



THE SOCIAL LIFE OF 9TH-CENTURY JAVANESE SOCIETY: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF THE KARMAWIBHANGGA RELIEFS AT BOROBUDUR TEMPLE

Nicholas Ferdeta Lakusa^{1*}

¹Performing Arts Education, Faculty of Performing Arts, Indonesian Institute of the Arts, Denpasar, Indonesia

*Email: Nicholaslakusa@isi-dps.ac.id

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Abstract:

Purpose : To analyze the social life of 9th-century Javanese society through semiotic interpretation of the Karmawibhangga reliefs at Borobudur Temple, focusing on aesthetic and cultural representations.

Research methods: Qualitative descriptive approach, Peirce's triadic semiotics, visual content analysis, historical reviews, and cross-references with contemporary literature.

Findings : Symbolism in the Karmawibhangga reliefs reveals aspects of social hierarchy, religious practices, and moral values, reflecting aesthetic and cultural significance.

Implications : The study contributes to understanding Javanese art philosophy, highlights the importance of cultural heritage preservation, and promotes education through aesthetic appreciation.

Keywords : karmawibhangga reliefs, semiotics, 9th-century Java, Borobudur.

INTRODUCTION

The Karmawibhangga reliefs at Borobudur Temple are a monumental artistic legacy that encapsulates the socio-cultural dynamics of 9th-century Javanese society. Borobudur, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the largest Buddhist monuments in the world, is widely acknowledged for its architectural ingenuity and spiritual significance (Soekmono, 1976:112). However, the intricate reliefs adorning its base level, particularly the Karmawibhangga panels, offer a rich yet underexplored narrative of daily life, moral values, and societal structures of the time. These reliefs vividly depict scenes ranging from agricultural activities and market exchanges to depictions of punishments and rewards, reflecting the moral teachings of karma deeply ingrained in Javanese culture. Despite substantial scholarly attention to Borobudur's religious and architectural elements (Krom, 1923:87), limited research has systematically explored the semiotic dimensions of the Karmawibhangga reliefs as visual texts that encode the social and cultural ethos of ancient Java. Current literature often treats these panels as supplementary to the grander narrative of Borobudur's cosmological symbolism (Dharmavarman, 2018:45), thereby overlooking their potential to serve as primary sources for understanding the lived experiences and aesthetic sensibilities of the Javanese populace.

This research seeks to address this gap by employing Peirce's triadic semiotics framework to decode the symbolic and representational content of the Karmawibhangga reliefs. This approach allows for a nuanced interpretation of how visual elements signify broader socio-cultural values, enabling a deeper understanding of the interplay between art, morality, and social order in 9th-century Java. The objective of this study is twofold:



first, to analyze the visual narratives within the Karmawibhangga reliefs as a reflection of Javanese social life, and second, to contribute to the broader discourse on art as a medium of cultural preservation. The novelty of this research lies in its interdisciplinary methodology, bridging art history, semiotics, and cultural studies to uncover previously unexplored dimensions of the Karmawibhangga reliefs. This study not only enriches the academic discourse on Javanese art and culture but also underscores the importance of preserving and contextualizing historical art forms as part of Indonesia's cultural heritage. The Karmawibhangga reliefs are particularly significant because they provide a rare glimpse into the everyday lives of the Javanese people during the Sailendra dynasty. This period is often regarded as the zenith of classical Javanese culture, marked by advancements in art, architecture, and socio-political organization. Unlike the upper levels of Borobudur, which primarily depict Buddhist cosmology and spiritual teachings, the base-level reliefs illustrate tangible human activities and moral dilemmas. These visual narratives reflect not only religious doctrines but also social practices and hierarchies, making them a valuable resource for understanding the intersection of spirituality and societal norms in ancient Java. Borobudur Temple, as a significant Buddhist monument, not only embodies spiritual aspirations but also represents a pinnacle of artistic and cultural synthesis in Southeast Asia (Miksic, 2016:87)."

