

Buddhist Engagement with the Muaro Jambi Temple Complex and Its Impact on Religious Identity and Socio-Economic Development

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Abstract

The Muaro Jambi temple complex, once a major Buddhist center during the Srivijaya Kingdom, continues to shape the socio-religious identity of the Buddhist community while contributing to local socio-economic development. This study examines contemporary Buddhist engagement with the site, focusing on its role in religious identity formation, educational utilization, and economic impact. Using an explanatory qualitative approach with an intrinsic case study strategy, data were collected through in-depth interviews, documentation, and observations, ensuring validity through triangulation techniques. Findings reveal that religious activities such as Vesak celebrations, meditation retreats, and dharmayatra pilgrimage have reinforced Buddhist communal identity, while the temple complex also serves as an educational hub integrated into Buddhist curricula and historical studies. Additionally, its function as a religious tourism site has boosted local economic activities, though challenges remain in ensuring sustainable local community involvement. Using Parsons' social action theory, this study illustrates how religious, cultural, and economic dimensions interact within structured social systems. These findings contribute to discussions on heritage preservation, religious identity, and sustainable cultural tourism, highlighting the importance of integrating religious heritage management with community-based development strategies.

Keywords: *Buddhist Identity, Religious Tourism, Socio-economic Impact, Muaro Jambi Temple, Heritage Preservation*

A. Introduction

The Muaro Jambi temple complex, located in Muaro Jambi Regency, Jambi Province, is the largest historical site on Sumatra Island, covering an area of 3,981 hectares (Widiatmoko, 2015). This complex houses more than 80 temple ruins, remnants of ancient settlements from the 9th to the 15th century CE (Yulianti & Seprina, 2022), as well as various significant artifacts, such as manapo (earthen mounds), bronze gongs, Chinese ceramics, and earthenware (Bottenberg, 2010).

Based on the discovery of the Prajñāpāramitā statue, Ayutthayan-style Buddha fragments, the Talang Tuo Inscription (Coedès & Damais in Widiatmoko, 2015; Bottenberg, 2010), along with ritual tools and ceremonial artifacts, the temple complex is believed to be a relic of Mahayana Buddhism (Lane, Catthopadhyana in Widiatmoko, 2015). Given these characteristics, the temple complex is thought to have been used for religious worship, meditation, and Buddhist education (Bottenberg, 2010). Consequently, it is recognized as a vihara (Utomo, 2011) or mahāvihāra, a Buddhist monastic and educational center (Widiatmoko, 2015; Direktorat Perlindungan Kebudayaan, 2020), comparable to prominent Buddhist educational centers in India, such as Nālandā University and Vikramasila University, and resembling the traditions practiced at Sera Jey Monastic University, India (Widiatmoko, 2015).

The Muaro Jambi temple complex was designated as an Integrated Historical Tourism Area on September 22, 2007, and later recognized as a National Cultural Heritage Area in 2013. Additionally, the complex has been nominated as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO and is currently listed as a tentative site (Direktorat Perlindungan Kebudayaan, 2022). Moreover, the provincial and regency governments of Jambi have identified it as a flagship tourism destination (Choirinnisa, 2010; Dahmiri et al., 2023), with eight out of 126 temples restored and repurposed for religious tourism (Firsty & Suryasih, 2019; Meilania & Febrianti, 2019). The complex has also been designated as a culture-based tourism destination (Mendikbudristek, 2021) and an educational center supporting the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program (Ramadhan, 2023).

As a testament to the grandeur of the Srivijaya Kingdom and evidence of interactions among Southeast Asian kingdoms (Wiyanarti, 2018), the Muaro Jambi temple complex, which is now part of the Civilization Trail (Choirinnisa, 2010), has been extensively studied from various perspectives. Prior research by Widiatmoko (2015), Astrilianda (2021), Pamungkas & Agustiningsih (2018), and Dahmiri & Bhayangkari (2022) has primarily focused on archaeological, folklore, and tourism aspects. Other studies, including those by Meilania & Febrianti (2019), Rozi (2019), Fajri, Bella, Tjung, & Pribadi (2023), Puspasari & Andriani (2018), and Sinuhaji (2019), have examined the site's development, management, and utilization as a cultural heritage and tourism site. Similarly, Firsty, Ophelia, & Suryasih (2019) have analyzed its use for religious tourism, Dahmiri & Fitriaty (2023) for tourism development, Anra & Syarifuddin (2019) for conservation, while Choirinnisa (2010) focused on evaluating tourism destination development.

