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Visual Pedagogy of Religious Moderation: An Iconographic Analysis of Borobudur Reliefs

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Abstract

Although discussions on religious moderation are increasing worldwide, most studies still focus on theology or policy, and rarely consider visual and cultural sources. In this context, the reliefs of Borobudur Temple provide an important but often overlooked perspective. This study explores how religious moderation is expressed through the visual narratives found in these reliefs. Using a qualitative approach, it applies iconographic analysis, supported by interpretive readings of selected panels and relevant literature. The analysis highlights symbols, story patterns, and ethical meanings embedded in the reliefs. The findings show that Borobudur conveys key values of moderation, including tolerance, non-violence, compassion, cooperation, equality, and cultural integration, through visual narratives of ethical behavior and harmonious coexistence. More than just illustrations, these reliefs serve as a learning medium that shapes moral understanding. This study, therefore, introduces the idea of visual pedagogy of religious moderation and shows how cultural

heritage can serve as a meaningful resource for religious education in today's multicultural societies.

Keyword: Religious Moderation, Borobudur Reliefs, Local Wisdom, Social Harmony, Iconography

A. Introduction

Indonesia's long-standing religious and cultural diversity has created a plural social landscape, yet it also presents ongoing challenges in sustaining tolerance and social cohesion.¹ While religious moderation has been widely promoted as a framework to address these challenges, most discussions remain focused on the normative and policy levels, with limited attention to how moderating values are embedded and transmitted through cultural heritage.² In this regard, the reliefs of Borobudur Temple offer an important but underexplored perspective, as they visually represent ethical teachings of compassion, tolerance, and harmonious coexistence within a historically plural society.³

The reliefs of Borobudur function beyond religious illustration; they serve as symbolic expressions of religious moderation, including values such as tolerance, *ahimsa* (non-violence), social compassion, equality, cooperation, and cultural inclusivity.⁴ Stories like the self-sacrifice of King Sibi and the compassion of the Bodhisattva demonstrate how religious

¹Abdullah Haidar, *"Moderasi Beragama di Tengah Isu Kontemporer."* (Jakarta: Kementerian Agama RI, 2023), 63.

²Novita Siswayanti, Dede Burhanudin, Budiana Setiawan, Masmedia Pinem, Ahmad Yunani, and Dedi Supriadi. 2023. "Religious Moderation on the Night of 1st Suro at Borobudur for the Strengthening of Tourism". *Migration Letters* 20, no. 6 (2023), 1061-1078. <https://doi.org/10.59670/ml.v20i6.4883>.

³Ardelia Jihan Ulfahira, "Candi Borobudur Sebagai Identitas Kompetitif Indonesia dalam World Heritage Sites," *Doctoral Dissertation*, (Yogyakarta: UII, 2024).

⁴Mudji Sutrisno, *"Meniti Jejak-Jejak Estetika Nusantara,"* (Yogyakarta: PT. Kanisius, 2022), 192.

teachings are grounded in everyday life and social interaction.⁵ At the same time, Borobudur reflects strong elements of religious and cultural syncretism, integrating Indian Buddhist traditions with local Javanese elements such as clothing, rituals, and environment.⁶ However, despite these integrative values, contemporary Indonesia still faces challenges, as some extremist views misinterpret temples as symbols of disbelief, leading to stigmatization and potential destruction, in contrast to broader societal recognition of temples as national heritage.⁷ Religious symbols are also sometimes narrowly interpreted or manipulated to justify intolerance and radicalism.⁸

Similar issues can be observed beyond Indonesia, such as in Myanmar with the 969 Movement and MaBaTha (The Patriotic Association of Myanmar), where Buddhist teachings of *ahimsa* (peace) and *karuna* (compassion) have been reshaped into exclusivist religious nationalism.⁹ These cases highlight how

⁵Agus Akhmedi, "Religious Moderation in Indonesia's Diversity," *Jurnal Diklat Keagamaan* 13, no. 2 (2019), 45-55; Charles Li, King Śibi in the Vahnipurāṇa: "A critical edition & translation of the śiber upākhyāna," *ALT: Asian Literature and Translation* 10, No. 1 (2023), 1-46. <https://doi.org/10.18573/alt.58>.

⁶Andreas Martinus & Rahadhian Prajudi Herwindo, "The Comparative Study on Architectural Typo-Morphology of Borobudur-Prambanan Temple and Angkor Wat, Case Study on Mass Order, Floor Plan, Figure and Ornaments." *Riset Architecture* 2, no. 4, (2018), 335-359. <https://doi.org/10.26593/risa.v2i04.3046.335-359>; Katarzyna Kowal, "The Borobudur temple: the Buddhist architecture in Indonesia; History, structure, symbolism and conservation. Influence on the contemporary Indonesian culture." *Budownictwo i Architektura* 18, No. 2 (2019), 5-19. <https://doi.org/10.35784/bud-arch.550>.

⁷Panggah Ardiansyah, "Persepsi masyarakat sekitar terhadap pemanfaatan dan kelestarian Candi Borobudur," *Jurnal Konservasi Benda Cagar Budaya Borobudur* 4, No. 4 (2010), 25-29; Anisa Syahidatullah, Shovi Novitasari, Rosyidah, and Rufaidah Azzahra, "Seni Patung dalam Tinjauan Agama Islam dan Hindu," *Sanaamul Qur'an* 5, No. 2 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.62096/sq.v5i2.102>; Muhammad Aji Nugroho, "Inclusive-Multicultural Islamic Education for Former Terrorist Convicts," *Indonesian Journal of Islamic Education Studies*. 6 No. 2 (2023), 123-147. <https://doi.org/10.33367/ijies.v6i2.4269>.