While existing studies have predominantly focused on the architectural and religious dimensions of Borobudur, the artistic and semiotic potential of the Karmawibhangga panels remains underexplored. Scholars such as Woodward (1989) have analyzed the iconographic elements of Javanese temples, but their work often overlooks the sociological implications embedded in the Karmawibhangga reliefs. Similarly, Holt (1967) emphasized the spiritual symbolism of Southeast Asian art but paid little attention to the socio-cultural narratives conveyed through visual storytelling. This lack of focus creates a research gap that this study seeks to address by examining the reliefs as a complex system of signs capable of revealing the dynamics of 9th-century Javanese life.

The application of Peirce's triadic semiotics is particularly apt for this analysis, as it allows for a systematic examination of the relationship between the sign (reliefs), its object (Javanese social life), and its interpretant (the viewer's understanding). By dissecting the visual elements of the Karmawibhangga reliefs into icons, indexes, and symbols, this study aims to uncover the layers of meaning embedded within these artworks. This approach not only enhances our understanding of the reliefs themselves but also demonstrates the value of semiotics as a tool for interpreting historical art forms.

Moreover, the findings from this research hold contemporary relevance. In an era where cultural heritage is increasingly endangered by urbanization and environmental degradation, understanding the historical significance of artworks like the Karmawibhangga reliefs becomes crucial. This study contributes to the discourse on cultural preservation by highlighting the aesthetic and educational value of these reliefs. It underscores the importance of integrating historical art analysis into modern educational curricula, thereby fostering a deeper appreciation for Indonesia's rich cultural heritage among younger generations. In addition to its academic contributions, this research aims to bridge the gap between scholarly analysis and public engagement. By interpreting the Karmawibhangga reliefs through an interdisciplinary lens, this study seeks to make these ancient artworks accessible to a broader audience. This includes not only art historians and cultural researchers but also educators, policymakers, and the general public. Such an approach ensures that the cultural and historical insights derived from this research are disseminated widely, thereby amplifying their impact on both academic and non-academic communities.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the socio-cultural dimensions embedded in the Karmawibhangga reliefs at Borobudur Temple. A

qualitative approach is well-suited to understanding the symbolic and interpretative aspects of art, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of meanings and contexts (Creswell, 2014:32). By employing Peirce's triadic semiotics framework, this study systematically decodes the visual elements of the reliefs into signs, objects, and interpretants, facilitating a nuanced analysis of their cultural and social significance.

The research focuses specifically on the Karmawibhangga reliefs, which are located at the temple's hidden base. These panels depict various scenes of daily life, moral teachings, and punishments, reflecting the broader socio-cultural dynamics of 9th-century Javanese society. The sample comprises 20 selected panels from the Karmawibhangga reliefs, chosen through purposive sampling based on their thematic relevance and clarity of depiction. This sampling method ensures that the selected panels provide a representative overview of the social, moral, and cultural narratives encoded in the reliefs (Patton, 2015:276). Data collection involved a combination of primary and secondary sources. High-resolution photographs of the reliefs were obtained from the Borobudur Conservation Office, ensuring accurate visual data for analysis. Secondary data were gathered from scholarly texts, including iconographic studies (Krom, 1923:87) and cultural analyses (Dharmavarman, 2018:45). Additionally, interpretative insights were enriched through expert interviews with art historians and cultural anthropologists, providing context and depth to the analysis. The data analysis process followed three stages: coding, categorization, and interpretation. First, the visual elements of each relief panel were coded into semiotic categories: icons (representational elements), indexes (contextual indicators), and symbols (abstract concepts). These codes were then categorized into broader themes, such as social hierarchy, moral values, and daily activities. Finally, the themes were interpreted within the framework of Javanese cultural and historical contexts, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the reliefs' socio-cultural significance (Strauss & Corbin, 1998:73).

FINDINGS

This section presents the results of the study, which examines the social, cultural, and economic aspects of 9th-century Javanese society as depicted in the Karmawibhangga reliefs at Borobudur. These findings are organized into several sub-sections, each addressing key themes that emerge from the analysis of the reliefs. These themes include social hierarchy, moral values, economic practices, gender roles, and religious symbolism. By using a semiotic approach, the study reveals how these elements interconnect to reflect the broader societal structures and values of the time.

