

Scales of Affordances: Visibility and Pandemic Encounters among Buddhists in the Javanese Highlands

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Abstract: In this contribution, I explore the encounter between a pandemic-mitigation event initiated by the local administration of Central Java, Indonesia, and a Buddhist village in the highland region of Temanggung. For the minority Buddhist community in the area, the event signified a possibility to pursue media presence. In the previous few years, the village of Surjosari had launched various projects of community and religious revitalization. On the one hand, such projects progressively included the community within the nationwide reach of Theravāda Buddhism. On the other hand, these projects were increasingly aimed at the implementation of a specific ethnopreneurial vision of highland eco-tourism, particularly endorsed by a host of local activists. The article shows how the government's *Candi Siaga* initiative offered an unprecedented opportunity to advance the residents' idea of community development, which braids together religious, ethnic and economic strands. By tracing long-term pre- and post-event developments in the village, I frame this opportunity in terms of affordance. Rather than mobilizing vocabularies of coping and responses that are intrinsic in recent virological discourses, affordances can provide an open-ended and undetermined horizon for encounters between broad processes such as a pandemic and the particular practices of a rural community. This requires us to extend the definition of the concept beyond its applicability to the restricted domain of immediate ecological perception.

[affordances, COVID-19 pandemic, Southeast Asia, Indonesia, ethnopreneurialism, Theravāda Buddhism]

Introduction: Taking Stock of Pandemic Encounters

Since the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic in 2020, Indonesia has experienced a multifarious array of responses to the challenges posed by the health crisis. While the central government has been largely aligned with the policies and countermeasures enacted elsewhere in the world (lockdowns, mass vaccination programs, travel restrictions, quarantines), different groups defined along ethnic and religious lines have offered a range of alternative or complementary discourses and practices. In the strictly medical sense, the pandemic has triggered the resurrection of traditional healing practices throughout the archipelago (Maarif 2021; Aprilio and Wilar 2021). This trend echoes similar responses on the part of indigenous communities in contexts as diverse as Kenya, Brazil, Central Asia, and Pakistan (Ali and Davis-Floyd 2022), and it often indicates simmering processes of ethnocultural revival or political friction that are already underway (Menton et al. 2021).

In the context of traditional religio-medicinal worlds in Indonesia, the major world religions¹ have been at the forefront of negotiating epistemologies and ontologies concerning virological cycles. The position of the national councils for Islamic affairs has been widely televised in a series of debates over the theological permissibility of vaccines of potentially *haram* origin.² But internal reconfigurations have also figured strongly. For the first time, the popular Islamic Lazismu Foundation, the charity branch of the Muhammadiyah mass organization, has extended its philanthropic charter to include aid for Christian houses of worship.³ Indonesian Buddhist monks have turned instead to the promotion of the *Ratana Sutta*, which was widely circulated in online speeches and gatherings. The text is a classic Pāli scripture on the Buddha's sermon in the town of Vesali at a time of plague and famine. While this is a relatively well-known sermon in the Theravāda Buddhist world, it has achieved an unprecedented omnipresence on all levels of devotional life for Indonesian Buddhists.

Processes of the kind summarized above have often been considered through the categories of coping, response and mediation (Irons and Gibbon 2022; Lorea et al. 2022), vocabulary that is also commonly deployed of official policies implemented by governments and biopolitical stakeholders. However, framing pandemic encounters solely through the lexicon of counteraction obscures a set of different developments in which the health crisis presents generative qualities. This might be expressed through the possibility of new horizons for environmental activism (von Storch et al. 2021) and using COVID-19's visual data to advance established conspiracy groups (Lee 2021), as well as envisioning new economic orders in the face of precarity (Bloch 2020). Such examples suggest the underdetermined character that is constitutive of relationships of this kind between a materially and semiotically diffused phenomenon like a pandemic and a receptive perceiver, articulated in the first-person singular or plural.

In the following sections, I will trace the evolution of such relationships and the horizons they open up. I draw on fieldwork material and subsequent online research I carried out between 2015 and 2020. In this contribution I will focus on a distinct pandemic encounter in the ethnographic setting of Temanggung, in highland Central Java, where I have lived and conducted three fieldwork stints between 2015 and 2020, some of which, in the context of my doctoral research, was concerned with Buddhist material culture. Although moving from canonical ethnographic approaches – structured and unstructured interviews, preliminary surveys – in this case the temporally

1 So-called world religions (Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism) are captured in Indonesia through the Sanskrit-derived category of *agama*, as opposed to the constellation of native practices and beliefs (*kepercayaan*) and 'customs' (*adat*). To this day the *agamas* are the only permissible religious affiliations that can be declared in the state bureaucracy, although several steps have been taken in recent years towards making local religious traditions official to some degree (Aragon 2021).