⁸Elma Haryani, "Intolerance and Resistance of Communities Against Pluralism: A Case Study of Religious Harmony in The City of Bogor West Java," *Jurnal Harmoni* 18, No. 2 (2019), 282-299. <https://doi.org/10.32488/harmoniv18i2.405>.

⁹Zo Bilay, "The characteristics of violent religious nationalism: A case study of Mabatha against Rohingya Muslim in Myanmar," *Journal of Human Rights and Peace Studies* 8. No. 1 (2022), 89-110; Benjamin Schonthal, & Matthew J. Walton. "The (new) Buddhist nationalisms? Symmetries and specificities in Sri Lanka and Myanmar," *Contemporary Buddhism; An Interdisciplinary Journal* 17, no. 1 (2016), 81- 115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14639947.2016.1162419>.

religious traditions can be misused when moderation is replaced by rigid ideologies, resulting in conflict and violence.¹⁰ Although Borobudur holds strong potential as a source of local wisdom that promotes social cohesion and balanced religious identity, most scholarly studies still focus on its architecture, history, or doctrine. Studies examining Borobudur's reliefs as visual representations of religious moderation remain limited, as existing research tends to focus on theological and policy perspectives rather than on values embedded in cultural heritage and visual narratives.¹¹

Recent studies increasingly view religious heritage sites as "cultural texts" that carry ethical and social values, yet their approaches remain fragmented. In Southeast Asia, some research highlights how religion fosters social cohesion through tolerance and inclusivity, while others argue that moderation serves as a shared ethical principle across traditions, including in the Hindu-Buddhist heritage of Borobudur Temple.¹² In visual culture studies, iconography is often understood as a form of visual pedagogy that conveys moral values such as compassion, self-restraint, and social responsibility.¹³ However, most of these studies still treat heritage, moderation, and visual representation

¹⁰Muhammad Aji Nugroho, "Model dan Praktik Pendekatan Moderat dalam Pembinaan Keagamaan," (Yogyakarta: Istana Agensi, 2025), 8.

¹¹Tri Yatno, "Multikultural dan Moderasi Lintas Budaya di Candi Borobudur," *Jurnal Agama Buddha dan Ilmu Pengetahuan* 8, no. 1. (2022), 36-47. <https://doi.org/10.53565/abip.v8i1.552>.

¹²Mohamad Dindin Hamam Sidik and Rika Dilawati, "The Role of Religion in Building Peace in Southeast Asia: A Systematic Literature Review," *Focus* 6, no. 1 (2025): <https://doi.org/10.26593/focus.v6i1.9350>; Suharno, Lasiyo, and Hastanti Widy Nugroho, "The Relevance of Buddhayana Principles to Religious Moderation in Indonesia," *International Journal of Nusantara Islam*, 14, no. 1 (2026), 147-160. <https://doi.org/10.15575/ijniv14i1.51875>; So Tju Shinta Lee, and Salim Lee. 2025. "Reflections on The Maitrakanyaka-Avadana at Candi Borobudur: The Teaching of Exchanging and Equalizing," *AMERTA* 43, no. 1. (2025), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.55981/amt.2025.4907>.

¹³Hong Zhang, and Cheryl Zhenyu Qian, "The Interplay of Religion and the Visual Arts: A Bibliometric Network Analysis (1991-2023)," *Religions* 15, no. 4 (2024), 481. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15040481>

as separate domains.¹⁴ Comparative analyses of sites such as Angkor Wat and Prambanan Temple further demonstrate how religious symbolism supports social cohesion. Yet, they largely remain descriptive and stop short of interpreting the reliefs as structured symbolic systems.¹⁵

Despite the growing body of research on religious moderation and Borobudur, a significant gap remains. Studies on moderation tend to focus on doctrinal and policy dimensions. At the same time, Borobudur scholarship is often limited to discussions of art, architecture, and religious teachings, with little attention to the reliefs as systematic representations of moderation. In response to this gap, this study positions Borobudur's reliefs as both a symbolic system and as a visual pedagogy rooted in local wisdom. Through an iconographic and socio-cultural approach, it highlights key values, such as tolerance, non-violence, social compassion, equality, cooperation, and cultural integration, as actively constructed and communicated through visual narratives, and as highly relevant for promoting social harmony in contemporary multicultural societies.

To maintain analytical focus, this study primarily draws on Roland Barthes' visual semiotics to explain how religious moderation is expressed through the reliefs of Borobudur Temple.¹⁶ Within this framework, the reliefs are understood as systems of signs that communicate layered meanings beyond their

¹⁴Elma Haryani, "Intolerance and Resistance of Communities Against Pluralism": 282-299. <https://doi.org/10.32488/harmoni.v18i2.405>; Benjamin Schonthal, and Matthew J. Walton, "The (new) Buddhist nationalisms? Symmetries and specificities in Sri Lanka and Myanmar," *Contemporary Buddhism; An Interdisciplinary Journal* 17, no. 1 (2016), 81- 115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14639947.2016.1162419>.

¹⁵Andreas Martinus, and Rahadhian Prajudi Herwindo, "The Comparative Study on Architectural Typo-Morphology of Borobudur-Prambanan Temple and Angkor Wat, Case Study on Mass Order, Floor Plan, Figure and Ornaments" *Riset Architecture* 2, no. 4, (2018), 335-359. <https://doi.org/10.26593/risav2i04.3046.335-359>; Chanratana Chen, "Angkor Wat: A Transcultural History of Heritages," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 52, no. 1 (2021), 133-40. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463421000230>.

