'. These codes formed the basis for segmenting the data, making it easier to identify patterns across participants' responses. Through grouping and refining these codes, the main themes emerged: competing interests, power play or power relations, and the political economy of tourism. These themes provide a lens for understanding how various stakeholders influence tourism development and conservation efforts, highlighting the tensions and alliances that shape decision-making within the World Heritage Site's management framework.

Findings and discussion

Political background

Before delving deeper into the findings, a discussion of the political background is necessary to understand the competing interests and power relations that shape heritage conservation and tourism development in the context of Borobudur. The decision to issue Presidential Decree No. 1 of 1992, regulating the management of Borobudur Temple Recreation Park into three zones managed by three separate entities, was inseparable from the policies of the government, then known as the New Order government, which emphasized economic development. The New Order era took place between 1965 to 1998 under the leadership of Indonesia's second President, Suharto (Douglas Wilson, 2006). Berger (1997) and Errington (1993) revealed that the political economy of the New Order era was very different from the Old Order era under the leadership of President Sukarno (Indonesia's first President). Berger (1997) argued that the failure of the national economy under Sukarno's Old Order, along with the failed 1965 coup, became the impetus for Suharto's New Order to pursue a program of social reorganization. This program emphasized anti-communism and redefined Indonesian nationalism, centering it around Pancasila, the state philosophy originally articulated by Sukarno in 1945. It includes five principles of belief: God, humanitarianism, national unity, democracy, and social justice. Under the New Order, Pancasila took on a new interpretation, emphasizing national stability and economic development within an authoritarian framework, which ultimately shaped the shift towards a state-centered capitalist model in the 1970s. It is not surprising that this viewpoint prompted the New Order to emphasize its economic policies concerning 'an import-substitution industrialization strategy' financed by growing foreign investment, as well as by foreign aid and some domestic investment (Berger, 1997, p. 342). As an embodiment of the New Order standpoint, post-1965 development was handed over to the 'elites', including the military, with Suharto as the leader. At the same time, the bureaucrats led the strengthening of 'a more centralized bureaucratic administration' (Berger, 1997, p. 334).

In addition, the New Order regime aspired to 'the modernization of Indonesia' through development, which was often interpreted as the construction of buildings or 'physical infrastructure', capital-intensive exploitation of natural resources (mainly timber and oil) and the development of cultural tourism (Errington, 1993). Thus, within this aspiration, the central government of the New Order developed the Borobudur Temple Recreation Park, utilizing the heritage site as its main attraction, complemented by various other recreational facilities, such as a 4D theater and elephant riding. The directive was stipulated in the 1992 Presidential Decree No. 1 concerning the management of Borobudur Temple Recreation Park, which consisted of three parties, namely the Borobudur Heritage Conservation Institute (BKB) as the manager of the core zone or the temple itself and the plaza that immediately surrounds the structure (Zone 1), PT Taman Wisata Candi Borobudur, Prambanan, dan Ratu Boko (PT TWC) as the manager of the Borobudur Temple

Recreation Park (Zone 2), and the Local Government of Magelang Regency as the manager of The Landscape Zone (Zone 3). However, this directive was different from the direction of the JICA Master Plan, which emphasized the preservation of monuments, the advancement of the National Archaeological Research Center, and the transference of heritage to future generations managed together in an archaeological park (JICA, 1979, p. 18). Although JICA also saw the potential for cultural and educational tourism, the establishment of PT TWC by the central government in the 1980s and the issuance of the Decree indicated that the World Heritage Site illustrates the fact that the site was primarily managed as a tourism destination by the central government. The issuance of the Presidential Decree itself is an important event in the history of cultural heritage management in Indonesia. For the first time, cultural heritage management was handed over to a profit-oriented, state-owned enterprise. Until the 1980s and in the colonial era, cultural heritage sites such as temples had always been managed by the government or at least private institutions engaged in academic practices and the cultural arts (Tanudirjo, 1995, 2017).