2 See Pedroletti (2022).

3 See for instance Fauzia (2020)

extended interaction with the communities ended up constituting a crucial point in itself for highlighting what was to become a complex, long-term cultural trajectory in the making. It also allowed a better orientation of the post-fieldwork, online material I collected (and afforded to a great extent by pandemic circumstances), material through which I could follow the developments of the Temanggung community through a multiplicity of angles and on which this article is largely based.

The highland Temanggung district hosts a sizeable Buddhist minority,⁴ scattered among several villages, historically positioned in complex relationships of continuity with Islamic and Javanese forms of ritual life and collective identity. In recent years, the community has experienced significant innovations. On the one hand, the broad influences of standard Theravāda Buddhism have transformed the devotional practices of the community in major ways, traditionally leaning towards more porous understandings of religiosity and denominationalism (Rizzo 2022). On the other hand, the religious revitalization sweeping the villages has intersected the efforts aimed at transforming the economic and aesthetic appeal of the wider area. This is especially tangible in the village of Surjosari.

For the past decade, young activists and return migrants have worked extensively to refashion this village's media presence and attractiveness. Prior to the spread of the pandemic in 2020, they had succeeded in drawing attention to Surjosari on a local scale by organizing a number of cultural gigs, concerts and religious events that thrived predominantly thanks to the activists' own personal networks. However, the government initiatives introduced as a response to the pandemic offered an unprecedented occasion for the Surjosari community to achieve visibility on a larger scale. For the villagers, this translated not only in putting the community on the map of the country's Buddhist affairs, but also in advancing its potential for a distinct vision of the leisure economy nestled between cultural tourism and eco-tourism, a potential that began to manifest itself effectively soon afterwards.

The notion of affordance proves useful in framing dynamics such as those underway among the highland Buddhist minorities. First, it can offer a different angle for reading a vast set of cultural processes. While bound to a series of initiatives directly connected to the spread of the virus, comprehending the encounters with the pandemic that have been substantiated among Surjosari Buddhists using only the language of coping and countering would make the richness of the ongoing developments in the village and the distinct configurations they allow unintelligible. In the following sections, I will briefly recap the recent discussion on the affordance concept as developed both within

⁴ According to 2010 statistics, Buddhists constitute 0.77% of the Indonesian population, accounting for just under two million followers. However, their distribution in the country is highly uneven, with larger pockets in western islands such as Sumatra, Java, Kalimantan and Lombok. 'Javanese' Buddhists are a minority within a minority, although no official statistical data exist on the connections between religious and ethnic identities.

and beyond anthropology. I will then turn to ethnography in order to explore a distinct possibility of temporally and phenomenally extended affordances.

Gibson's Ecology of Perception: The Various Fortunes of a Concept

The idea of affordance stems from the work of the psychologist James Gibson (1979; 1983). Describing the relationships that exist between an organism and its environment, Gibson defined as affordances that which an environment offers to a perceiving entity. These are relationships that come into being naturally and that do not require prior structured knowledge about them on the part of the perceiving subject. They are simultaneously objective features and non-deterministic potentiality, in that they depend on the specificity of the perceiver to be ultimately taken up, engaged or 'responded to'. Affordances constituted a relatively controversial notion at the time of Gibson's writings for questioning the pervasive role of representation and mental grids that was widely assumed in perception psychology (Chong and Proctor 2020). Gibson postulated instead the possibility of direct experience between a perceiver and the environment. Representation would be a matter of later concern, if at all.

The notion of affordance has come a long way from its original formulation. It has proved particularly productive in several fields, from psychology to architecture (Maier et al. 2009) and media studies (Costa 2018; Nagy and Neff 2015). In anthropology, it has mainly been received as part of Ingold's influential reflections on human–environment principles of correspondence (Ingold 2015; 2002; see also Ingold 2018 for a critical rejoinder). More recently, affordances have also been mobilized by authors working on the anthropology of ethics (Keane 2014; 2018), who have woven Gibson's Ur-concept into the ongoing conversation on the phenomenology and ontology of human interaction (Mattingly 2018; Throop 2016).

Points for discussion, and sometimes departures from the earliest organization of the concept, have been numerous. Some authors have questioned the 'objectiveness' of affordances as given properties of the world and have created distinctions between affordances as stable occurring features of the natural world and affordances as emerging in contact with a distinct perceiver (Shaw et al. 2019). However, a compelling debate for anthropologists is the extension of affordance theory beyond the immediate physical world. That is, the prospect emerged that, not only is the perceivable physical environment furnished with possibilities for action, but that situations, narratives and whole sociocultural worlds can constitute the terms for such a relationship (Keane 2014a; Guinote 2008). Ramstead (2016) coined the notion of 'cultural affordance' in order to signal this specific level of experience, drawing expectations, norms, conventions, social cooperation and linguistic or symbolic mediation to the pool of features that 'afford' upon interaction with perceiving subjects.