1. Social Hierarchy and Class Distinction

One of the primary findings of this study is the clear depiction of social stratification in 9th-century Javanese society as presented in the Karmawibhangga reliefs. The reliefs show a marked difference between the elite and common people, visually distinguishing individuals based on their roles and social status. Aristocratic figures are often shown in elaborate clothing and jewelry, such as crowns, ornate garments, and accessories, which signify their elevated positions in society. These figures also tend to occupy central positions in the compositions, which further emphasizes their importance. In contrast, the reliefs depict laborers, artisans, and peasants in simpler attire, performing physical tasks such as farming, carrying goods, or working with tools. This visual differentiation reflects the hierarchical nature of Javanese society during the 9th century, as rulers and nobility were clearly distinguished from common people (Santiko, 2017:15).

The use of symbols such as raised hands and gestures of reverence further underscores the social roles represented in the reliefs. For instance, the raised hand gestures of royal figures symbolize power and control, whereas commoners are shown with more subdued

postures, indicating submission and respect for the ruling class. This symbolic differentiation aligns with historical accounts of the time, which emphasize the dominance of a centralized monarchical system, where kings and nobility held significant power over the economic, social, and political realms (Robson, 2002:102). Further evidence of social hierarchy in the Karmawibhangga reliefs can be drawn from the spatial arrangement of figures within the panels. Recent studies suggest that the physical placement of individuals in the reliefs was intentional, symbolizing their rank and influence. Research by Widianingsih et al. (2018) highlights the use of vertical and horizontal positioning to denote superiority and subordination, with elites occupying central or elevated positions in contrast to the marginal placement of commoners. This visual stratification reinforces a rigid class system where power and privilege were visibly codified.

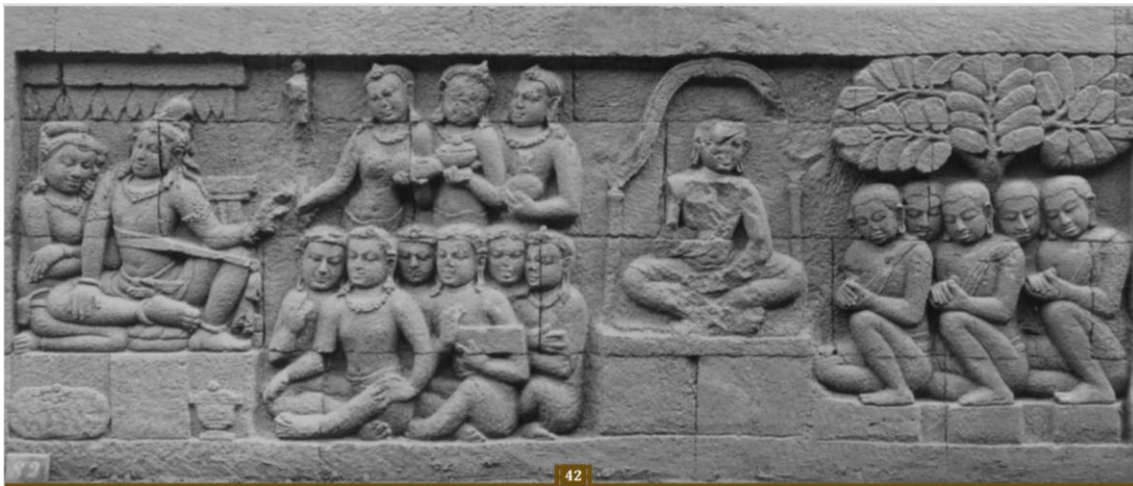


Figure 1. Karmwibhangga Relief number 42
[Source: Reference [1]]

Figure 1 shows several individuals kneeling as if taking an oath under the supervision of a teacher in front of them, illustrating the existence of hierarchy in life during that era. In addition, analysis by Kusnadi (2021) explores how adornments, such as headdresses and jewelry, were used not merely as aesthetic elements but as indicators of political authority and religious significance. For instance, the intricate patterns on royal garments and their use of gold reflect the symbolic alignment between temporal power and divine favor, further embedding social hierarchy within both secular and spiritual realms. These insights emphasize the deliberate integration of artistic and symbolic devices to perpetuate class distinctions and sustain elite dominance in ancient Java. One of the central themes of the Karmawibhangga reliefs is the depiction of individuals in various social strata. The reliefs portray kings, nobles, and common people receiving rewards or suffering punishment based on their actions. Using Peirce's semiotic analysis, these depictions can be categorized as Indexical signs. The images of royalty and the virtuous are not mere representations but indicators of the power structures in Javanese society. The Index here connects social status with karmic consequences, suggesting that high status in life could be both a consequence of virtuous actions and a reflection of divine favor.