¹⁶Roland Barthes, "Mythologies: The Complete Edition" (New York: Hill & Wang, 2012), 109-117.

literal form, conveyed through imagery, narrative sequences, gestures, and spatial composition.¹⁷ These visual elements transform abstract religious teachings into accessible moral messages, allowing ethical values such as tolerance, compassion, and non-violence to be interpreted within everyday social contexts.¹⁸ By focusing on semiotic analysis, the study positions Borobudur's reliefs not merely as artistic or historical artifacts but as visual pedagogies that actively construct and transmit the values of religious moderation in ways that remain meaningful for contemporary plural societies.¹⁹

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the symbolic meanings of the reliefs of Borobudur Temple in relation to religious moderation, tolerance, and social harmony. It examines 20 selected panels from the Lalitavistara, Jataka, and Avadana series that show ethical stories, human interactions, and values such as compassion, non-violence, and cooperation. Each visual scene is analyzed as the main unit of study. Data were collected through literature review, observation, documentation, and historical analysis. The study uses iconographic and semiotic approaches to interpret symbols and meanings, supported by steps such as identifying symbols, grouping themes, and drawing conclusions, with validity ensured through data triangulation. Overall, the findings show that Borobudur's reliefs serve as a form of visual learning that connects past values with current issues like pluralism, social harmony, and responses to intolerance.

¹⁷Eko Punto Hendro, "Simbol: Arti, Fungsi, dan Implikasi Metodologisnya," *Endogami: Jurnal Ilmiah Kajian Antropologi* 3, no. 2 (2020), 158-165. <https://doi.org/10.14710/endogami.3.2.158-165>

¹⁸Noor Latif, "Perancangan Ornamen Harini Melalui Kajian Visual Relief Latitavistara Pada Candi Borobudur," *Humaniora: Journal of Indonesian Culture and Society*, 5, no. 2 (2014), 1087-97. <https://doi.org/10.21512/humaniorav5i2.3225>.

¹⁹Katarzyna Kowal, "The Borobudur temple: the Buddhist architecture in Indonesia"; 5-19. <https://doi.org/10.35784/bud-arch.550>; Wiwin Tania, and Tri Yatno, "Akulturasi Buddhisme Di Jawa: Integrasi Ajaran Buddha Dan Budaya Lokal Dalam Pembentukan Simbolik Sosial," *Jurnal Budi Pekerti Agama Buddha* 3, no. 3 (2025), 29-40. <https://doi.org/10.61132/jbpabv3i3.1842>

B. Discussion

1. Symbols in Borobudur Reliefs Representing Religious Moderation

Borobudur Temple can be read as a semiotic system in which 2,672 relief panels operate as visual signifiers of ethical, spiritual, and social values.²⁰ Drawing on Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, these reliefs function at both denotative (narrative representation) and connotative (mythological,, cultural-ideological) levels, transforming visual narratives into normative ethical discourse.²¹ Empirical data from interviews with local guides and historians confirm that "*the reliefs are understood as practical moral references,*"²² indicating their role as a form of visual pedagogy embedded in lived experience.

The King Sibi relief exemplifies this dual structure. Denotatively, it depicts a ruler sacrificing himself for others; connotatively, it conveys ideals of universal empathy and social responsibility. In Barthesian terms, the figure of the king operates as a "myth" that naturalizes moral leadership grounded in altruism, thereby articulating moderation as a balance between individual and collective interests. Similarly, the Quail narrative, while denotatively illustrating selective feeding and non-violence, connotes ahimsa as a disciplined ethic of self-restraint. Ms Ha stated that "*quails teach self-awareness and ethical self-control, which reflect a moderate approach to thinking and acting.*"²³ This symbolic layering reinforces moderation as an internalized moral disposition rather than a purely doctrinal construct.

²⁰Museum and Cultural Heritage, "*Borobudur Relief Documentation Report,*" (Magelang: Balai Konservasi Borobudur, 2025); Borobudur, "*Wikipedia,*" <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borobudur>. accessed on October 10, 2025.

²¹Roland Barthes, "*Mythologies: The Complete Edition,*" 109–117.

²²Local Guides and historians, *Interview,* October 27, 2025.

²³Researcher of Islamic civilization and an expert on cultural acculturation, *Interview,* September 25, 2025

Interreligious coexistence, represented through panels depicting Brahmanas (Hindu priests and scholar caste), Buddhist monks, and Hindu communities, further demonstrates the semiotic production of tolerance. Mr. He noted that “*the reliefs capture coexistence, showing that religious moderation is lived, not merely prescribed.*”²⁴ At the denotative level, these scenes portray plural religious actors; at the mythological level, they construct harmony as a normative social ideal. This aligns with studies on religious iconography, which show that visual symbols can cultivate interfaith tolerance and shared social imaginaries.²⁵ Here, moderation emerges not as an abstraction but as a socially enacted and visually mediated practice.

The reliefs also encode cultural syncretism as a modality of moderation.²⁶ The integration of Javanese material culture dress, instruments, landscapes, and fauna, with Indian Buddhist narratives, signifies, at the connotative level, a process of cultural negotiation that sustains coherence without erasing difference.²⁷ Such semiotic hybridity reflects a broader pattern of religious syncretism in which moderation is realized through the harmonization of diverse symbolic systems while maintaining core ethical commitments.

Moreover, the spatial sequencing of reliefs along the pilgrimage path constitutes a narrative pedagogy. Denotatively arranged as episodic stories, these panels, at the mythological level, map a trajectory from individual ethical awareness to collective responsibility. This structured progression resonates

²⁴Borobudur Unit Staff, *Interview*, October 27, 2025

²⁵Eko Punto Hendro, “Simbol: Arti, Fungsi, dan Implikasi Metodologisnya,” 158-165. <https://doi.org/10.14710/endogami.3.2.158-165>;

²⁶Enny S. Sardiyarso, Popi Puspitasari, Rita Walaretina, and Agustin R. Lakawa, “The reading of borobudur temple reliefs: Virtue architecture,” *AIP Conf. Proc.* 2706, no. 1 (2023), 020154. <https://doi.org/10.1063/5.0120648>

²⁷Wiwin Tania, and Tri Yatno, “Akulturasi Buddhisme Di Jawa,” 29-40. <https://doi.org/10.61132/jbpab.v3i3.1842>

with sociological perspectives on moral formation and social cohesion, positioning the temple as an integrated ethical-educational space. Finally, narrative motifs such as the turtle assisting a merchant encode altruism and cooperation. While denotatively representing acts of help, they connotatively affirm social solidarity as a foundational value. These symbolic constructions suggest that religious moderation encompasses both ethical restraint and proactive social engagement, thus reinforcing its relevance as a lived, relational practice. Here are some images that illustrate the explanation.