The discussion has then veered to whether this expanded understanding of affordances collapses the notion back to representationalism, or whether instead such strands of cultural life are also framed as embodied and perceptually grounded practices. Authors like Ingold (2016; 2018) and van Dijk and Rietveld (2020) have worked in this direction and turned to imagination as a feature complementary to the immediacy of the environmental encounter, binding perception, action and image. By doing so, they loosen the distinction that is often posited between embodied phenomena and representation (including discourse) along lines similar to the theorization of ‘affects’ by Donovan Schaefer (2015). Recuperating the classic Kantian definition (Rundell 2022), imagination is understood as a faculty intrinsic in human cognition that allows ‘living creatively in a world that is not already created, already formed, but one that is itself crescent, always in formation, [...] a world without objects’ (Ingold 2018:43). As such, imagination is in continuity and/or alternation with immediate perception and embodied sensations and practices.

The evolution of the notion of affordance is significant and might offer a different entry point for understanding the manner in which a composite sociocultural formation such as a pandemic – encompassing narratives, procedures, technologies and virological circulation – is encountered in specific contexts. The set of events concerning the Buddhist community of Surjosari constitutes an ethnographic scene which addresses, on the ground, the possibility of large-scale affordances. Seemingly, the pandemic emerges here as exclusively neither an arrangement of physical, medical or procedural calls and responses, nor a discursive formation. The affordance is materialized between a sequence of material and linguistic practices that are traceable to the spectrum of pandemic manifestations, territorialized in the organization of the *Candi Siaga* event, and a responsive citizenry, a phenomenal ‘we’ attuned to the possibilities triggered by the call of the governmental initiative vis-à-vis the specific experience accumulated in the months and years before the virological crisis.

From Community Revival to Visibility: Transforming a ‘Javanese Buddhist Village’

The village of Surjosari underwent dramatic transformations over the course of just a couple of years, that is, between my three fieldwork stints in the area in 2015, 2017 and 2019. An unassuming collection of settlements, hardly distinguishable from the other farming hamlets of the highlands, had morphed into a lush and neat locality that aspired to the status of a recognized eco-tourist destination. Since 2019, the entrance to the village has been signposted by a large wooden gate that welcomed the visitor with a salutation in classical Javanese. Less visible at first glance, the core of the village was

now surrounded by plots of land growing ginger, mushroom and other crops using the principles of permaculture.

The green landscape, which stretched uphill, included a waterfall and morphed into a thick forest. A major feature of Surjosari emphasized within these recent developments was the religious affiliation of its residents. Like the overall scenery, Buddhism was a relatively low-key sight in the village, flagged only by the discreet presence of a *vihara*.⁵ Instead, by 2020, Buddhist shrines dotted the area outdoors and in. Buddhist celebrations in the village constituted a frequent form of sociality for the residents, and, increasingly for outsiders. Surjosari was in a process of reconfiguration that weaved together ethno-identitarian ideas, religious stances and a leisure economy.

Connecting the threads that thematized the rapid changes underway in Surjosari was a host of local activists, who were predominantly organized around a youth association (*Pemuda Buddhis*) set up by thirty-year-old Subagyo.⁶ A Buddhist Studies graduate working in the digital print industry, this man had moved to the village only two years before, upon marrying a woman from the area, whom he had met at college. The activist group was inaugurated in 2016, with a ceremony overseen by a Theravādin monk and intended originally to socialize the younger residents on a Buddhist platform. In fact, a major supposition underlying the association was that the village's demographics and rural Buddhism were both in a state of decay. Revitalizing social-religious commitment starting from the youngest residents would redress this course in the long run.

The membership of the association and the themes along which the village restructured itself showed deep ties with broader trends, which embedded Surjosari into processes that stretched well beyond the apparent remoteness of the highlands. The founder of the group, Subagyo, like some of the other 'senior' members, were highly mobile individuals or return migrants from the island's major cities who had brought back with them distinct experiences and sensibilities regarding religion and economic development, as well as a range of images about rural life. Ideas about 'authentic' Javanese folklore and lifestyle had surged with increased strength in the years following the decentralization program of post-Suharto Indonesia. A wide set of discourses and official programs revalorized ethnocultural features as a desirable expression of individual and collective identity (see, for instance, Bogaerts 2017). In such narratives, religion was often conflated in the pool of cultural markers. The life trajectories of two of the most dedicated 'activists', Subagyo and Wahyu, were exemplary of the process by which these macro-trends seeped into the village.