Additional research on the Muaro Jambi temple complex has been conducted by Yulianti & Seprina (2022), Syaputra, Sariyatun, & Ardianto (2020),

and Luthfiah & Sartika (2021), focusing on its use in education. In terms of socio-economic aspects, the site has been examined by Putra (2019). However, studies exploring the socio-religious dimension and the role of the Buddhist community in utilizing the temple complex remain limited, even though records from the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Jambi indicate that the site has been used for religious tourism, the Muaro Jambi Temple Festival, and Vesak celebrations since 2010 (Anonymous, 2010; Firsty & Suryasih, 2019: 39).

Previous research on the Muaro Jambi temple complex has predominantly focused on its archaeological significance, tourism development, economic potential, and educational utilization. While these studies provide valuable insights, they have largely overlooked the socio-religious and socio-economic dimensions of the Buddhist community's engagement with the site. The contemporary use of the Muaro Jambi temple complex extends beyond the mere continuation of historical Buddhist traditions; it plays a pivotal role in shaping the socio-religious identity of modern Buddhists and fostering economic interactions within the local community. This engagement represents not only a means of preserving religious heritage but also an evolving manifestation of spiritual and cultural practices in response to contemporary social dynamics. Despite its importance, this phenomenon has received limited scholarly attention, leaving a gap in understanding how religious and socio-economic transformations are intertwined within this heritage site. Given the increasing prominence of the Muaro Jambi temple complex in religious tourism and cultural preservation efforts, a deeper investigation is warranted. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the role of the Buddhist community in utilizing the Muaro Jambi temple complex and assess its impact on both socio-religious identity formation and socio-economic contributions to the local community. By addressing these aspects, this research aims to contribute to broader discussions on the intersection of religious heritage, cultural identity, and economic sustainability in Buddhist communities.

B. Method

This study employs an explanatory qualitative approach combined with an intrinsic case study strategy (Yin, 2017) to provide a comprehensive analysis of how the Buddhist community engages with the Muaro Jambi temple complex and the subsequent impact on socio-religious identity formation and socio-economic development. Conducted over six months, the research took place at the Muaro Jambi temple complex in Muaro Jambi Regency and in Jambi City, allowing for in-depth examination and contextual understanding of the phenomenon. Data sources include the Chairman of the Buddhist Unity Association of Jambi (PUBJ), 20 Buddhist community members who also serve as

teachers and administrators of Buddhist religious education organizations, temple managers, Buddhist worship centers' social media platforms, and online news reports. The Chairman of PUBJ was selected as a key informant due to his leadership position, active role in promoting temple utilization, expertise in Buddhist heritage, and status as a member of the Jambi Province cultural heritage expert team.

To collect data, the study employed semi-structured interviews, open-ended questionnaires, documentation analysis, and direct observations. The documentation process involved gathering photographic archives, digital newspaper articles, government websites, and Buddhist worship centers' social media content, while observations focused on the spatial layout and functional use of the temple complex. The data were analyzed using Creswell's (2015) spiral analysis technique, involving multiple iterative stages: data collection, data management, memoing, descriptive and thematic coding, classification, and interpretation. The analysis was framed within Parsons' social action theory to understand how Buddhist social-religious actions shape and influence their engagement with the Muaro Jambi temple complex. To ensure data validity, the study adopted credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability techniques. Credibility was established through triangulation of sources and methods, cross-verifying information from the PUBJ chairman, Buddhist teachers, temple managers, and online sources. Methodological triangulation was conducted by comparing interview data with documentation, online sources, and observational findings.