Although the New Order regime ended in 1998 following the Asian financial crisis, which triggered economic and political crises in Indonesia, the central government's policies regarding the management of the World Heritage Site as a tourist attraction did not change significantly. The commodification of cultural heritage, as happened at the Borobudur Temple Compound, intensified at the expense of its role in cultural preservation. Mallalahi and Yamada (2022) revealed in their research that the Board of Directors of PT TWC represented private companies being assigned to lead the state-owned company. This corresponds to Poczter and Pepinsky's (2016) assertion that the fall of the 'new order' regime did not fundamentally change the political constellation in Indonesia. Although the military had a decreasing role, there was a strengthening of political actors from the private sector.

The importance of Borobudur as one of Indonesia's primary tourism destinations is also reflected in the designation of Borobudur Temple Area as a National Tourism Strategic Area, stipulated in Government Regulation Number 50 of 2011 and the 2010-2025 National Tourism Development Master Plan and later as a super priority tourism destination. Due to this position as a super priority destination, new infrastructure development led by the Ministry of Public Works and Housing (PUPR) has been advanced in recent years. The Integrated Tourism Master Plan (ITMP), recently prepared by the central government and coordinated by PUPR, also reflected an economic approach to support and distribute national economic development more evenly throughout the region.

Competing interests in the management of Borobudur WHS

The competing interests of multiple stakeholders shape the management of the Borobudur WHS, each with distinct roles, interests, and objectives that influence site management and tourism policies (see Table 2 for a summary of key stakeholders, their interests, and functions).

An official from the Directorate General of Culture at the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) highlighted that a key challenge in managing the WHS lies in the competing interests between heritage conservation and tourism development. Each organization involved has its own objectives and priorities, making it difficult to achieve cohesive planning, much less implement a unified management plan. One prominent example is the 'limited entry' policy introduced during the pandemic, which restricts visitors to the plaza surrounding the temple. According to an interviewed official from BKB, this measure was necessary due to significant wear on some of the temple's stairs, eroding as much as 3.95 cm. However, this policy, as decided by the Directorate General of Culture (MoEC), did receive objections from the state-owned company that manages the recreational park, symbolizing the political conflicts that can arise in the policy planning process. In this case, the conflict is between the organization prioritizing environmental conservation (BKB) and the state-owned company focussing on generating revenue.

Table 2. Main stakeholders from heritage and tourism.

No.	Organizations	Function and Interest
1.	Borobudur Heritage Conservation Institute (BKB) (since 2023 amalgamated into Indonesia Heritage Agency)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BKB, responsible for managing Zone 1, is a technical unit within the Directorate General of Culture, Ministry of Education and Culture, responsible for managing conservation and research in the heritage site. • Functions as a center for education and training of technical personnel in the field of conservation and restoration. • Helps with conservation of other heritage sites in Indonesia and several Southeast Asian countries.
2.	Ministry of Education and Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oversees BKB as a technical unit dedicated to preserving the physical integrity of Borobudur Temple • Develops and enforces policies to protect Borobudur as a cultural heritage site. • Integrates Borobudur into educational programs to foster awareness of its cultural and historical significance among the public. • Works with UNESCO and other international organizations to ensure Borobudur's preservation meets global standards. • Regulates religious ceremonies (alongside the Ministry of Religious Affairs) and cultural events to maintain harmony between spiritual practices and preservation needs. • Research and documentation.
3.	PT Taman Wisata Candi Borobudur, Prambanan dan Ratu Boko (PT TWC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The management of Zone 2 or the recreation park is carried out by PT TWC, a state-owned company under the Ministry of State-owned Enterprise. • Manages three recreation tourist parks, namely Borobudur Temple Recreation Park, Prambanan Temple Recreation Park (also a World Heritage Site) and Ratu Boko (an archaeological site) – this latter two are both located in Yogyakarta (a province located around 50 km from Borobudur). • Plans and develops facilities in the recreation park. <p>Note: as a profit-oriented business entity, the mass tourism approach that the company used to adopt posed a threat to the preservation of Borobudur Temple.</p>
4.	Borobudur Authority Board (BOB)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Borobudur Authority Board (BOB) is a unit under the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy (MoT), Republic of Indonesia. • Its authoritative duties include managing 309 acres of land in the Menoreh hills, Purworejo Regency, Central Java. The area is located at a strategic location 12 kilometers from the heritage site and 35 kilometers from Yogyakarta International Airport (YIA).
5.	Ministry of Public Works and Housing (PUPR)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on Presidential Decree No.58/2014 concerning Spatial Planning of Borobudur Temple and Its surrounding Area, the area is designated as a National Strategic Area. Thus, the spatial arrangement of Borobudur area and its surroundings is the authority of the Central Government (in this case PUPR). • The regulations emphasized in this spatial planning decree is space utilization control (land use control) to control the growth of built-up areas to preserve Borobudur Temple WHS and its surroundings. • PUPR is responsible for infrastructure development, especially after the ITMP project funded by the World Bank.