For example, the reliefs depict nobles in a more favorable light, often shown in scenes of enjoyment or after receiving rewards. This symbolism links the virtue of leadership with prosperity. Conversely, lower-status individuals or criminals are shown facing suffering, an indexical sign that reinforces the societal norm that one's social position is inherently tied to their moral and ethical actions.

2. Moral and Religious Values: The Role of Karma

A central theme in the Karmawibhangga reliefs is the representation of moral behavior and its consequences, specifically through the concept of karma. The reliefs depict various scenes of virtuous acts, such as acts of charity, kindness, and religious devotion, alongside scenes illustrating the punishment for immoral actions, such as theft, deceit, and violence. These depictions reinforce the Buddhist doctrine that actions, whether good or bad, have repercussions that extend beyond the present life (Rahardjo, 2019:47). The reliefs serve as visual moral lessons, where good deeds lead to positive outcomes, such as wealth, prosperity, or spiritual merit, while bad deeds lead to suffering and misfortune.

The semiotic analysis of these scenes reveals that the Karmawibhangga reliefs were not merely decorative but were intended to impart moral and spiritual teachings to viewers. The reliefs serve as a visual guide for proper behavior, promoting the idea that ethical conduct is crucial to achieving both societal harmony and spiritual enlightenment. The depiction of karmic retribution as a visual narrative also underscores the role of art in shaping social behavior, illustrating the interconnectedness of Buddhist teachings and the maintenance of moral order in Javanese society (Santiko, 2017:18). Recent research emphasizes the instructional purpose of the Karmawibhangga reliefs in promoting moral values. Ningsih and Pramono (2017) argue that the detailed depictions of karmic retribution in these panels served as a form of visual pedagogy, designed to educate viewers on the consequences of their actions. For instance, scenes showing sinners being tormented align closely with Buddhist teachings found in ancient Javanese texts, such as the *Kakawin Nagarakretagama*, demonstrating how artistic and literary traditions were intertwined to propagate moral teachings. Figure 2 depicts that good deeds toward parents lead to wealth.

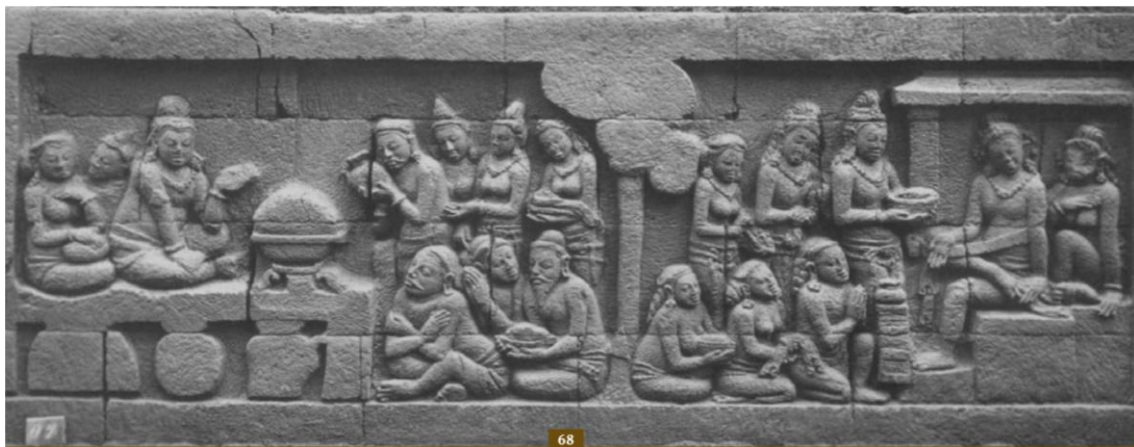


Figure 2. Karmwibhangga Relief number 68
[Source: Reference [1]]