C. Result and Discussion

1. The Significance of the Muaro Jambi Temple Complex for the Buddhist Community

As a relic of past civilizations, the temples within the Muaro Jambi temple complex hold profound significance for the Buddhist community in Jambi Province and its surrounding areas. The cultural and religious value of the site has been shaped by Buddhist interactions with the temple complex, particularly since the 1990s, despite the site only being officially designated as a tourist destination in the 2000s (Andra & Sadzali, 2017). These interactions involve a connection between the Buddhist community and both the historical and religious background of the temple complex, which was once a Buddhist education center during the Srivijaya era, as well as with the physical structures of the temples themselves. In the context of temple architecture, Sedyawati in Munandar (2022) highlights three key components that define a temple's significance: its physical structure, the religious concepts that underpin its construction, and the community that supports and assigns social functions to it.

The latter includes not only the local communities residing around the temple complex but also visitors who come to engage in religious and cultural activities (Munandar, 2022).

Buddhist interaction with both the historical-religious narrative and the tangible aspects of the temple complex has fostered a sense of spiritual attachment and religious pride among the community. This process of meaning-making reflects the role of cultural systems in shaping religious perception and identity formation. One of the informants, IS, described his personal experience upon first visiting the *Tinggi* Temple and *Kedaton* Temple, expressing a deep emotional and spiritual connection:

"At first, I felt something special – something different about this place. As I walked around, surrounded by trees, I felt a sense of familiarity and belonging. When I saw *Kedaton* Temple with its small tree growing there, I found myself inexplicably drawn to it. It felt like a perfect place for meditation—peaceful and deeply comforting (Interview, December 2024)."

For other informants, such as KN and SR, the temple structures evoked a strong sense of duty to revitalize, preserve, and continue the Buddhist traditions of the past. KN articulated this sentiment by stating:

"The Buddhist community in Jambi is privileged... We have inherited these temples, tangible proof of Buddhism's historical presence and former glory. And now, efforts are being made to revive it, which is an incredibly inspiring movement (Interview, December 2024)."

Meanwhile, SR emphasized the moral obligation to respect and safeguard the Srivijaya-era legacy, stating:

"It is time we honor our ancestors by protecting these sacred sites. Spiritually, I can feel the energy present here (Interview, December 2024)."

These varying interpretations and emotional responses stem from personal experiences and direct engagement with the temple complex, shaped by the individuals' religious and historical consciousness. Such meaning-making processes illustrate the internalization of religious values, reinforcing the cultural and spiritual significance of the site within the broader Buddhist belief system.

The perception of the temple complex as a sacred space aligns with Mircea Eliade's concept of *homo religiosus*, which posits that humans possess an innate inclination toward the sacred (Wilujeng, Syamsuddin, & Murtiningsih, 2022). According to Eliade, *homo religiosus* is aware of the distinction between the sacred and the profane, with the sacred representing a source of awe (*mysterium tremendum*) and divine majesty (*majestas*) that radiates an overwhelming spiritual presence (Wilujeng et al., 2022). This notion is particularly evident in the Buddhist community's reaction to their engagement with the Muaro Jambi temple complex. Many Buddhists reported experiencing a profound sense of

reverence, spiritual intensity, and a deep connection to their faith upon visiting the site—an experience that Eliade characterizes as an encounter with the "Sacred" (Pals, 2018).

For Buddhists in Jambi and beyond, the Muaro Jambi temple complex initially functioned as a profane site but later transformed into a sacred space as they recognized and embraced its religious significance. This sacralization process is evident in the dual utilization of the site—while some visitors approach the temples as a conventional historical attraction, others engage with them as a place of pilgrimage and spiritual practice. The shift from profane to sacred reinforces the role of cultural systems, religious values, personal spirituality, and collective religious actions in influencing Buddhist engagement with the site. By adopting Parsons' social action theory, the religious utilization of the Muaro Jambi temple complex can be understood as an interaction between multiple systemic elements. The cultural system encompasses historical and religious values that shape the Buddhist community's perception of the site. The personality system, which includes spiritual and religious motivations, drives individual engagement with the temple complex. Finally, collective action systems, formed around shared religious values, encourage community-driven initiatives to preserve, protect, and actively utilize the Muaro Jambi temple complex.