Source: Darmawan (2022) and authors' compilation

In managing the 80 hectares that encompass both the recreation park and the core temple zone, differing perspectives emerge regarding park management, often centered on the issues of resource allocation, hence the question of who gets what. The MoEC's position is that dispersing visitors to other attractions in the surrounding rural area rather than focusing solely on the temple is better for the preservation of the site (Borobudur Management Plan, 2021). MoEC proposed adjusting daily ticket allocations and visitor management practices according to the site's carrying capacity. However, this approach conflicts with the goals of the state-owned company, which aims to maximize

revenue through ticket sales. Since March 22, 2023, a daily maximum of 1,200 visitors may enter the temple after making an online reservation, better meeting the interest of the Borobudur Conservation Office (interview with an official from BKB). Moreover, visitors must wear special sandals called Upanat, designed with rubber soles to prevent wear and tear on the temple's stairs and surfaces. These sandals, made from sustainable materials such as pandan leaves, coconut shells, and EVA sponge, are produced by local artisans from villages surrounding Borobudur as part of a broader initiative led by the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy to minimize physical damage to the monument. Each visitor retains the sandals after the visit, requiring around 1,200 pairs to be produced daily under the current quota. While this initiative generates consistent income for local craft producers and aligns with sustainable tourism principles, it also presents challenges concerning resource use, waste management, and production scalability, issues that could become critical if visitor numbers increase substantially.

With the introduction of carrying capacity limits and visitor management mechanisms restricting access and numbers of visitors to the temple structure, there have been appeals from both the state-owned company PT TWC and the vendors operating within the park to allow more visitors. These appeals, albeit informally expressed, intensified during the Eid holiday in 2024 when the visitor cap highlighted a stark contrast in attendance in comparison to earlier years. In 2019, an interview with the General Manager of PT TWC revealed that Borobudur Temple Recreation Park received at least 60,000 visitors daily during the Eid Holiday (Fitriana & Wedhaswary, 2019). Contrastingly in 2024, another interview with PT TWC's General Manager revealed that around 10,500–15,000 visitors per day come to visit the recreation park during Eid Holiday, from which 1,200 visitors (the maximum number per day) chose to enter the Temple with additional entrance fees (Birru & Purba, 2024). This decrease in visitor numbers after implementing quotas for temple access links with contextualization of the power of the 'tourist gaze' (Urry, 1990), implicating a set of expectations tourists bring to heritage sites. For many tourists, the essence of the Borobudur experience lies in physically accessing the temple, whether to seek an authentic encounter or to capture photographic proof of their visit. Therefore, when access is restricted based on carrying capacity, the overall visitor numbers to the recreation park are consequently affected.

Darmawan (2022) emphasized that Borobudur WHS is a contested space, where economic struggles and conflicting interests often give rise to tensions. Prior to the implementation of the new visitor management approach, conflicts emerged between mass tourism activities – led by PT TWC as the park operator – and the conservation efforts of the BKB. The introduction of visitor quotas, while aimed at preserving the site, has led to a significant decline in visitor numbers. This decline has triggered dissatisfaction among local vendors who rely on tourism for their livelihoods, as well as PT TWC, which manages ticket sales (interview with an official from BKB). According to a BKB representative:

Some people (local vendors) were concerned about visitors' limitation. We informed them that with this limitation, visitors would likely disperse to areas outside the temple. (Official of BKB, personal communication, 15 November 2022)

The reduction in visitor numbers has had tangible effects on local livelihoods, particularly among vendors and small traders whose earnings rely on dense visitor traffic. Interviews and on-site observations indicated that sales dropped markedly during peak periods, with some stalls closing temporarily due to reduced demand. These outcomes highlight the uneven social consequences of heritage management decisions, where conservation imperatives intersect with everyday economic vulnerability, revealing the distributive tensions.