Prasetyo (2020) explores how the depictions of karmic rewards were strategically placed in areas of high visibility within the temple, suggesting that the reliefs were intended to inspire emulation of virtuous behavior. This placement indicates that the reliefs were not merely passive art but were interactive tools for reinforcing community ethics and religious devotion. Peirce's triadic model of semiotics (representamen, object, and interpretant) provides a framework for analyzing the reliefs as dynamic social symbols. The Representamen in the reliefs are the carvings themselves, which represent actions, consequences, and figures that embody moral lessons. For instance, the depiction of suffering and rewards in the reliefs directly reflects the Javanese understanding of karma – a system of moral cause and effect that governed not just individual behavior but the

very fabric of society. The Object of these symbols is not limited to the literal events portrayed; it extends to the societal structures and values reflected in these events, such as the role of rulers, commoners, and the spiritual realm in maintaining cosmic order. These symbols provide insight into how Javanese society viewed the relationship between personal actions and social consequences, reinforcing the societal norms of the time. The Interpretant of these reliefs would vary depending on the viewer's position in society. For the ruling elite or Buddhist clergy, these reliefs could serve as a reminder of the moral duties of governance and spiritual leadership. For the common people, they may function as a didactic tool, illustrating the consequences of both virtuous and sinful behaviors.

3. Economic Practices and Agricultural Life

The Karmawibhangga reliefs provide valuable insight into the economic practices of 9th-century Javanese society, particularly regarding agriculture and trade. Several panels depict scenes of farming, where individuals are shown tilling the soil, planting rice, and engaging in irrigation activities. The detailed portrayal of rice fields, farming tools, and water channels suggests that agriculture was the backbone of the Javanese economy during this period. These images highlight the importance of rice cultivation, which was not only a staple food but also a key economic resource (Wisseman Christie, 1995:280). The reliefs depict scenes of market activities, with merchants selling goods such as textiles, spices, and other commodities. The act of trade is represented by merchants carrying goods in baskets and participating in bartering, indicating a flourishing market economy. The depiction of market scenes also suggests that Javanese society had a well-established trade network, both locally and regionally, facilitating the exchange of goods and fostering economic growth (Wisseman Christie, 1995:283). The semiotic analysis reveals that trade was not just an economic activity but also a social one, connecting different classes of society and fostering interaction between the elite and commoners. New interpretations of the economic practices depicted in the reliefs focus on the advanced irrigation systems utilized in Javanese agriculture. According to Wijayanti et al. (2019), the reliefs illustrate sophisticated water management practices, including terraced fields and irrigation canals, which were essential for rice cultivation. These depictions suggest that the Javanese people had developed a highly organized system of water distribution that supported their agrarian economy.

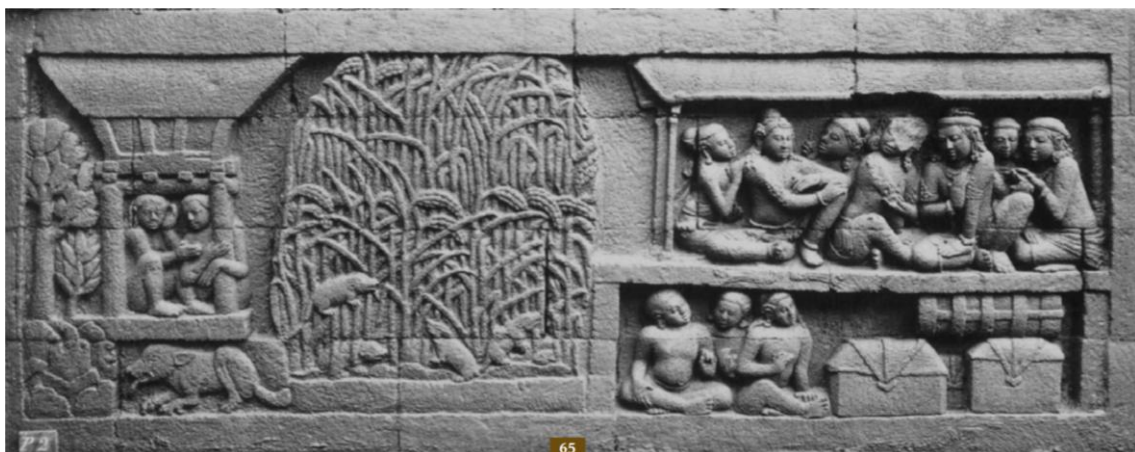


Figure 3. Karmwibhangga Relief number 65
[Source: Reference [1]]