2. Utilization of the Muaro Jambi Temple Complex as a Religious and Educational Space

Building upon the community's understanding of the temple complex's cultural and spiritual significance, its functional role has evolved into both a sacred site for religious practices and a space for education. Informants' perceptions of the temples reveal a dual utilization: while the religious function is evident in ritual activities, the educational aspect emerges through both formal and informal learning processes. The Muaro Jambi temple complex has been actively utilized for Buddhist religious practices since the 1990s, even before it was officially recognized as a tourism destination. These religious engagements, initially limited to a few Buddhist groups, have now expanded into regularly conducted ceremonies and communal gatherings.

According to Buddhist informants, the importance of preserving the temple complex as a cultural heritage site is intertwined with its spiritual significance. This recognition has motivated individuals such as informant DT to deepen their knowledge about the historical background of the temple complex. This is achieved through seminars, visits to museums, reading scholarly works, and engaging with digital media focused on Buddhist history and pilgrimage practices (*dharmayatra*). These activities reflect the influence of cultural systems

and personal religious identity in shaping how the community interacts with the temple complex.

The Muaro Jambi temple complex is utilized by the Buddhist community in Jambi, particularly in Jambi City, for various purposes, including religious worship, conventional tourism, religious tourism, and education. The distinction between these functions aligns with Eliade's theory of the sacred and the profane—religious activities mark the sacralization of the space, whereas conventional tourism and educational visits are secular engagements. In this context, the sacred function of the temple complex is represented by meditation retreats, short rituals, and major religious celebrations such as Vesak and Asadha, while the profane function encompasses secular tourism, historical and archaeological exploration, and educational initiatives.

The social-religious actions performed at the temple complex involve multiple systemic elements, as outlined in Parsons' social action theory. The social system includes the community's organizational structures, such as Buddhist associations, temple management, and government institutions, which regulate religious and educational activities at the site. The cultural system incorporates Buddhist doctrines and values, reinforcing the community's commitment to preserving and utilizing the temple complex. The personality system is reflected in the individual motivations of Buddhists who actively engage in these activities, while collective action systems are demonstrated in the collaborative efforts to sustain the temple's spiritual, educational, and cultural roles.

Religious Activities at the Muaro Jambi Temple Complex

Religious practices at the Muaro Jambi temple complex have been conducted by the Buddhist community since before the site was officially opened for tourism. According to Rudy Zhang, Chairman of the Buddhist Unity Association of Jambi (PUBJ), the first documented meditation retreats at the temple complex took place in the 1990s, when access to the site was still challenging. Despite the logistical difficulties, Buddhist practitioners from Jambi organized week-long mindfulness retreats at the temple complex, often led by monastic figures such as *Samanera Kumuda*. In addition to meditation retreats, short Buddhist rituals have also been conducted at the temple complex, often performed either individually or in small groups. Informant Mr described how members of his temple regularly visit the site to recite Buddhist scriptures (*paritta*) and perform *pradaksina*—the act of circumambulating a sacred structure three times in a clockwise direction. Mr explained:

"At our temple, we have a small program where on the 1st and 15th days of the lunar calendar, we encourage a few members to visit the temple

complex to chant Buddhist verses, even if it is just a short recitation (Interview, December 2024)."

The utilization of the Muaro Jambi temple complex for meditation, retreats, and ritual practices aligns with the findings of Firsty, Ophelia, and Suryasih (2019), who noted that *Gumpung* Temple and *Tinggi* Temple serve as focal points for spiritual reverence and Buddhist devotion. Beyond individual and small-group rituals, larger-scale Buddhist celebrations such as Vesak and Asadha have also been held at the temple complex. The first recorded Vesak celebration at the site took place in 1992, with Buddhist participants performing *pradaksina* around the temples, as reported by *Kompas* on May 21, 2008 (Ita & Boy, 2008). Since then, Vesak has been observed annually, growing in scale and participation over time. Several Buddhist educators in Jambi recalled that they first attended Vesak celebrations at the temple complex between 2000 and 2010, which were organized by Vihara Sakyakirti and Sariputra School in Jambi City.