With a declining agricultural sector, through the accelerated conversion of land from an agricultural area to other purposes since the 1990s, limited employment opportunities, and the generally low education level among communities in rural Borobudur (Kausar, 2011), Borobudur's position as an economic battleground is inevitable. This recent development reflected Healy et al.'s (2012) statement that power struggles and political maneuvering among interest groups frequently shape sustainable

tourism development. In the Borobudur case, the 3,000 local vendors (Darmawan, 2022) are also part of the local communities, embedded in larger socio-political structures. With their significant numbers, they can influence decisions that supersede other community members (Tosun, 2000), such as attempting to influence tourism management strategies to favor higher visitor numbers.

Moreover, competing interests in the management of the Borobudur WHS and its surrounding area stem from the diverse forms of attention the site receives – particularly due to its high visitor numbers (interview with an official from the MoEC). As mentioned in the introduction, various ministries have implemented different programs in the region. For instance, PUPR developed four primary gateways to Borobudur – Blondo, Kembanglimus, Klangon, and Palbapang – and constructed an upgraded parking facility. The Ministry of State-Owned Enterprises coordinated efforts among several state-owned companies to establish *balai ekonomi desa* (Balkondes), or village economic centers, and also oversees PT TWC, the state-owned company managing the site. Meanwhile, MoT is responsible for the establishment and administration of BOB, while the MoEC remains the key institution in charge of preserving the World Heritage Site and representing Indonesia at the World Heritage Committee. As noted by one of the Directors of BOB:

There have been various kinds of projects and budgets from different ministries coming to Borobudur and its surrounding areas. (Official of BOB, personal communication, 12 November 2022)

A UNESCO officer further noted that excessive attention to Borobudur has sometimes resulted in poorly coordinated interventions, especially in the surrounding rural landscape. Several decisions of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee Assembly have provided a warning note to the Indonesian government regarding the OUV of Borobudur Temple Compound, which has been heavily compromised by tourism activities. To return to its conservation goals, UNESCO recommends taking steps to improve the organizational management and regulation of tourism activities.

Priority tourism destination as an outcome of a decision founded on the political economy

The Indonesian Government's designation of Borobudur as a super priority destination reflects a political-economic goal to boost international visitor numbers, according to an official from BOB. As a result, the ITMP for Borobudur, Yogyakarta, and Prambanan was developed to coordinate tourism efforts across these areas. However, despite the ITMP's comprehensive scope, extending from Borobudur to Yogyakarta City and Prambanan WHS, an official from MoEC observed that the plan is rarely used to guide informed decision-making. This official also believes that the existing legal frameworks, including Presidential Decree No. 58/2014 on the Spatial Planning for Borobudur and Its Surrounding Area, ITMP, and BVMP are somewhat in place but lack a coordinated implementation:

ITMP mainly discusses infrastructure, connectivity, and destination development, although the discussion on culture is very limited. It is a very comprehensive document, providing much information for evidence-based policy and informed decision. However, during the many discussions and debates (involving various ministries), it is not really used as a reference. There has actually been a request from UNESCO, to adopt ITMP as a policy by stipulating it through Presidential or Ministerial Decree, but this has not been done. (Official of MoEC, personal communication, 8 November, 2022)

A similar but more sceptical sentiment is also expressed by a representative of UNESCO, emphasizing the lack of long-term vision and practical applicability. Böhme (2023) asserted that future-orientated thinking needs to be put forward in planning and policy making on the contrary to 'presentism' or short-termism. Böhme (2023) highlights that planning and policymaking in sustainable development require future-oriented thinking rather than 'presentism' or short-termism, where decisions account for the social and environmental impacts on present and future generations. Burns (2004) echoed these concerns, critiquing the 'masterplanning' approach in tourism development for often producing plans that merely 'sit and gather dust' in ministries. Such issues are similar to what has been mentioned by the informants from the MoEC and UNESCO about the Planning

documents (including the ITMP developed for each super priority destination) that are rarely used as reference in heritage and tourism development in Borobudur WHS. In addition, Burns (2004) also pointed out that plans produced under the culture of short-termism usually encourage a reductionist, homogenizing approach where, in effect, destinations are developed and changed to meet the requirements of known or familiar market segments and tourists.