Despite his recent identification as a farmer, Subagyo had grown up in urban environments throughout his life thus far. He was educated in a private Christian school

5 In the Buddhist context of Java, a *vihara* denotes a Buddhist temple, normally affiliated with a registered association, as distinct from a *klenteng* (Chinese-syncretic worship venue) and a *cetya* (prayer house).

6 The names of my research participants have all been anonymised.

first and in the capital's Buddhist college later. Before marrying, he also lived in Yogyakarta, a major cultural hub on the south coast of Java, where he got acquainted with Javanese spiritualist groups and began stockpiling his substantial library on Javanese arts and mysticism. The care he dedicated to Javanese culture was also visible in his day-to-day activities. Over the course of my stays in Temanggung, Subagyo donned Javanese traditional attire more and more often, and he increasingly spoke in Javanese rather than standard Indonesian on all levels of communication, from daily conversations to social media posts.

Unlike Subagyo, Wahyu was born and raised in the Temanggung regency, in a family of tobacco farmers. However, he spent much of his adult life migrating back and forth between the village and the island's main cities. He contributed to the activities of *Pemuda Buddhis* with a distinctive blend of managerial and religious 'know-how' that came from his specific biography. In 2018, Wahyu graduated in economics in the city of Semarang, while his chief interest revolved around the coffee industry, a booming domestic market in both Java and Indonesia at large. While the passion for coffee was shared with Subagyo and some of the other activists, Wahyu was the person who was most engaged in the business himself, and he had a rich network of personal contacts across the region. One of the reasons why he decided to return to the village permanently was the prospect of developing a modern coffee enterprise in the area. According to Wahyu, it was an especially favourable conjunction, especially since 2016, when the government recognized the *Temanggung robusta* variety of the bean with Geographical Indication certifications and related standards.

However, Wahyu was also a practising Buddhist. Although he had been born and raised in a practising family, he often pointed to his university years in the city of Semarang as particularly intense from a religious perspective. Unlike the kind of Buddhism he had experienced as a child, in Semarang he grew closer to Theravādin forms of meditation and chanting, which he brought to the village on those occasions in which he led the worship session by the village *vihara*.⁷ In 2018, he also became a *samanera* (a temporary monk).

The biographies of local activists like Subagyo and Wahyu suggest some of the concrete channels through which broad ideas of revamped ethnic culture, as well as economic and religious innovation, become diffused through a village like Surjosari. The vision of developing the village into a sustainable and culturally intriguing leisure destination was undoubtedly the result of the specific convergence of the activists' backgrounds and mobilities. At the same time, it was correlated with large-scale processes which instantiated a form of 'ethnopreneurialism' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009) drawing together environmentalism, metropolitan tastes and religious self-awareness, the latter a salient feature of the 'turn to religion' of post-Suharto Indonesia (Hefner 2011).

⁷ It is common in Indonesia to have temple worship led by lay practitioners instead of ordained monks, especially in areas farther away from major urban centres.

Ecology, Sociality and the *dhamma*

Since its foundation, the *Pemuda Buddhis* activists invested great efforts in revitalizing the highlands' Buddhist sociality in general, particularly through the organization of communal events and the restoration of Javanese agricultural rituals. However, in Surjosari the revival took on nuances that were more explicitly oriented towards a touristy vision of village development, filtered through the ubiquitous theme of *potensi wisata* (touristic potential) that characterised several conversations among the activists. The vision promoted by the activists and most residents recalled closely the widespread (and vehemently debated) notion of the 'eco-tourist community' signalled by Hayami (2006) in the comparable highland settings of northern Thailand and Myanmar, where this form of cultural leisure economy has been in existence for some time.

The thorough refurbishing of Surjosari's image involved several facets, from aesthetic enrichment to more conspicuous infrastructural and agricultural upgrades. The relative success with which both activists and residents were able to refashion the village in just a few years was also made possible by an array of different funds which the villagers were quick to tap into. Part of the budget came from government applications, such as a fund allocated within the *Keluarga Sehat* ('healthy family') program, a wide scheme aimed at assessing and intervening in public health within the household. Simultaneously, the regional government between 2016 and 2018 allocated a budget entry for the upgrade of the system of public water supply to those administrations that filed such a request. In Surjosari, the fund was utilised mainly to restore the canal system of the three different waterways that make up its supply, but it was also partly employed in the re-establishment of community rice barns.