Figure 1. Borobudur Relief as a Representation of Social Harmony and Religious Moderation

The relief on the wall of Borobudur Temple above depicts the social and religious life of ancient Javanese society within the Buddhist tradition. A group of human figures is shown seated in a row with serene postures; some are engaged in discussion, listening to teachings, or performing ritual activities. This composition reflects a communal atmosphere, likely a spiritual gathering or a social event that brings together people from all social strata. Details of clothing, jewelry, and body gestures indicate social status as well as the acculturation of local culture with Buddhist teachings. Symbolically, this relief emphasizes the values of togetherness, respect for spiritual figures, and social

harmony. Elements such as sacred buildings, trees, and natural ornaments reinforce the relationship between humans, the environment, and the sacred. In a broader context, this scene represents religious moderation, marked by dialogue, learning, and peaceful coexistence, in line with Buddhist teachings on balance, compassion, and inner peace.



Figure 2. The Borobudur Relief: An Indicator of Religious Moderation

The relief in this second image can be interpreted as a visual representation of religious moderation encompassing four key indicators: nationalism, non-violence, tolerance, and adaptability to local culture. The value of nationalism is reflected in the depiction of a harmonious, orderly communal life as an expression of collective awareness of maintaining social order, which, in a modern context, aligns with a commitment to unity. The principle of non-violence is evident in the absence of conflict or aggression, where all figures are depicted in a peaceful, dialogic, and serene atmosphere. Meanwhile, tolerance is evident in the interactions among figures with diverse roles without exclusion, reflecting a spirit of mutual respect in social and spiritual life. As for the adaptive attitude toward local

culture, it is illustrated by the integration of Buddhist teachings into Javanese culture, evident in attire, ornaments, and daily-life settings, showing that religious values can engage with local wisdom without losing their essence. Thus, this relief not only records historical reality but also presents an ideal model of religious practice that is inclusive, peaceful, and contextual.



Figure 3. Spiritual Authority and Social Harmony in the Borobudur Reliefs

The relief on the wall of Borobudur Temple depicts a central figure, likely a spiritual teacher, sitting calmly and surrounded by people who are listening, interacting, and participating in religious activities. Around them are also scenes of daily life, such as rituals of offering, social interaction, and elements of nature and sacred buildings. This composition reflects a society in which spiritual values are closely connected to everyday life, guided by moral leadership and maintaining social harmony. Seen through the perspective of religious moderation, the relief highlights key values such as tolerance, peaceful interaction, balance, and openness to local culture. The absence of conflict emphasizes non-violence, while

the integration of local cultural elements shows how religion adapts to its social context. Overall, the scene conveys a simple yet powerful image a harmonious, moderate religious life in ancient Javanese society.

The reliefs also incorporate environmental and everyday life elements, such as local flora, fauna, and village settings, which normalize ethical and tolerant behavior within familiar cultural contexts. Field observations and interviews revealed that these representations serve to embed moderation in daily life, making abstract principles accessible to ordinary people. This illustrates how Borobudur's visual culture merges ethical teachings with lived experience, demonstrating that religious moderation is both aspirational and practical.

In conclusion, Borobudur reliefs systematically encode religious moderation through symbolic storytelling, cultural syncretism, practical tolerance, cooperative ethics, and spatial pedagogy. Field interviews confirm that these narratives are interpreted as guidance for empathy, non-violence, tolerance, and social harmony. By integrating historical context, semiotic analysis, and social representation, the reliefs function as enduring visual texts that communicate ethical and social principles, offering a model for contemporary plural societies to navigate diversity, tolerance, and communal cohesion.

2. Values of Tolerance and Social Harmony in Borobudur Reliefs

Borobudur reliefs can be understood as visual narratives that encode meanings related to tolerance and social harmony. Within the semiotic framework of Roland Barthes, these reliefs function as systems of signs, where visual elements, such as figures, gestures, spatial arrangements, and narrative sequences, act as signifiers that convey layered meanings.²⁸ Rather than

²⁸Roland Barthes, *Mythologies: The Complete Edition*: 109–117.

serving as direct evidence of social impact, the reliefs are better understood as symbolic representations that convey ethical ideas within their historical and cultural contexts.²⁹ In this sense, the meanings of tolerance and coexistence are not explicitly stated but emerge from how social interactions and cultural elements are visually arranged and narrated.³⁰

At the denotative level, several relief panels depict diverse social and religious actors engaging in shared social spaces through everyday activities, rituals, and interactions. These scenes depict coexistence as it appears in daily life. At the connotative level, however, they suggest deeper patterns of mutual recognition across religious boundaries, where differences are acknowledged without tension. In Barthesian terms, these repeated visual forms gradually build a cultural “myth,” presenting pluralism not as an abstract concept but as a natural and lived reality. This meaning is further strengthened through visual integration, in which ritual objects, clothing styles, and architectural motifs from different traditions appear in the same scenes. Denotatively, these are artistic details, but connotatively, they reflect processes of cultural encounter and adaptation. At the level of myth, they construct an image of harmony that embraces, rather than erases, diversity.