A pivotal moment in the religious utilization of the temple complex occurred in 2007, when the Muaro Jambi temple complex was selected as the venue for the National Vesak Celebration by Majelis Buddhayana Indonesia (MBI). The event was formally linked to the historical significance of the site as a Buddhist center during the Srivijaya era (*Kompas*, May 31, 2007). Rudy Zhang, reflecting on this event, noted:

"From 2007 onward, participation increased significantly. By then, hundreds of people were already attending (Interview, December 2024)."

Following the 2007 milestone, annual Vesak celebrations at the temple complex became a central religious event for Buddhists in Jambi and surrounding provinces. Media reports from *Kompas* (Ita, Boy & Egi, 2008; Tambunan & Irma, 2010) and *Jambi Ekspres* (April 2, 2009) further confirmed the growing significance of these religious gatherings. By 2017, the Vesak celebration at the Muaro Jambi temple complex reached an unprecedented scale, becoming a unifying event for Buddhists from diverse traditions, sects, and temples across the region. According to Rudy Zhang, this marked a turning point in Buddhist communal relations in Jambi:

"The 2017 Vesak celebration was a milestone. It was initiated by Budi Hartono (now deceased), who championed the idea of bringing together all Buddhist traditions. That year, Buddhists from all major traditions – Theravāda, Tibetan, Mahāyāna, Nichiren, and Zhen Fo Zong – came together in a single celebration (Interview, December 2024)."

The 2017 Vesak event, known as Vesak 2561 Buddhist Era, coincided with the Muaro Jambi Temple Festival, attracting not only local Buddhists but also attendees from other provinces. The event was also attended by government

officials from Jambi Province, further demonstrating the growing recognition of the temple complex as a religious and cultural landmark.

Despite the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, during which Vesak celebrations were suspended, Buddhist religious activities at the temple complex resumed in 2021. Activities such as spiritual pilgrimages and small-scale rituals at Kedaton Temple and Gumpung Temple were documented and shared on social media by Buddhist organizations. Following the pandemic, Vesak celebrations resumed at the temple complex in 2022 and 2023, with the main ritual site shifting from *Gumpung* and *Tinggi* Temples to *Kedaton* Temple (MetroJambi.com, 2022). Meanwhile, Asadha celebrations, though historically less prominent than Vesak, have also been held at the site since at least 2007 (Liputan6, 2007) and were documented again in 2019 through Buddhist community social media channels.

The Muaro Jambi Temple Complex as an Educational Space

Beyond its role as a religious site, the Muaro Jambi temple complex has also been utilized as an educational resource for both formal and informal learning. Its significance extends beyond the Buddhist community, serving as a historical and cultural site that provides insight into the region's Buddhist heritage, archaeological significance, and historical role as an educational center during the Srivijaya era. This dual function as both a religious and educational site underscores the temple complex's broader cultural relevance, making it an important point of engagement for various stakeholders, including educators, students, and religious communities.

In the context of conventional education, many Buddhist practitioners and teachers have made efforts to introduce the Muaro Jambi temple complex to their families and students. For example, informant IS mentioned how they personally took their visiting relatives to the site, stating:

"When family members visit from Java, I always take them to Muaro Jambi to introduce them to the history of Buddhism in the region. I want them to know that Jambi has an important Buddhist heritage (Interview, December 2024)."

This reflects the role of informal education in promoting historical awareness and cultural literacy among the Buddhist community.

Meanwhile, the temple complex's role in religious education aligns with the broader concept of pilgrimage-based learning, a practice commonly associated with Buddhist traditions. Known as *dharmayatra*, this practice involves pilgrimage to sacred sites as a means of deepening religious understanding (Howard, 2012). According to social media documentation from Buddhist organizations in Jambi, the concept of *dharmayatra* has been actively introduced to students in Buddhist Sunday schools, ensuring that younger generations

develop a spiritual and historical connection to the temple complex. Informants KN and SM confirmed that religious instructors have intentionally incorporated pilgrimage-based learning into their educational programs, reinforcing both historical awareness and religious devotion.