Despite these challenges, an official from MoEC observed that Borobudur's designation as a super-priority destination has heightened stakeholder awareness and encouraged inter-ministerial collaboration. For instance, the Ministry of Public Works and Housing prioritized the development of ornamental gates and the renovation of façades along the main road leading to the WHS. In parallel, the Ministry of State-Owned Enterprises has coordinated multiple state-owned enterprises to develop *balai ekonomi desa* (Balkondes), or village economic centers. Nevertheless, these physical development initiatives have at times conflicted with efforts to safeguard the site's OUV and the integrity of its surrounding cultural landscape. One such example is the construction of four ornamental gates located around 7–8 km from the Borobudur recreation park. With their shapes inspired by the temple's reliefs, each is a landmark of the four gateways leading to the entrance of the WHS. These structures initially drew objections from the BKB, MoEC, and UNESCO, due to concerns about their potential impact on the rural cultural setting. A BOB official clarified that the gates were envisioned as landmarks defining the broader Borobudur area and as tourist attractions aimed at dispersing visitor concentration (Personal communication, 12 November 2022). Conversely, BKB raised concerns about the orientation of such development, where one representative notes:

They [the Ministry of Public Works and Housing] view development differently, focusing mainly on infrastructure and physical elements. (Official of BKB, personal communication, 15 November 2022)

In response, the design of the gates was scaled down, though an issue arose regarding who was responsible for maintaining such physical features. The Ministry of Public Works and Housing intended to hand these facilities to the local government. However, the local government was reluctant to intervene, given concerns about increased maintenance and operational costs, including electricity costs for lighting. An interview with a representative of one of the tourism villages revealed a similar opinion about the physical development. One tourism village leader said that following designation as a priority destination, *balkondes* were built in 20 villages surrounding the temple by different state-owned enterprises as part of their approach to corporate social responsibility. Each center, built in a traditional Javanese wooden building style, accommodates a multi-purpose hall and 10–20 guest rooms as tourist accommodation. However, some community members see these accommodation establishments competing with existing homestays already run by the communities (interview with tourism village's representative). The top-down approach and lack of consultation in the development process of the *balkondes* often resulted in not meeting the real needs of the community. For instance, almost every center hosted a cafe despite limited market research concerning whether there was a need and demand for such a service.

Nevertheless, go-along interviews, such as one conducted with a staff member at a batik studio, revealed positive perceptions of the developments that have taken place since Borobudur was designated a super-priority destination. She highlighted improvements such as homestay revitalization, installation of streetlights, construction of sidewalks and ornamental gates, and improved road access. She explained:

For us, the designation of this area as a super-priority destination has brought significant impact. There have been many development initiatives directly from the central government, such as from PUPR, MoT, the Ministry of Villages and Development of Disadvantaged Regions as well as CSR programs from several state-owned enterprises. The downside is that these developments have not involved the local government. (Borobudur Batik Studio staff, personal communication, 25 October 2023)

A similar sentiment was expressed by a staff member at a local dance studio during another go-along interview, who also acknowledged the scale of physical development in the area. However,

the exclusion of local authorities from planning and implementation raises concerns about the sustainability, continuity, and long-term maintenance of these initiatives, as well as their alignment with local priorities and capacities – as mentioned earlier by one of the tourism village actors.