This interpretive perspective is also reflected in limited field findings. Interviews with local scholars, such as Mr. He, suggest that “*these reliefs are often understood as illustrating everyday tolerance rather than abstract doctrine.*”³¹ This view resonates with broader scholarship that sees Southeast Asian

²⁹Michael Alexander, “Pemaknaan Simbol Representasional Lintas Agama”: 236, <https://doi.org/10.22146/jf.57053>.

³⁰Suharno, Lasiyo, and Hastanti Widy Nugroho, “The Relevance of Buddhayana Principles to Religious Moderation”; 147-160. <https://doi.org/10.15575/ijni.v14i1.51875>

³¹Borobudur Unit Staff, *Interview*, October 27, 2025

religious traditions as historically accommodating pluralism.³² The visual narratives themselves reinforce this reading, particularly through the integration of Hindu and Buddhist rituals, attire, and architectural motifs within shared scenes. Field observations further indicate that local communities occasionally refer to these reliefs when explaining social harmony, positioning them as cultural exemplars rather than prescriptive models.³³ In line with this, scholars such as Morgan and Freedberg argue that religious iconography serves as a form of visual pedagogy, communicating ethical values through narrative and imagery rather than direct instruction.³⁴

Ethical values are also conveyed through narrative reliefs such as the King Sibi story. At the denotative level, the scene depicts a king performing a self-sacrifice. Connotatively, this act represents compassion, fairness, and moral responsibility toward others. At the level of myth, the story goes beyond a single event and offers a broader ethical model in which leadership is defined by restraint and care. In this way, the reliefs link personal virtue to social harmony, suggesting that a balanced, ethical attitude is essential to maintaining coexistence in a diverse society. As a local guide noted, *“the king’s self-sacrifice teaches both social responsibility and care for all living beings.”*³⁵ This reflects moderation as an ethical practice grounded in empathy.

³²Benjamin Schonthal, & Matthew J. Walton. “The (new) Buddhist nationalisms?”: 81- 115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14639947.2016.1162419>; Noor Latif, “Perancangan Ornamen ‘Harini’ Melalui Kajian Visual Relief Latitavistara”: 1087-1097. <https://doi.org/10.21512/humaniora.v5i2.3225>.

³³Staff of the Borobudur Museum and Cultural Heritage Unit, *“Field Observation Findings,”* September 27, 2025.

³⁴David Morgan, *“The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 3–5; David Freedberg, *“The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response”* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 17–19.

³⁵Local guides and historians, *Interview,* September 27, 2025.

Taken together, the reliefs of Borobudur Temple can be understood as a visual system that communicates tolerance and social harmony through layered meanings. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic perspective, these panels move from simple depictions of everyday life to deeper cultural messages that present pluralism as a natural, lived reality. Supported by field findings, the reliefs serve as visual pedagogy, conveying values such as empathy, self-restraint, and social responsibility through symbolic narratives, such as the story of King Sibi. In this way, they not only represent coexistence but also shape moderation as a lived and relational ethical practice. Here are some images that illustrate the explanation.



Figure 4. King Sibi teaches social responsibility and care for all living beings

Similarly, reliefs depicting non-violence, such as the Quail story, present scenes of avoiding harm to other beings. While denotatively depicting specific events, these images convey connotations of self-control and respect for life. Mr. Ha explained that *“these narratives were designed to encourage moral reflection*

and non-violent behavior."³⁶ In Barthes' framework, such representations help construct a broader moral narrative in which non-violence becomes a normalized ethical principle embedded in everyday conduct rather than an exceptional virtue.³⁷ As Mr. Heri stated, "*this integration validates local customs while preserving spiritual teachings,*"³⁸ indicating that tolerance emerges through cultural negotiation and lived ethical practice.

The reliefs also encode meanings of cooperation and collective responsibility.³⁹ Narratives such as the Kura-Kura story visually depict acts of helping and mutual support. At the level of denotation, these are simple depictions of interaction; however, at the level of connotation, they signal the importance of social interdependence. As cultural myths, these recurring motifs contribute to an understanding of society as a cooperative order in which harmony is sustained through shared responsibility.⁴⁰ Devotees often follow these paths as reflective practices; this suggests the reliefs function as structured visual media that communicate shared moral awareness.⁴¹

In addition, elements of cultural integration are visible in the presence of local Javanese features, such as music, dance, and environmental details, alongside Buddhist

³⁶Local religious leaders, *Interview*, October 27, 2025.

³⁷Supardi and Jauharudin, "Crafting Interfaith Harmony through Ritual and Identity Integration: A Localised Muslim-Hindu Model from Saren, Bali, Indonesia," *Jurnal Wawasan* 10, no. 1 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.15575/jw.v10i1.44464>.

³⁸Borobudur Unit Staff, *Interview*, October 27, 2025

³⁹Michael Alexander, "Pemaknaan Simbol Representasional Lintas Agama: Sebuah Upaya Merumuskan Alur Rekursif Imposisi Makna Simbol," *Jurnal Filsafat* 30, no. 2 (2020), 236, <https://doi.org/10.22146/jf.57053>.

⁴⁰Irwansyah, Moh Soehaedha, and M. Muji Buddin SM, "Religious Syncretism as a New Model for Interreligious Harmony: A Study of Tridharma in Indonesia," *Pharos Journal of Theology* 106, no. 4 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.106.4024>;

⁴¹Émile Durkheim, "*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*," trans. Carol Cosman, ed. Mark S. Cladis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 47.

narrative structures.⁴² Denotatively, these elements reflect artistic contextualization; connotatively, they suggest a process of adaptation between universal teachings and local culture. At the mythic level, in which produces an image of inclusivity, where religious values are expressed through culturally familiar forms, allowing them to be more easily internalized within society.