Furthermore, Buddhist educators have reported that the temple complex has been visited by international religious figures, including Lama Zhong Pa Rahul from Hong Kong, Nam Khai Rinpoche from the Nyingma tradition, and Simdha Rinpoche from Tibet. The presence of these figures indicates Muaro Jambi's growing role as a transnational religious and educational site, attracting Buddhist scholars and practitioners from various parts of the world. The provincial government and the *Balai Pelestarian Cagar Budaya* (BPCB) Jambi have also facilitated and supported these visits, further integrating the temple complex into the broader network of Buddhist educational institutions.

From an academic standpoint, the temple complex is not only significant for religious education but has also been recognized as an important historical and archaeological study site. University students and researchers from Nalanda University in India and students from African Kids education programs have conducted study visits to the complex. The site is particularly valuable for archaeological and historical research, as it provides tangible evidence of the influence of Buddhism in the Srivijaya era and its connection to other Southeast Asian Buddhist civilizations.

For Buddhist educators, the temple complex serves as a teaching resource that is incorporated into formal classroom instruction. Several Buddhist teachers, including SP, SM, MR, and KN, confirmed that they regularly integrate Muaro Jambi temple studies into their curriculum. MR, for instance, noted:

"In our fourth-grade class, we have a topic on Buddhist temples. I always make sure to include Muaro Jambi in the discussion, comparing it with other well-known Buddhist sites in Indonesia (Interview, December 2024)."

Similarly, KN, who has a background in information technology (IT), mentioned that they had produced educational videos about the temple complex to be used in Buddhist religious education classes. This initiative was even supported by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud) in 2016, further demonstrating government support for educational activities related to the temple complex.

Beyond direct educational applications, Buddhist educators have also utilized Muaro Jambi-related imagery and iconography in creative ways. Informant Dt, for example, stated that students had used images of Muaro Jambi's temples as backgrounds for digital content in school competitions, including TikTok, YouTube, and Buddhist-themed educational events. This

innovative use of digital media shows how cultural heritage can be integrated into modern educational and artistic expressions.

The integration of Muaro Jambi into Buddhist religious education is also evident in structured learning programs, such as those organized by Cetiya Oenang Hermawan in Jambi. Informants KN and SML confirmed that students from Buddhist Sunday School (SMB) programs were taken on field trips to the temple complex, where they engaged in meditation, scripture recitation, and group discussions on Buddhist history. The educational function of the Muaro Jambi temple complex is not limited to Buddhist religious education. Previous studies by Yulianti & Seprina (2022), Syaputra, Sariyatun, & Ardianto (2020), and Luthfiah & Sartika (2021) have explored the temple complex's potential as a historical education resource, particularly in teaching local history and cultural heritage preservation. These studies emphasize that the temple complex fosters historical awareness among students, encouraging a greater appreciation for Indonesia's Buddhist legacy. The significance of the site as an educational hub has also been recognized by the Ministry of Education and Culture, with initiatives aimed at developing the site into an educational and cultural research center (Kemdikbud, 2021). Given these efforts, the temple complex is now increasingly being positioned not only as a religious heritage site but also as a center for historical education and cultural preservation.

In analyzing these educational engagements, Parsons' social action theory can be applied to understand how systemic interactions facilitate knowledge transmission. The social system, represented by schools, religious organizations, and government bodies, creates institutional structures that promote the use of the temple complex as an educational site. The cultural system, encompassing historical values and religious traditions, influences both Buddhist and secular educational initiatives. The personality system, which includes individual motivation for learning and religious devotion, drives students and educators to engage with the site. Finally, collective action systems, formed through community-based education programs and intergenerational knowledge sharing, ensure the continuity of educational engagement with the temple complex. Ultimately, the educational utilization of the Muaro Jambi temple complex reflects broader patterns of knowledge transmission within Buddhist and historical studies. Whether through formal school curricula, informal community programs, or digital education initiatives, the temple complex serves as a vital educational asset, reinforcing both religious identity and historical consciousness among its visitors.