Power relations and prioritization of tourism interest

Interviews with informants consistently revealed a consensus that tourism interests often overshadow preservation and management priorities at the WHS. This finding echoes Bianchi's (2018) assertion that the political economy of tourism is regulated by a neo-liberal economy that commodifies actors and resources and hence privileges tourism interests. Nonetheless, officials from MoEC felt that the MoT does not play a significant role in the ongoing discussions, perhaps because there is a state-owned enterprise managing the recreational park operations (interview with MoEC official). In addition, the sites do not really advance narratives and interpretations of heritage from the perspectives of locals and host communities, thereby omitting parochial-based storytelling of Borobudur landscapes and rural life. Instead, the Ministry of PUPR seems to dominate the activities, particularly in pursuing an infrastructure-led development approach in the interests of tourism. One representative of the BKB explicated:

The term 'priority' is indeed alarming as there would be many development activities ... many times we (BKB) are perceived as anti-development. (BKB Official, personal communication, 15 November 2022)

Two significant interrelated common concerns that were raised related to the lack of a shared vision for the super priority destination and problematic leadership, especially in relation to lack of clarity concerning the establishment of purposeful objectives. Accordingly, an MoEC official stated:

The leadership and vision of the super priority destination is not clear. There is a lack of shared vision of how the super priority destination should be managed. Every party comes with its own vision. The inconsistency of decisions, many times, is also apparent ... It [leadership] is not clear of the overall objectives of the super priority destination and how the objectives are translated and elaborated into action plans by each organization involved. It is actually clear that super priority destination's objectives are to achieve the priority destination that attracts visitors, provide high quality experiences and preserve the site. However, these objectives are often overshadowed by the desire to attract as many visitors as soon as possible. Hence the methods chosen are often not correlated directly with the objectives, for example, through emphasizing only on physical facilities. (MoEC Official, personal communication, 8 November, 2022)

Prior research highlights similar challenges in conservation areas involving multiple organizations. Issues like uncoordinated programs, communication barriers, and misaligned interests are common, as noted by Kausar et al. (2020) in the Kepulauan Seribu Islands, and Degarege and Lovelock (2021) in Ethiopian coffee tourism development. To address these issues, Pechlaner, Kozak and Volgger (2014) proposed destination leadership as an important approach to managing a destination. They suggested that destination leadership is about motivating, encouraging, and inspiring human actors by setting long-term values and directions. Moreover, destination planning can adopt a spatial and infrastructural perspective that encourages the *balkondes* to integrate a range of tourism development goals, whereas destination governance is concerned with managing inter-organizational ties and organizational boundaries in destinations (Pechlaner et al., 2014). Nevertheless, good destination leadership can complement the structural and procedural perspective of destination governance by considering the role played by emotions, creativity and values in destination development (Pechlaner et al., 2014). In the case of Borobudur, the values lie in attempts to bring together new ideas to recreate and authentically reflect cultural heritage and historical realities rather than modernized value systems.

Conclusion

This research shows that the 'political economy decision' of prioritizing tourism in the form of developing a 'super priority destination' affects the management and preservation of Borobudur

WHS and the values attached to it. The political economy decision in this context means that the designation of Borobudur as a super priority destination is not merely about promoting tourism. It is also about achieving broader political and economic objectives, such as increasing international visitors, boosting national revenue, and aligning with political agendas for regional development. This prioritization of tourism development reflects a blend of political motivations and economic strategies, even when these may conflict with heritage preservation goals.

The cultural heritage site is affected by the political economy of tourism. Tourism interests dominate the decisions and policies concerning the area, particularly because the tourism industry reflects neo-liberal values. There are also issues of an unclear shared vision concerning the priority destination and, thus, a real need for action plans and a division of responsibilities among organizations. Crucially, strong, proactive and accountable leadership is paramount which envisions the importance and centrality of sustainable tourism development. The current and dominant notion of tourism development concerns physical and infrastructural development rather than a form of tourism development that centralizes localized narratives and stories of cultural heritage and its preservation. Accordingly, a localized and more sustainable form of development needs to closely integrate with the local economy and society.