The implementation of a modern and sustainable coffee industry in the highlands attracted an additional stream of funds. The intercropping of distinct varieties of coffee and tobacco in the Temanggung area was discussed in several conferences and workshops, and it was actively supported by the regional administrations as an effective way to counteract land erosion. However, the very start of a 'coffee project' in the framework of sustainability principles and community development was realized on the outskirts of the village thanks to a fund donated by Buddhayana, the ecumenical Buddhist association.⁸ The allocation of the fund was decided upon at a meeting that Wahyu managed to organize in Surjosari. On that occasion, the activists and the Buddhayana representatives declared that the creation of a community-run plantation was a positive form of investment in light of the project of socializing the Buddhists of the district, as well as for launching an enterprise that, while open to interfaith participation, would be traceable to the normally marginal presence of the local Buddhist community.

⁸ This association was founded in the 1950s by the charismatic monk Ashin Jinarakkhita, and it has been a crucial platform for channelling the modernist revival of Buddhism in Indonesia (see Chia 2020; Yulianti 2022).

The question raised during the meeting with Buddhayana – that of the community's visibility – was central to Surjosari's revitalization project. Over the following years, as the revamping and amelioration of the village morphed more explicitly in an eco-tourist direction, many activists and residents articulated the subject of visibility as pertaining to two distinct but interwoven issues. On the one hand, visibility signified the exposure needed to launch a leisure destination in the broader region and in Java at large. On the other hand, for activists like Subagyo and Wahyu, visibility was also understood as raising the right awareness in the rural Buddhist community in respect to itself, thus counteracting the trend of religious disengagement.

In fact, a frequent argument in decay narratives of village Buddhism was the reality of the scattered nature of Buddhist villages and, sometimes, of individual Buddhist households, amplified by the physical geography of the region. This condition isolated further segments of the community and, according to some, facilitated conversion into publicly more visible religions, such as Islam and (to a lesser extent) Christianity. Conversely, enhancing communal engagement via events, rituals and projects would create a more cohesive and self-confident religious community. From 2018, *Pemuda Buddhis* activists began to organize events and small concerts and restored Javanese rituals, often centred around Surjosari, also with the aim of improving the perception of the vitality of the community towards itself. The issue of visibility, and the material and spiritual prospects it yielded, eventually took off by 2020.

The *Candi Siaga* Event: A Pandemic Affordance

The diffusion of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia triggered an array of different mitigation responses. In addition to the implementation of official biomedical policies country-wide, regional and provincial administrations launched local programs intended to counteract the social and economic effects of the pandemic. In May 2020, the governor of Central Java, Ganjar Pranowo, introduced one such provincial scheme, called *Jogo Tonggo*, or 'taking care of each other' among neighbours. The program channelled funds from the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform and aimed at introducing the conventional changes required for countering the pandemic within local neighbourhoods,⁹ such as the distribution of hand sanitisers. The program also financed the distribution of food staples, and primary commodities and subsidized any form of creative endeavour connected to local responses to the sanitary conditions.

Numerous initiatives were pioneered as part of the *Jogo Tonggo* program throughout the province. In the Temanggung region, it funnelled projects through established institutions (i.e., *Jogo Santri*, *Jogo Pasar*, 'care' for Islamic education and for the market-

9 The *rukun tetangga* or *rukun warga* ('RT/RW') administrative unit in Indonesia.

place respectively). It also involved more amusing ventures. Al Khadziq, Temanggung's regent, sent out many of the region's officers dressed up as Javanese *wayang* puppet characters, and supported by crews of local artists, to some of the area's markets and public venues in order to remind or instruct residents about the health protocols that were being implemented nationwide to contain the virus.

An additional and localized manifestation of the *Jogo Tonggo* program in Temanggung was *Candi Siaga*. The main goal of this initiative was to award a prize to the village that was best equipped to confront the situation of social and sanitary distress. It involved a committee appointed by the regional police headquarters which toured a selection of 250 villages, designated by the regency's sub-districts. The evaluation was made against the criteria of health security, socio-economic resilience, food security, sustainability and innovation, and it was meant to provide motivation and recognition simultaneously to the winning village as an example of good administration for the entire regency.

The *Candi Siaga* competition took place in mid-September 2020. Surjosari was the only village representing its sub-district in the Eastern Highlands of Temanggung. The visit of the committee to the village broadly followed what appeared to be a standardized pattern. The officials were routinely welcomed by the residents with a banquet and a few stalls showcasing or selling items representing the village, normally food produce or handmade souvenirs. After a few courtesy greetings with the village and/or the sub-district authorities, the event was routinely formalized with a few official speeches and a tour of the village sections that were deemed relevant to the themes of the initiative.