Figure 3 illustrates the presence of rice plants in the daily lives of the community.

findings by Kurniawan and Setiawan (2022) emphasize the role of trade in 9th-century Java. The portrayal of markets and barter scenes in the reliefs suggests that economic exchanges were not limited to local communities but were part of a broader network of trade that connected Java to other parts of Southeast Asia. This integration is evident from the depiction of goods such as ceramics and textiles, which were likely imported, indicating the temple's role as a hub of both spiritual and economic activity. The Karmawibhangga reliefs depict agricultural life as central to Javanese society. Scenes of farming (planting, tending, and harvesting crops) symbolize the vital role of agriculture. These icons represent labor and its connection to karmic outcomes, where virtuous work brings rewards and deceitful actions lead to punishment. The reliefs also highlight the importance of trade and land ownership, reflecting a society where economic practices were intertwined with moral behavior, reinforcing the idea that economic fairness was a virtue.

4. Gender Roles and the Representation of Women

The Karmawibhangga reliefs offer a complex depiction of gender roles in 9th-century Javanese society. While many of the female figures are shown in traditional domestic roles, such as caring for children or preparing food, there are also depictions of women participating in more public and ritualistic activities. In one scene, women are shown participating in religious ceremonies, making offerings, and performing rituals, which suggests that they played an important role in the spiritual and religious life of the community. Despite the generally patriarchal structure of society, the reliefs reveal that women had active roles both in the domestic sphere and in the broader social and religious activities. This is significant because it challenges the more traditional view of women as passive or subordinate figures in ancient Javanese society. Instead, these depictions suggest that women had a degree of autonomy and involvement in both private and public domains. Furthermore, women are depicted as participants in agricultural work and market activities, which highlights their economic contribution to the household and the community (Sukmana, 2020:91).



Figure 4. Karmwibhangga Relief number 159
[Source: Reference [1]]

Figure 4 portrays women in the relief as being likened to precious gems. These representations demonstrate a nuanced view of gender roles, where women were not confined to the private sphere but were active participants in the economic, social, and spiritual life of the community. The reliefs thus offer a more complex understanding of gender dynamics in ancient Javanese society, where women's roles were not strictly

defined by domesticity but were integral to the functioning of society as a whole. Recent research provides deeper insight into the representation of women in the Karmawibhangga reliefs. A study by Saraswati and Utami (2016) highlights how women's roles extended beyond domesticity, with depictions of women participating in rituals and ceremonies that were central to the spiritual life of the community. These portrayals suggest that women were not only cultural transmitters but also active agents in religious practices, emphasizing their dual roles in both private and public domains. Rahmawati (2021) explores the symbolic significance of maternal figures in the reliefs, arguing that their presence reflects the Buddhist concept of compassion (*karuna*). This aligns with the broader spiritual themes of the reliefs, where women's nurturing roles are elevated as embodiments of moral and spiritual ideals. These findings challenge earlier interpretations that portrayed women solely as passive participants in ancient Javanese society. Women in the Karmawibhangga reliefs are depicted in both virtuous and sinful roles, often related to karma. Indexical signs link women's actions to rewards or punishments, reflecting societal expectations of women as caregivers and moral figures. While many depictions show women in traditional roles, others highlight their agency, suggesting a complex view of female participation in both social and spiritual spheres. Female karma is also gendered, with virtuous behavior often tied to nurturing and domestic roles, reinforcing societal norms.