Spatial arrangement also plays a significant semiotic role. The sequential organization of relief panels along the pilgrimage path structures the viewer’s experience into a narrative progression. Denotatively, this reflects architectural design; connotatively, it suggests a guided movement through stages of moral reflection.⁴³ At the level of myth, this spatial sequencing constructs an implicit pedagogical model, where ethical understanding develops gradually through visual engagement. The semiotic interpretation developed in this study can be summarized in the following table:

Tabel 1. Identified Values of Tolerance and Social Harmony in Borobudur Relief Narratives

Core Theme	Visual Sign (Relief)	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning	Myth (Barthesian Interpretation)
Pluralism	Hindu–Buddhist coexistence scenes	Different groups in shared space	Social interaction across traditions	Coexistence as a normalized social order
Ethical Moderation	Raja Sibi narrative	Act of self-sacrifice	Compassion and moral responsibility	Moderation as ethical leadership
Non-violence	Quail story	Avoidance	Self-restraint	Non-violence as

⁴²Cultural Heritage Unit, Documentation Report on the Borobudur Reliefs, “*Field Observation Findings*,” September 27, 2025. Tri Yatno, “Multikultural dan Moderasi Lintas Budaya di Candi Borobudur,” 36-47. <https://doi.org/10.53565/abip.v8i1.552>

⁴³Borobudur Unit Staff, *Interview*, October 27, 2025

Core Theme	Visual Sign (Relief)	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning	Myth (Barthesian Interpretation)
		of harm	and respect for life	everyday value
Cooperation	Kura-Kura narrative	Helping behavior	Mutual aid and interdependence	Social harmony through cooperation
Cultural Integration	Javanese-Buddhist elements	Mixed cultural features	Adaptation and negotiation	Inclusivity as cultural norm
Spatial Pedagogy	Sequential relief arrangement	Ordered visual narrative	Guided moral reflection	Ethics learned through visual progression

It is important to note that this analysis does not claim that these reliefs directly shape contemporary social behavior or policy. Rather, based on limited field observations and interviews, the reliefs are occasionally referenced by local communities and cultural practitioners when discussing values of harmony. In this sense, their role is better understood as symbolic and interpretive, functioning as cultural resources that contribute to narratives of coexistence rather than as causal determinants of social outcomes.

Overall, the Borobudur reliefs can be understood as a form of visual pedagogy, not in the sense of direct instruction, but as a system of signs that communicates ethical meanings through imagery and narrative structure. Through a semiotic reading, these reliefs reveal how values such as tolerance, compassion, and social harmony are visually constructed, culturally embedded, and continuously open to reinterpretation within contemporary plural societies.

3. Contemporary Application of Religious Moderation in Borobudur Reliefs

Borobudur’s reliefs continue to function as a meaningful reference for contemporary social and religious life, particularly

in educational and community contexts. Interviews with local actors show that these visual narratives are not only appreciated as heritage but are actively used as teaching tools. For instance, Ms. Wa, a local educator, “*explained that stories such as Raja Sibi and the Quail are incorporated into classroom discussions to help students reflect on ethical dilemmas, empathy, and responsibility.*”⁴⁴ In this context, the reliefs are interpreted not merely as historical depictions but as narrative devices that encourage moral reasoning. This supports Irwansyah et al.’s argument that religious symbols from the past can inform present-day approaches to moderation, particularly when embedded in lived educational practices.⁴⁵

A similar pattern appears in interreligious engagement. Mr. San, a heritage guide, noted that “*during interfaith dialogues in Central Java, the Borobudur reliefs are often introduced as concrete examples of how difference has been historically negotiated.*”⁴⁶ Rather than being treated as abstract ideals, the images of Brahmanas, Buddhist monks, and Hindu communities sharing space are discussed as visual evidence of socially practiced harmony. Participants in these dialogues, however, do not always interpret the symbols uniformly; some see them as idealized representations, while others view them as realistic models that can still be emulated. This variation in interpretation suggests that the effectiveness of the reliefs lies not in a fixed meaning, but in their capacity to open space for discussion and reflection, aligning with Nasir and Rijal’s view that moderation is enacted through everyday interaction.⁴⁷

⁴⁴Local Educators, *Interview*, October 15, 2025

⁴⁵Irwansyah, Moh Soehaedha, and Muji Buddin, “Religious Syncretism as a New Model for Interreligious Harmony: A Study of Tridharma in Indonesia,” 106, no. 4 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.106.4024>;

⁴⁶Heritage guide, *Interview*, September 27, 2025.

⁴⁷Muhammad Nasir and Muhammad Rijal, “Keeping the Middle Path: Mainstreaming Religious Moderation through Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia,” *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 11, no. 2 (2021), 213-241, <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v11i2.213-241>.

The ethical narratives embedded in the reliefs also inform community-based initiatives. Local cultural practitioners describe how stories such as Raja Sibi are used in workshops addressing leadership and social responsibility, while the Quail narrative is employed in campaigns promoting non-violence. These uses demonstrate that the reliefs operate as adaptable ethical frameworks rather than prescriptive doctrines. Their relevance emerges through reinterpretation in specific contexts, where facilitators connect the narrative elements to contemporary social issues, including radicalism and communal conflict. In this way, the symbolic content becomes analytically meaningful only when linked to how communities actively engage with it.

The integration of diverse cultural elements in the reliefs further provides a basis for discussing cross-cultural across traditions. As highlighted by Mr. He, *“the combination of Indian Buddhist sources with Javanese cultural forms is often used in community discussions to illustrate that difference does not necessarily lead to conflict, but can be managed through adaptation.”*⁴⁸ Importantly, this interpretation is not universally accepted; some community members read it as historical evidence of cultural blending, while others interpret it as a normative guide for present interactions. This indicates that the reliefs function as open texts whose meanings are shaped through dialogue rather than fixed representation.