However, the committee's visit to Surjosari also stood out for a number of reasons. The commission was greeted by about thirty residents entirely clothed in traditional Javanese dress, namely white blouses and brown-patterned *batik* gowns for the women and striped or floral vests for the men, with a *sarong* and a tight fabric headwear (*blangkon*). Throughout the visit, the residents put up a few stalls exhibiting the goods that were perceived to be most representative of the village: packaged ground coffee, green coffee beans, and statuettes embodying Buddha Sakyamuni¹⁰ in gold and white-clay iconographies, manufactured by a local artisan. Consistently with the recent changes and introductions implemented in the previous few years, Surjosari seemed to present itself as a village combining a straightforward Buddhist affiliation, strong local agronomics, a sense of care for the environment and, importantly, an expressive manifestation of Javanese ethnic identity.

The main part of the visit consisted of the village tour, in which the delegation was guided by the village head, together with Subagyo and his father-in-law Martono, both of whom often acted as unofficial community organizers. The authorities were shown the renovated public water taps and the large jugs with water that the residents had set

10 The historical Buddha and the main iconographic representation in contemporary Indonesian Buddhism together with *bodhisattva* Kwan Im, the latter found predominantly in non-Theravādin environments..

up in front of their yards, which, after the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, were supplied with soap bars for public use. Martono also pointed to the community kitchen (*dapur umum*), which had been organized in the village, and to a section of the district recently designated as a quarantine quarter.

During the speech, the members of the committee addressed the overall scope of the program, namely the compliance with national sanitary policies and the criteria underlying the *Candi Siaga* initiative. They complimented the residents for the pleasant atmosphere that emanated through the village's verdant scenery and the sense of 'compactness' (*kekompakan*), addressing the communal effort of the villagers and the perception of religious-identitarian uniformity. Both were presented as desirable qualities for resisting a draining situation such as a pandemic outbreak.

Encountering Visibility: Social Media, Tourism and the Weisak Ceremony

On 5th October, the Temanggung police headquarters released a document with the village scores in the *Candi Siaga* competition and naming the winner. Surjosari came first in the ranking with a score of 556, ahead of a village in the subdistrict of Selopampang, which scored 544. The police branch awarded the winning village a framed certificate and a small monetary donation. The prizegiving ceremony was organized at the Temanggung headquarters, while the award was collected by a representative of the departmental office of Surjosari's sub-district, and smaller, gilded prizes were handed over to the villages ranked second and third.

The achievement was shared and advertised enthusiastically in the social media accounts of some of the residents of Surjosari, particularly its foremost activists Subagyo and Wahyu. Subagyo, in particular put together a video clip in which he showcased the newly awarded village and uploaded it on to YouTube, on a channel dedicated entirely to the village that had been created shortly before. Like his posts on Instagram and Facebook, these posts tended to gather likes and comments from his extended network of acquaintances, other Buddhists and, occasionally, residents of the province praising the natural sights and aesthetics of Surjosari.

The *Candi Siaga* events and the prize-giving ceremony were also widely shared by the official accounts of both the Temanggung police headquarters and the Temanggung City administration. Besides reporting on the event, in the days following the ceremony, the social media pages of Temanggung City began sharing photos of Surjosari originally posted by Subagyo. Although the posts were initially associated with the *Candi Siaga* initiative, they increasingly hinged on general depictions of Surjosari's lush landscapes, its waterfall and pristine rural feel. Shots of Surjosari in institutional Facebook and Instagram posts began to appear in the regular feeds of the profiles,



Figure 1 Awarding the winner of the *Candi Siaga* mitigation initiative. *Courtesy of Kab. Temanggung Media Center*

which routinely reposted pictures about the regency's attractions. Weeks after, pictures of Surjosari were shared from private profiles other than the village's activists, and accumulated likes, comments and re-shares from various quarters of the province.

The village's social media presence was further amplified as it hit popular travel and cultural websites such as *Brisik.id*. Consistently with the tone of the institutional media pages, the portrayals of Surjosari tended to focus on its leisure potential, encouraging visits to the area 'for picnics' and occasionally depicting the village as a 'Buddhist oasis'. Shortly afterwards, in a column on Buddhist celebrations in the country, Surjosari was showcased in the mainstream media outlet *Kompas*, with photographic portrayals of its Buddhist statues in the verdant setting of its front yards.

The mediatic presence of the village was quickly translated into actual tours by visitors from the regency and beyond. Despite the dip in the tourist economy generally in 2020 due to the pandemic restrictions still in place, Surjosari recorded an unprecedented increase in the number of visitors making their way through the steep highlands, inaugurating a new pattern of tourist circulation which, until that point, was limited to the Buddhist residents of the immediate surroundings or Subagyo's network in Java's Buddhist associations.