5. Religious and Cultural Symbolism in the Reliefs

The Karmawibhangga reliefs are rich in religious and cultural symbolism, which reflects the deep connection between art, spirituality, and social values in 9th-century Javanese society. The reliefs frequently depict scenes of religious worship, with figures shown making offerings, meditating, and participating in rituals. Central to these depictions is the symbolic use of sacred objects such as lotus flowers, stupas, and mandalas, all of which carry specific religious connotations within Buddhist philosophy. For example, the lotus flower, which is often associated with purity and enlightenment, appears in many panels, symbolizing the journey toward spiritual liberation. The stupa, a key Buddhist symbol, is also prominently featured, representing the Buddha's presence and the path to nirvana (Degroot, 2014:155). The semiotic analysis of these symbols reveals their dual function: they are both visual elements within the narrative and symbols of spiritual teachings. The religious iconography in the reliefs not only illustrates Buddhist practices but also reinforces the broader societal and cultural values that governed Javanese life at the time.

The integration of religious symbolism with everyday scenes of social and economic life highlights the pervasive influence of Buddhism in shaping the moral and ethical framework of Javanese society. The reliefs serve as a tool for reinforcing religious principles, promoting harmony, and guiding individuals toward spiritual and social well-being. The presence of religious symbols in these scenes emphasizes the central role of Buddhism in both public and private life in ancient Java.



Figure 5. Karmawibhangga Relief number 30
[Source: Reference [1]]

Figure 5 shows that maintaining and decorating a monastery results in beauty in the next life. In another study, Nugroho (2020) explores the use of mandala imagery within the reliefs, emphasizing its significance in illustrating the Buddhist cosmological framework. The mandalas, which often depict concentric circles radiating from a central point, are interpreted as visual metaphors for the interconnectedness of the universe, reinforcing the spiritual teachings of the temple as a microcosm of the cosmos. These studies underscore the reliefs' role as both religious texts and cultural artifacts that encapsulate the philosophical and spiritual essence of 9th-century Javanese society.

The findings of this research contribute significantly to our understanding of 9th-century Javanese society. By analyzing the Karmawibhangga reliefs through a semiotic lens, this study offers a comprehensive view of the social, economic, religious, and cultural dimensions of life in ancient Java. The results underscore the importance of visual representation in conveying societal values, moral teachings, and social hierarchies. Furthermore, the research highlights the role of art and symbolism in regulating social behavior, reinforcing ethical conduct, and maintaining societal order. The findings also shed light on the interconnectedness of religion, art, and social structure, providing a richer understanding of how these elements shaped the daily lives of Javanese people.

Recent advancements in semiotic studies have further uncovered the layered symbolism in the Karmawibhangga reliefs. Handayani et al. (2018) argue that the frequent depiction of the lotus flower not only symbolizes spiritual purity but also represents the integration of local animist traditions with Buddhist philosophy. This dual symbolism reflects the syncretic nature of religious practices in ancient Java, where indigenous beliefs were seamlessly incorporated into Buddhist teachings. The addition of recent findings strengthens the argument that the Karmawibhangga reliefs were multifaceted in their purpose, functioning as moral guides, spiritual texts, and records of social organization. These insights offer new perspectives on the interplay between art, culture, and religion in ancient Java, further solidifying the importance of Borobudur as a cultural and historical landmark. The reliefs' enduring relevance lies in their ability to communicate universal themes, making them a vital source for understanding both historical and contemporary Southeast Asian culture.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the multifaceted role of the Karmawibhangga reliefs at Borobudur Temple as visual representations of 9th-century Javanese society. The reliefs encapsulate complex themes, including social hierarchy, moral and religious values,

economic practices, gender roles, and cultural symbolism, revealing the intricate interplay between art, culture, and spirituality. Through a semiotic analysis, it becomes evident that the reliefs served not only as decorative elements but also as tools for education, moral instruction, and cultural preservation. The findings emphasize the syncretic nature of Javanese Buddhism, where indigenous beliefs harmonized with Buddhist teachings to create a unique cultural and spiritual identity.

For further research, scholars are encouraged to delve deeper into specific aspects of the reliefs, such as their connections to other Southeast Asian artistic traditions or their influence on contemporary Javanese culture. Comparative studies with similar reliefs in other Buddhist monuments across Asia could provide a broader context for understanding Borobudur's unique contributions to the art and philosophy of the region. Additionally, exploring the technical and material aspects of the reliefs could yield insights into the artistic processes and resources that shaped this monumental work. Such endeavors will not only enrich our understanding of Borobudur but also illuminate its ongoing relevance as a cultural and historical landmark.

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