

Keynote “On Decoloniality and Restitution in Cambodia Today” by Prof. Ashley

Thompson, Hiram W Woodward Chair of Southeast Asian Art SOAS University of London for the research workshop CONFLICT: Archives, Collections, and Heritage on March 25, 2024, at the University of Copenhagen South Campus, Denmark.

Transcript of the first 15 minutes.

Thank you, Magali, first of all for the invitation and. It's a - I'm really looking forward to the day – it's a wonderful opportunity for me to learn what's going on in this field, so I will begin.

There is there's an unsettled and unsettling relation between the de's and the re's that haunt the work of restitution today. The de's of decolonization or decoloniality or deconstruction: all of which are concerned with disempowering hegemonic power structures. And the re's of restitution, repatriation, repatriation, return, repair, and I would see even recursion, all of which are concerned with re-empowering; what, however, remains an open question.

The de's and the re's might appear to be at odds with each other; the de's undoing and the re's redoing. The one's retractive and the other additive. They're not exactly binary oppositions. One might instead pair restitution with destitution and decolonizing with recolonizing, for example.

However, they work together as parts of a single system, the one giving way to the other, like a Möbius strip. It is of concern that in following on from decolonization, defined as a political event, restitution may only appear to lead to decoloniality. Defined as a cultivated quality in and of social and epistemological realms. Forging a path of forward progress, when in fact it comprises a seamless return to an old order - whereby nationalism serves as cover for still invincible coloniality.

So, to fend off such an imminent pairing of despair and repetition, today I will consider the potentiality of the colonial museum, or the decolonial museum, in Cambodia today. And with a nod to the creative intervention made by *The Art of Ikat: A Cambodian Renaissance* exhibition that I'm looking forward to seeing, I will highlight briefly how dressing statues can comprise a very powerful, performative gesture, deflecting the colonial gaze and reflecting a Cambodian idiom.

So, a monumental Khmer statue of the Hindu elephant-god, Ganesha, will serve as my guide in this talk. Today, this Ganesha sits under a pavilion on the grounds of the National Museum of Cambodia, aligned with the museum's eastern gate and facing west, towards the building's central entrance. The metal structure was built in 2023 to house the statue temporarily, when awaiting restoration and planned installation inside the museum building's central entry hall; so, facing out to the east. That is: facing museum visitors on entry. Here you see him awaiting that move, still. Facing the museum.

The statue is flanked by two identical replicas of another Ganesha statue in the museum's collection. These two statues, made by the museum's replica-workshop, were set here, respectively facing the museum's northern and southern entries, well before the central installation of the monumental sculpture - which makes them a sort of try out or a sort of family of three. Shortly after this installation went up, I heard someone, and I can't recall who, muttering that the magnificent masterpiece was haphazardly set up under a corrugated steel roof. I consider the installation quite otherwise.

The central monumental Ganesha is framed in the devotional manner to which Khmer statuary is accustomed. Symmetry and alignment is important. The square pavilion is set in the museum's very precise East-West-axis. There, Ganesha sits atop a square pedestal and under rectangular fabric canopy, or ceiling, known as a *pidan* - which I believe Sonetra will talk to us about this afternoon. The centre of the *pidan*, demarcated by a descending, circular component, hangs low over the centre of Ganesha's head. A low rectangular table for offerings, with a circular sand filled pot for incense sticks at its centre, echoes the central, circular component of the *pidan* - to complete the installation's vertical alignment. The undulating, fringed, flange of the *pidan* echoes the sculpted metal border of the pavilion roof above it, with its downward pointing floral motifs mimicking hanging garlands. These are in turn mirrored by the opening lotus blossom motif of the incense pot below. The composition creates an attraction between upper and lower registers, effectively bracing, or embracing, the statue.

Such devotional arrangements serve to establish and reestablish order, or in contemporary Cambodian Buddhist terms “dharma”, the micro level realignment. So, the museum's east-

west axis coincides with that of the Royal Cremation Ground, called *dolmen* or *The Field of Meru* - the Sacred Mountain constituting the centre of the cosmos in Indic cosmologies.

The museum was built by the French colonial administration in the early 20th century. It is set immediately north of the Royal Palace and east of the Royal Cremation Ground, which itself had been set to the northeast of the palace's throne hall in a ritual arrangement widely evidenced in ancient Cambodian practice. The choice setting of the museum by the colonial administration, along with its design (combining vernacular Khmer, religious, royal, and colonial architecture, and integrating art school with master instructors from the palace workshop), shows a knowing assimilation of governing practices on both sides of the colonial enterprise, whereby artistic expression is irrevocably enmeshed in constructions of governance.

The dark saffron yellow colour of the *pidan* is irrevocably associated with the Theravāda Buddhist monastic robes and is typical of *pidan*. Together with the pavilion roof, the *pidan* serves to protect and adorn the statue.

The staging of the Ganesha can be compared with that of a famous pair of statues on their restitution to the national fold in 1959. These two statues had been abducted by a rebel military commander seeking to overthrow the royal government's control of Siem Reap province. The rebel was caught and assassinated. The statues were restituted to their home in Siem Reap town via a royal reception at neighbouring Angkor Wat Temple. The ceremony was presided over by Queen Kossamak, mother of then head of state Norodom Sihanouk.

The statues were installed in a temporary pavilion, on the terrace approach to Angkor Wat's second enclosure in its east-west-axis. The pavilion design is more elaborate than that of our Ganesha but follows the same principles of embracing the statues. The *pidan* is in wood here, with circles above the heads of each statue, and the drapery is on the bodies of the statues themselves. Here they are in a more recent staging with the saffron yellow drapery on their bodies and elaborate gold circular hangings above their heads in the guise of *pidan*.