Along with the attention received in the framework of its tourist prospectus and sustainability, Surjosari also earned an unprecedented centrality within the region's Buddhist affairs. According to Subagyo, requests from Buddhist groups and individuals to perform religious practices and meditation in the village increased substantially after the *Candi Siaga* event, although he declined many such requests because of the pandemic protocols. Apart from the overall atmosphere, which was enhanced by the placement of outdoor altars (a rarity in Muslim-majority Java), for the Buddhist community of the region and the nearby cities, a major attraction seemed to be the possibility of meditating by Surjosari's waterfall and lush hillside. The general upgrades undertaken in recent years in the village included revamping the path up to the waterfall. The track was now equipped with handrails and a large half-shaded wooden platform over the pool intended for individual and group meditation, evoking a distinct eco-spiritual landscape and imaginary (Badone 2016; Salazar and Graburn 2016).

A couple of months later, Surjosari was eventually chosen by the regional committee for Buddhist affairs as the location for the regional *Waisak* ceremony, a major Buddhist event attended by thousands of practitioners. The most important Buddhist holiday in the country, in recent years *Waisak* was decentralized to regional events of greater or lesser sizes on the side of the official ceremony held at the Borobudur complex. The regionalization of *Waisak* was frequently explained on the grounds of the logistic and financial difficulties many less well-off practitioners found in getting to the Borobudur monument. According to others, however, the scattered character of the *Waisak* celebrations originated in inter-denominational conflicts among the country's Buddhist organizations, including institutional friction among the associations sitting on the national board for Buddhist affairs.

Although Surjosari had already hosted a few small-scale events in the several months prior to the pandemic, the organization of a *Waisak* ceremony was by far the largest enterprise involving the village and its residents. The two-day event was organized by the *Keluarga Buddhis Theravada Indonesia* organization ('Indonesian Theravāda Buddhist Family'), an umbrella organization bringing together the country's lay and monastic Theravāda associations. The organization brought to the village seventeen monks from various monasteries in Java, together with hundreds of lay practitioners from cities such as Semarang, Yogyakarta and Surabaya. According to Surjosari's young activists, the event gathered up to three thousand people in what was the first regional *Waisak* in two years.

According to many interlocutors, the *Waisak* 2021 ceremony in Surjosari was one of the largest organized outside of the institutional ritual at Borobudur, with the greatest number of participants. As in previous years, the *Waisak* was inaugurated with the release of a few captive birds, overseen by the monks, and attended on this occasion by the Temanggung regent Al Khadziq. However, the celebration stood out for the rich set of rituals, performances and side events that accompanied the main ceremony, held on a site that functioned as a village square.



Figure 2 The waterfall scene at Surjosari, as shared on social media. *Courtesy of A. Purwanto*

The official procession that wound through the village was coloured by a showcase of Javanese cultural and religious features. The *Pemuda Buddhis* youth organizers showed up dressed uniformly in Javanese traditional attire, and a few pieces of Javanese fabrics and headwear were reserved for those of the guests who wished to follow suit. A towering Javanese-style heap of food offerings was paraded after the Buddha statue, while a local crew performing traditional arts was invited to march with the procession. On those two evenings, moreover, an ensemble from Yogyakarta performed *wayang* theatre at length, and several performances of Javanese masked and horse dances took place in the village pavilion.

The organization of Waisak 2021 in Surjosari marked the village's popular recognition as a community defined along Buddhist religious lines in an environment that was widely perceived as enjoyable from the perspective of leisure tourism and was increasingly shared and hash-tagged in social media. Importantly, however, through the vital role of its youth organization, the community of Surjosari clearly portrayed the particular *telos* of a Theravāda Buddhism that had been ethnicized through a distinct idea of Javanese culture that revived filaments of rural religious life as much as it reformulated prevailing notions of 'Javaneseness'. Ultimately the *Candi Siaga* program and the Waisak event consecrated the transition of Surjosari from a decaying mountain settlement into a vibrant resort area, distinguished by an active agrarian and ethnoreligious entrepreneurialism.

On Large-Scale Affordances

The pandemic-mitigation event of *Candi Siaga* represented, if unwittingly, a turning point in the fortunes of the Javanese-Buddhist village of Surjosari. It triggered a cascade of processes and (social-)mediatic reverberations that helped raise the profile of the village to an unprecedented degree. That is, the event afforded a principle of region-wide visibility that resonated with the idea of an eco-tourist community envisaged and partially implemented by the residents over the preceding few years. The visibility afforded by the pandemic response also constituted the bundle of events upstream that allowed Surjosari to be shifted to the forefront of large-scale Theravāda Buddhist rituality.