3. Socio-Economic Impact of the Utilization of the Muaro Jambi Temple Complex

The utilization of the Muaro Jambi temple complex by the Buddhist community has had significant social and economic impacts, both within the Buddhist community itself and in the broader societal context. These impacts can be seen in the formation of religious identity, the strengthening of communal bonds among Buddhists, the establishment of relationships with local government authorities, and contributions to the local economy. Over time, the religious engagement with the temple complex has facilitated both internal cohesion within the Buddhist community and external interactions with the local population and public institutions, fostering an environment of social and economic interdependence.

From a socio-religious perspective, Buddhist practitioners in Jambi view the Muaro Jambi temple complex as a cultural and spiritual legacy of the Srivijaya Kingdom, a heritage that strengthens their sense of religious identity and pride. Informants frequently expressed a heightened sense of belonging and affirmation of their faith as a result of their involvement in temple-based religious activities. The annual Vesak celebrations, in particular, have played a crucial role in bringing together Buddhists from various backgrounds and fostering unity within the community. The growing participation in these celebrations over the years reflects a deepening engagement with Buddhist heritage and an increasing recognition of the temple complex as a central religious site.

Interpersonal relationships within the Buddhist community have also been strengthened through shared experiences at the temple complex. From small-group meditation retreats in the 1990s to large-scale Vesak celebrations in 2017, the site has evolved into a space for communal religious expression. Informants SR, SPR, and TR highlighted that participation in religious activities at the temple complex alleviates feelings of religious isolation, fostering a greater sense of connectedness among Buddhists in Jambi. As TR stated:

"Attending Vesak at Muaro Jambi makes me realize that we are not alone. Seeing so many fellow Buddhists gathering here is incredibly uplifting (Interview, December 2024)."

Beyond individual and small-group connections, the temple complex has facilitated collaboration among different Buddhist organizations, temples, and traditions. Initially, religious activities at Muaro Jambi were primarily conducted by Buddhists from specific temples, such as Vihara Sakyakirti. However, over time, these activities expanded to include Buddhists from different sects, traditions, and regional affiliations, culminating in the establishment of the Buddhist Unity Association of Jambi (PUBJ) in 2017. Today, PUBJ consists of more than 20 Buddhist temples and 10 religious organizations, making it the largest formal Buddhist network in Jambi City. The formation of PUBJ is a direct result of collective engagement with the Muaro Jambi temple complex,

demonstrating its role in fostering institutional unity and cooperation among Jambi's Buddhist communities.

The social impact of temple utilization extends beyond the Buddhist community itself, influencing the relationship between Buddhists, local government authorities, and the broader public. Government support for Vesak celebrations, Asadha rituals, and other Buddhist events at the Muaro Jambi temple complex has facilitated formal recognition of Buddhist religious practices in the region. According to PUBJ chairman Rudy Zhang, the provincial government of Jambi has actively facilitated Buddhist activities at the temple complex, ensuring logistical support and security arrangements. The involvement of local authorities in the 2017 Vesak celebrations was particularly significant, as it marked the first large-scale collaboration between the Buddhist community and the Jambi provincial government. This interaction reflects a broader trend of religious inclusivity and interfaith cooperation, reinforcing the role of state institutions in facilitating cultural and religious diversity.

In addition to its social impact, the utilization of the Muaro Jambi temple complex by the Buddhist community has contributed to the local economy, particularly through religious tourism and community-based commerce. The influx of visitors—both from within Jambi and from other provinces—has created opportunities for small businesses, vendors, and service providers operating near the temple complex. According to informants from both the Buddhist community and local business owners, Buddhist activities at the temple complex have boosted local economic activity in several key ways. First, the presence of large numbers of visitors during major religious events such as Vesak has increased demand for food, beverages, transportation services, and souvenirs. Local vendors have responded to this by offering Buddhist-themed products, such as incense, prayer beads, and temple-related handicrafts, catering specifically to religious tourists. Second, the PUBJ leadership, in collaboration with temple management, has made conscious efforts to engage with local businesses when organizing religious events. As PUBJ chairman Rudy Zhang explained:

"We always make an effort to support local businesses. During religious events, we encourage Buddhists to buy flowers and offerings from local vendors and to dine at local food stalls. This way, we contribute to the community while conducting our religious practices (Interview, December 2024)."