Practical lessons are also drawn from narratives emphasizing collaboration.⁴⁹ The Kura-Kura story, for example, is frequently referenced in village programs that focus on collective problem-solving. As noted by Mr. Ha, *“facilitators use the story to initiate discussions about shared responsibility in addressing local challenges.”*⁵⁰ Here, the relief does not directly

⁴⁸Borobudur Unit Staff, *Interview*, October 27, 2025

⁴⁹Émile Durkheim, *“The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,”*; 47.

⁵⁰Local religious leaders, *Interview*, October 15, 2025.

determine behavior but serves as a symbolic entry point for discussing social ethics. Its effectiveness depends on how it is contextualized within specific community needs and experiences.⁵¹ The analytical framework of the discussion above is presented in the following table:

Tabel 2. Religious Moderation Values in Borobudur Reliefs (Semiotic Interpretation)

Indicator	Relief Representation	Semiotic Meaning (Connotation-Myth)	Contemporary Relevance
Ethical Responsibility	Raja Sibi	Compassion and self-sacrifice as moral leadership (myth of ethical governance)	Basis for ethical education and social welfare programs
Non-Violence	Quail / Bodhisattva	Restraint and care as everyday ethics (myth of harm avoidance)	Anti-violence education and interfaith dialogue
Interreligious Relations	Brahmanas, Buddhists, Hindus	Mutual recognition in shared spaces (myth of normalized plurality)	Model for interfaith engagement
Cultural Adaptation	Javanese-Indian elements	Negotiation and integration of traditions (myth of dialogical culture)	Multicultural education and cultural programs
Social Cooperation	Kura-Kura story	Collective responsibility and mutual aid (myth of social cohesion)	Community-based collaboration initiatives

⁵¹Gilles Beauchamp, "Post-Christendom Ignorance in Secular Society," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 42, no. 1 (2025), 431-449, <https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12776>; Michael Alexander, "Pemaknaan Simbol Representasional Lintas Agama": 236, <https://doi.org/10.22146/jf.57053>.

Indicator	Relief Representation	Semiotic Meaning (Connotation-Myth)	Contemporary Relevance
Social Equality	Siddhartha with common people	Inclusivity and accessibility (myth of egalitarian leadership)	Inclusive leadership and social policy
Harmonious Life	Mixed religious symbols	Unity within diversity (myth of lived harmony)	Public discourse on pluralism and coexistence

The field data strengthens this semiotic reading by demonstrating how these layers of meaning continue to operate in present contexts. When educators, guides, and community facilitators use the reliefs in teaching, dialogue, and social programs, they are effectively reactivating the connotative and mythic dimensions of the images. The reliefs are not interpreted in a single fixed way; instead, their meanings are negotiated through discussion, sometimes seen as ideal representations, other times as practical models. This variability confirms Barthes' idea that myth functions as a cultural system open to reinterpretation.⁵² Thus, religious moderation in Borobudur is not only visually encoded but also socially reproduced, as communities engage with, reinterpret, and apply these symbolic narratives in everyday life.⁵³

In addition, the spatial arrangement of Borobudur contributes to how these messages are understood and applied. The sequential layout of the pilgrimage path is often adapted for educational and reflective activities, in which participants are guided through stages of discussion that

⁵²Roland Barthes, *Mythologies: The Complete Edition*, 109–117.

⁵³Michael Alexander, "Pemaknaan Simbol Representasional Lintas Agama": 236, <https://doi.org/10.22146/jf.57053>.

mirror the narrative progression of the reliefs.⁵⁴ This structured engagement illustrates how visual form and spatial experience work together to support ethical reflection, reinforcing Durkheim's idea that shared symbols can shape collective awareness when they are embedded in social practice.

Overall, the reliefs of Borobudur can be understood as a form of visual pedagogy whose significance emerges through interaction rather than passive observation. The narratives of Raja Sibi, the Quail, the Kura-Kura, and scenes of interreligious encounter provide flexible interpretive resources that communities use in education, dialogue, and social programs. Their contribution to contemporary society lies not simply in representing values such as empathy, restraint, and mutual respect, but in enabling ongoing processes of interpretation through which these values are negotiated and made relevant. The consistency between theoretical perspectives, such as semiotics, religious moderation, and visual culture, and the empirical findings underscores Borobudur's role as a dynamic cultural text that connects historical symbolism with present social realities.

4. A Dialogical Reading of Ethical Values in the Borobudur Reliefs

Rather than positioning Islamic teachings as a framework that explains or redefines the reliefs, this section approaches them as part of a broader ethical conversation across traditions. The values depicted, such as empathy, non-violence, social responsibility, and coexistence, can be read as shared moral concerns that resonate with the Islamic concept of *wasathiyah* (moderation), without reducing the reliefs to

⁵⁴Wiwini Tania, and Tri Yatno, "Akulturasi Buddhisme Di Jawa," 29-40. <https://doi.org/10.61132/jbpab.v3i3.1842>

an Islamic lens.⁵⁵ In the Qur'anic notion of *ummatah wasatan* (universal human rights) (Qur'an 2:143), moderation reflects balance, justice, and social responsibility, allowing for a dialogical reading in which Islamic ethics meet, rather than reinterpret, the moral universe expressed in Borobudur's visual narratives.⁵⁶

For example, the story of Raja Sibi, which illustrates self-sacrifice for the well-being of others, parallels Islamic ideas of ethical responsibility and *maslahah* (public good). Yet, it is important to acknowledge that this convergence does not imply equivalence of origin.⁵⁷ Instead, it shows how different traditions articulate similar moral aspirations through distinct symbolic languages. A similar pattern appears in the quail narrative, where themes of restraint and care can be placed in conversation with Islamic notions of *tahdhib al-nafs* (self-discipline) and *la darara wa la dirar* (the avoidance of harm), without claiming that the relief itself conveys Islamic doctrine.⁵⁸

The Quail relief, emphasizing restraint, mindfulness, and *ahimsa* (non-violence), can be examined through the Islamic framework of *tahdhib al-nafs* (disciplining the self) and the prohibition of *zulm* (harm and injustice). Islam does not glorify violence as a normative religious behavior;

⁵⁵Muhammad Aji Nugroho, Arif Billah, Yulinar Ainir Rahmah, Linda Trisnadariawati, "Green Wasathiyah Campus as a Space for Transforming Islamic Wasathiyah Values through Ecotheology," *Analisa: Journal Of Social Science and Religion*, 10, no. 1 (2025), 79-100. <https://doi.org/10.18784/analisa.v10i1.3206>.