The set of pandemic-related calls and responses elaborated within the Temanggung regency fits broadly into the original formulation of affordances by Gibson and its reading by authors such as Keane (2018) and Ingold (2002). It might be deemed an 'objective' affordance, in that it is comprised of protocols, virological vocabularies, sanitary procedures, objects and images. But it is also one that, like all affordances, does not ensue a deterministic outcome. Indeed, it was not the intention of the organizing committee to link up to concerns of visibility or ethnopreneurial matters, and this would not necessarily be the case if the winner of the competition came from a village other than Surjosari, with a different background and different aspirations. Similarly, it was not a conscious effort by the Javanese-Buddhist community of the village to capitalize on pandemic-mitigation initiatives and thus advance a premeditated agenda. It was a relationship that came into being from the encounter between an emerging feature of the world and an attuned subject, made receptive, that is, by the configuration of its specific history and corporeal habituations. The Surjosari villagers constituted in the encounter a collective recipient, a 'first person plural' (Walsh 2020; cf. Mattingly 2014:33–58), which emerged from the sedimentation of repeated, small-scale interactions through which members 'become beholden' (2020: 44) in a phenomenal We.

However, the example of the *Candi Siaga* mitigation event and the chain of phenomena that unfolded clearly exceeds the formulation of affordances conceived by Gibson and other authors who engaged with it in a strictly environmental sense. The pandemic as an affordance had a nebulous character in that it was dispersed into a number of physical and sociological components; certainly, it cannot be reduced to virological circulation alone. Were that so, the Surjosari community (and, arguably, much of the world population) could hardly be said to have ever encountered or been affected by it. Yet, the pandemic was perceived as a menace and was acted upon by the community through distinct responses, just as the governmental event was routinely presented within the frame of the virological condition. In this respect, a pandemic might afford in a manner much like Dijk and Rietveld's 'large-scale affordances' (2020:4), that is, that micro-level affordances have the capacity to be coordinated simultaneously and experienced jointly by a partaker in the relation. While Dijk and Rietveld's example (the design of an architectural project) remains confined to the procedures of a relatively circumscribed project, the possibilities it opens up are far-reaching.

Once we recognize that a pandemic akin to COVID-19 resides in the pathogen as much as in the ubiquity of hand-sanitisers, travel restrictions, social distancing and the popularization of medical terminologies and government policies of various kinds – including an event like *Candi Siaga* in Temanggung – its qualities as an affordant become more apparent and far-reaching. The seeming discrepancy between the original rooting of affordances in immediate perceptions and the possibility illustrated by the ethnographic quarter of Surjosari subsists only in so far as we understand individual strands such as policies, discourses, imaginaries and – above all – the very idea of ‘large-scale affordances’ in exclusively representational terms. As pointed out by Dijk and Rietveld, large-scale affordances do imply an extensive temporality in order to unfold phenomenally. The process tying these types of relations together is imaginative.

Far from an unruly catchall device (cf. Stankiewicz 2016), imagination appears here as a situated and contextual faculty. It is the cognitive and pre-reflexive ability to achieve continuity among different scales of affordances. Rather than a delusional mental exercise, it sits at the very core of basic human consciousness (Rundell 2022). This resonates with Ingold thematizing imagination as a crescent capacity (2018:43) that braids continuously embodied perceptions with creative motion forwards. It also recalls the idea of ‘anticipation’ in the constitution of reality by perceiving subjects (Crapanzano 2004:19). The experience of environmental inputs and the engagement of cognitive formations occupy a comparable status in the unfolding of affordances and of the imagination that ties them together and propels them into the future (Sneath et al. 2009:12).

Reading affordances as multi-scalar means framing them as coming into being through micro-encounters, as well as via bundles of varying magnitudes brought together by the imaginative first person and occasionally ritualized in events such as *Candi Siaga*. It allows us to entertain the possibility of recognizing continuity and correspondences amidst the ever-emerging and intermittently realized set of affordances between relations and relata. A multi-scalar approach also permits us to conceive and speak of the pandemic as a unitary phenomenon, albeit aggregational and only loosely interconnected, in the ways in which it is encountered by perceivers and proceeds further into cultural practices. The *Candi Siaga* initiative in highland Java is an example of the pandemic affording in the fashion of a dispersed yet contiguous set of events involving a diverse taxonomy of components. The affordance thus precipitated, in the guise of mediatic visibility and tangible advancements in touristic and religious terms, suggests a temporally extensive yet experientially anchored processual stream.

Thinking with affordances may offer an alternative tool for apprehending the generative qualities of a broad social-cultural phenomenon, while not losing sight of the practical ways in which it is encountered. This might be particularly salient in the thriving landscape of pandemic discussions and commentaries, as well as, arguably, in connection with the widening spectrum of rapidly circulating and heavily mediated phenomena being induced by environmental distress and other cultural aggregates.

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