One notable example of community engagement is the Pojok Kopi Dusun, a local coffee shop near the temple complex that has become a preferred gathering spot for visiting Buddhists. In addition to supporting local businesses, Buddhist organizations have also contributed to local employment

opportunities, particularly in security and event management during major religious celebrations. Informants noted that during Vesak celebrations, local residents are often hired as security personnel and logistical staff, providing short-term employment opportunities and fostering positive relationships between Buddhists and the surrounding community.

However, despite these economic benefits, the integration of local communities into the broader development of religious tourism at Muaro Jambi remains limited. Previous studies, such as those conducted by Dahmiri et al. (2023) and Firsty, Ophelia, & Suryasih (2019), have noted that while Buddhist religious events bring economic opportunities to local vendors and service providers, there is still a lack of long-term strategies to maximize local community involvement in the tourism sector. Many local businesses remain small-scale and informal, and there are few structured partnerships between Buddhist organizations and local entrepreneurs. To address these challenges, scholars have suggested strengthening collaboration between the Buddhist community, local government, and business stakeholders to develop sustainable religious tourism strategies. Enhancing community-based economic programs, improving tourism infrastructure, and integrating local artisans into the supply chain for religious tourism products could further expand the economic benefits of Buddhist engagement with the temple complex.

From the perspective of Parsons' social action theory, the socio-economic impact of the Muaro Jambi temple complex can be understood through the interaction of four systemic elements. The social system encompasses the networks of Buddhist organizations, government institutions, and local businesses, all of which contribute to the functioning of the temple complex as a religious and economic space. The cultural system consists of Buddhist values, historical consciousness, and economic traditions, shaping the way the Buddhist community interacts with the site. The personality system reflects individual motivations for religious participation and economic engagement, while collective action systems manifest in collaborative initiatives to integrate religious tourism with local economic development. Ultimately, the utilization of the Muaro Jambi temple complex demonstrates how religious heritage sites can serve as catalysts for both social cohesion and economic growth. The engagement of the Buddhist community with the site has not only strengthened religious identity and unity but has also created economic opportunities and fostered inter-community relationships. However, to fully realize the temple complex's potential as a socio-economic driver, more structured and sustainable development strategies are needed to enhance local participation and maximize long-term benefits.

D. Conclusion

The Muaro Jambi temple complex serves as a significant religious, cultural, and educational site that continues to shape the socio-religious identity of the Buddhist community while contributing to local socio-economic development. Through religious rituals, meditation retreats, and Vesak celebrations, Buddhists have reclaimed the site as a sacred space, reinforcing a sense of historical continuity and collective spiritual identity. At the same time, the temple complex functions as an educational resource, integrated into Buddhist curricula, pilgrimage-based learning (dharmayatra), and historical studies, fostering both religious devotion and historical awareness. Beyond its religious and educational roles, the temple complex has generated economic benefits for the local community, particularly through religious tourism and small-scale commerce. Increased visitor activity during major Buddhist celebrations has created opportunities for local vendors, artisans, and service providers, demonstrating the economic potential of cultural heritage sites. However, challenges remain in ensuring sustainable local community participation, highlighting the need for collaborative efforts between Buddhist organizations, local authorities, and business stakeholders to develop inclusive religious tourism strategies.

This study contributes to academic discussions on the intersection of religious heritage, cultural identity, and economic sustainability, particularly within the Indonesian Buddhist context. Using Parsons' social action theory, it illustrates how religious, cultural, and economic dimensions are interconnected through systemic social structures, individual motivations, and collective action. Moving forward, further research is needed to explore how ritual practices at the Muaro Jambi temple complex evolve alongside broader transformations in religious tourism and heritage management to ensure its long-term preservation and relevance.

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