⁵⁶Mohammad Hashim Kamali, "The Middle Path of Moderation in Islam: The Qur'anic Principle of Wasathiyah" (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 49-58; Muhammad Aji Nugroho, "Model dan Praktik Pendekatan Moderat dalam Pembinaan Keagamaan"; 74.

⁵⁷Wahibur Rokhman, Muhammad Qoes Atieq, Forbis Ahamed, Shuana Zafar Nasir, and Sehrish Shahid, "Exploring Workplace Happiness: Islamic Leadership and Work Ethics Driving Engagement and Helping Behaviour". *Islamic Guidance and Counseling Journal* 8, No 1 (2025), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.25217/0020258558400>.

⁵⁸Muhammad Aji Nugroho, and Arif Billah, "Developing a Scientific-Based Instrument to Measure Wasathiyah Values among Islamic University Students," *Indonesian Journal of Islamic Education Studies (IJIES)* 8, no. 1 (2025), 73-92. <https://doi.org/10.33367/ijies.v8i1.7448>.

instead, it promotes *silm* (peace), *rahmah* (mercy), and ethical restraint, even in situations of conflict.⁵⁹ Qur'an 5:32, which equates the preservation of one life with the preservation of all humanity, reinforces the moral gravity of non-violence. In this regard, the reliefs serve as visual reminders of ethical self-regulation, a key component of Islamic moral psychology and social ethics.

Scenes depicting the peaceful coexistence of Brahmanas, Buddhist monks, and Hindu communities strongly parallel the Islamic concept of *tasamuh* (tolerance) and *ta'ayush silmi* (peaceful coexistence). Historically, Islamic governance models, such as the Medina Charter, demonstrated how religious plurality could be managed through mutual recognition, justice, and shared civic responsibility.⁶⁰ From this perspective, Borobudur's reliefs illustrate a lived form of tolerance that Islam also upholds: coexistence grounded in ethical interaction rather than theological homogenization. This reinforces the argument that religious moderation in Islam is relational and practical, not merely doctrinal.

The same dialogical approach applies to cultural integration in the reliefs. The blending of Javanese and Indian elements reflects processes of adaptation and negotiation that can be compared with the Islamic recognition of *'urf* (local custom), yet this comparison remains analytical rather

⁵⁹Maqbool Hassan Gilani, Saima Ali, and Ghulam Mohyiddeen, "Reimagining Islamic Discourse: Towards A Global Ethical Framework For Contemporary Leadership". *Al-Shajarah Journal of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC)*, (2024), 103-120. <https://doi.org/10.31436/shajarah.vi.1931>

⁶⁰Abdul Malik Ghozali, "Implementation of Islamic Community Development in The Charter of Medina," *Ijtima'iyya: Jurnal Pengembangan Masyarakat Islam* 18, no. 2 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.24042/ijpmi.v18i2.28541>; Nasir Hassan Wani and Areesha Azhar, "The First Social Contract? Situating the Prophetic Pledge of Allegiance within the Trend of Global Constitutionalism," *Al-Adalah: Jurnal Hukum dan Politik Islam* 28, no. 1 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.35719/aladalah.v28i1.568>.

than appropriate.⁶¹ Likewise, narratives of cooperation, such as the Kura-Kura story, can be read alongside Islamic teachings on *ta'awun* (mutual assistance), not as identical teachings, but as comparable ethical orientations that emerge in different cultural contexts.

Importantly, this perspective emphasizes that Borobudur's reliefs should first be understood within their own historical and religious setting. Islamic concepts are introduced here only as a secondary analytical lens to highlight ethical intersections, not to reinterpret or subsume Buddhist meanings. This approach helps maintain critical distance while still allowing the study to contribute to broader discussions on religious moderation and shared moral values.

In this sense, the encounter between Borobudur's visual narratives and Islamic ethical thought demonstrates that moderation can function as a cross-cultural moral language. The aim is not to Islamize the reliefs, but to show how different traditions can engage in constructive dialogue through overlapping ethical concerns. Such a perspective supports interreligious understanding by focusing on points of connection while respecting the integrity and autonomy of each tradition.

C. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the reliefs of Borobudur Temple serve as a form of visual pedagogy, conveying the ethical values of moderation, tolerance, and social harmony through symbolic narratives and spatial arrangements. Theoretically, by employing Barthes' visual semiotics, this research contributes to expanding the analysis of religious moderation beyond textual traditions into visual-cultural domains. Methodologically, it highlights the

⁶¹Ayman Shabana, "Custom in Islamic Law and Legal Theory: The Development of the Concepts of *'Urf* and *'Ādah* in the Islamic Legal Tradition" (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 49-58; Omar Farahat, "The Foundation of Norms in Islamic Jurisprudence and Theology" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1-25.

importance of integrating visual analysis with field data to capture how meanings are socially interpreted and practiced.

However, this study is limited to a specific site and interpretive framework, which may not fully represent broader cross-cultural variations. Future research is encouraged to explore comparative studies across different religious heritage sites and to incorporate interdisciplinary approaches to deepen the understanding of visual representations of moderation in diverse sociocultural contexts.

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