Through the case of Borobudur, this study emphasizes how competing interests shape the outcomes of tourism management within the WHS designated as a priority destination. The interplay of tourism-centric policies, infrastructure-focused development, and the sidelining of local heritage narratives reflect an overarching prioritization of tourism interests over conservation. Stakeholders involved, including national ministries (MoEC, PUPR) and its subunits, an international organization (UNESCO), and profit-oriented entities such as PT TWC and local vendors display divergent priorities and approaches. Without cohesive, shared objectives, decisions tend to prioritize economic returns and visitor influxes at the expense of preserving Borobudur's cultural and social landscape. The consequences include physical developments that often conflict with the site's outstanding universal value, underscoring the challenge of balancing preservation with the pressures of modern tourism.

Despite efforts toward an 'integrated tourism master plan' (ITMP), the lack of alignment between organizational roles and visions remains evident. Findings show the pressing need for a clear division of responsibilities and coherent action plans among stakeholders. As highlighted in interviews, the fragmented approach weakens the potential for sustainable tourism that respects the cultural landscape and the surrounding community's interests. Future research can evaluate the long-term social, cultural, and environmental impacts of prioritizing tourism over preservation at heritage sites. Further studies could examine how local narratives and community voices can be effectively integrated into heritage interpretation, thereby enabling the wider framing of the political economy approach to comprehending the management and development of this heritage site; especially in relation to assessing the direct effects of the political economy on local communities and the outcomes of those effects.

Although the study revealed the conflicts between organizational-based stakeholders in managing Borobudur, it would be useful to engage with the socio-economic and political implications of these conflicts for the actual people affected, i.e. tourists and hosts alike. Irrespective of the conflicts involved, however, it is imperative that a more integrative and consensual approach is achieved between organizations to have productive outcomes and strong governance structures. Therefore, comparative studies across other UNESCO World Heritage Sites could provide insights into alternative governance models that balance tourism growth with heritage conservation, along with contextual recognition of similar and dissimilar challenges faced in aiming to improve the planning situation. Research into collaborative destination leadership practices and cross-organizational coordination mechanisms may also yield valuable strategies for addressing the current challenges at Borobudur and similar sites globally. Finally, research focusing on representing the 'tourist voices' would be appropriate, especially in assessing perceptions and experiences of conservation, preservation and sustainability at Borobudur. Such information would be useful to contextualize

the degree to which tourists are able to adapt to new developments in achieving forms of tourism that are closely aligned to localized needs and to the cultural and social landscape.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Devi Roza Krisnandhi Kausar**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Marcus L. Stephenson**: Methodology, Validation, Writing – review & editing; **Alexander Trupp**: Methodology, Visualization, Writing – review & editing; **Janianton Damanik**: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft; **Daud A. Tanudirjo**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft.

Notes on contributors

Devi Roza K. Kausar is currently a Professor of Tourism and Dean of the Faculty of Tourism at Universitas Pancasila, Jakarta, Indonesia. Part of this work was conducted and submitted to the Journal of Heritage Tourism during her academic appointment at the College of Tourism and Hospitality, University of Tabuk, Saudi Arabia. Her research focuses on sustainable and heritage tourism, as well as disaster management planning in tourism.

Marcus L. Stephenson is a Professor and Head of the Edge Hotel School at the University of Essex, Colchester, United Kingdom. He also holds an appointment as Adjunct Professor in the Faculty of Hospitality and Tourism Management at UCSI University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. His research focuses on critical perspectives in tourism studies, including cultural and heritage tourism, identity, representation and the social and political dimensions of tourism development.

Alexander Trupp is currently a guest professor in Human Geography at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. Before joining Innsbruck, he served as Associate Professor, Acting Head of the Asia Pacific Centre for Hospitality Research, and Deputy Dean for Research at Sunway University, Malaysia. His research focuses on social geographies, including (im)mobilities, migration, tourism, sustainability, digitalization and microbusinesses, with a strong emphasis on qualitative and creative methods.

Janianton Damanik is a Professor in the Department of Social Development and Welfare, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. His research focuses on social development and community livelihoods in tourism destinations, with particular attention to sustainability, resilience and local community change.

Daud A. Tanudirjo is a senior archaeologist affiliated with the Department of Archaeology at Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia. His work focuses on archaeology, cultural heritage, and heritage management, with particular attention to societal and tourism-related contexts.

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