These are Buddhist statues in iconographic terms, but they are worshipped as two ancient royal princesses and served today as palladia of the kingdom. The comparable [...] staging of

the Ganesha suggests that he too is living life as an ancestral figure. Still, we are in the gardens of the National Museum, where label is in order.

At first glance, all is indeed in proper museum order. And Khmer and English we read the identity of the divinity represented. The fine site, the period, date and style, the material, and the discrete suggestion of the Ganesha's looting history with the words: "Received from the USA, 2023".

Yet there is a glitch, a mistranscription of one Khmer word, which, like a slip, is free of intention and overdetermined. The Khmer gives the fine site of the piece as "*Prasat Bak*" (the ruined temple). This local name of the sanctuary within the Koh Ker temple complex in northeast Cambodia was first documented by a French scholar administrator in 1930. The English, or the Roman letters here, instead gives "*Phsar Bak*" (the ruined market).

Phsar is the Khmer version of the Persian *bazaar*, like the English *bazaar*. This is not a mistake made by a museum staff-member insufficiently versed in transcription system or by a technician miscopying an order. What we have here is one word substituted for another. *Prasat* has become *phsar*. The temple has become the market.

What could be a better slip, insofar as it is this very substitution that converted our Ganesha from a cult object to a commodity, or work of art if you prefer, and that brought it around the world and back again? Between the Khmer and the English, the label gets to the heart of both the history and the state of the field in a way that a more scientifically accurate transcription would have served to obscure. Unwittingly or not – who's to say? – with this label the National Museum is conveying a message legible only to an attentive Khmer speaking audience. The text succeeds the frame of your standard bilingual museum label, addressing a single message to two distinct language communities; hiding in plain sight, an additional message is there to be read between the lines. Like an inside joke, the slip works in a performative manner to make an exclusive community united in interpretation.

In time, I will make my way to the question bubbling up here of the National Museum of Cambodia as an irrevocably colonial site by its very nature, condemning today's managers and staff members to acts of mimicry destined to fail to achieve the muchwanted international

standards of curatorial performance, or to the contrary, as a privileged site of decolonial promise.

So, with this in mind, I want to turn to Ganesha's appearances in early colonial records. Following the statues traces in this archive will, in the first instance, tell us more about colonial structures than it will about the Khmer statue. It's something of an expedition, in which we uncover the gradual establishment of an old boys' network, in the name of the EFEO, the *École française d'Extrême-Orient*, and, of course, at the service of colonial power.

This is a power consolidated over generations through processes which explicitly tie the accumulation and organisation of knowledge to the diminishment of local agency. Ancient Khmer temples become a privileged site of transformation at the heart of these processes. They do not yet become a marketplace per se, insofar as French governance was developed through the conservation and restoration of ancient temple sites. However, one powerful effect, if not perhaps the systematically organized, organizing principle of such conservation governance was to dispossess and repossess. And this dispossession/repossession of ancient temples, literally and conceptually, laid the ground for the international marketplace to come. The tension between conservation of objects and dispossession of agency is real and crucial to the operations at hand, where an apparent good deed cannot be disentangled from a manifestly reprehensible bad one.

Ancient Khmer statuary played a pivotal role in these processes. The temples may have been in many cases, ostensibly abandoned, but they were peopled with statues. If early French explorers were frequently seeking also to inventory ethnic groups, their languages, and customs, the documentation they produced indicate that their eyes were often more precisely trained on statues than on people.

And when trained on people, their eyes, it would seem, often saw something on the order of the statues they studied. That is, objects of study rather than subjects with agency - capable even of studying themselves. Furthermore, as is still the case today, relations between local inhabitants and statuary remains can easily go unseen to the untrained eye.

Still, the distinct capacity for statuary to embody agency did not go unnoticed, wittingly or not. Unlike temples, for their anthropomorphic or zoomorphic form, statues convey identity,

be it on the order of the individual or the generic. A given statue can be identified as a god, a specific god (say, Shiva or Buddha), as a mythic or historical figure or both (like the Angkorian princesses).

Restoring statues or removing them from temple sites for whatever reason, to service as specimens for historical study or museum display, for simple safekeeping, for direct monetary gain, as [well as] for their spiritual or political potency, always involves some recognition of identity. The agency inherent in statuary identity can be more or less suppressed or enabled however, depending on that of the people relating to them. A statue's agency can be enlivened through veneration of a figure they embody or through their inclusion in an oral tale. It can be deadened through their cataloguing as an object, even an art object, given a number, a date, provenance, or even a name. In short, in tracking the appearance of our Ganesha in colonial records, I have come not only to see dispossession as a condition of colonial knowledge production, but more precisely to see dispossession and repossession of a statue to operate the dispossession of local human agency.

To repurpose a famous comment on colonial appropriation and an anticipation of our expedition into French colonial records, I would like to say something along the lines of: when certain men die, they enter history ; when statues die, they enter into art, in a process that suppresses the historical presence of many others.

Summary

There is an unsettled and unsettling relation between the de-'s and the re-'s that haunt the work of restitution today – the de-'s of decolonization or decoloniality or deconstruction (all of which are concerned with disempowering hegemonic structures), and the re-'s of restitution, repa/matriation, return, repair and even recursion (all of which are concerned with re-empowering – what remains an open question).

The de-'s and the re-'s might appear to be at odds with each other – the de-'s undoing and the re-'s re-doing, the one subtractive and the other additive. They are not exactly binary oppositions – one might instead pair restitution with destitution, and decolonizing with recolonizing, for example. Yet they work together as parts of a single system, the one giving way to the other like a mobius strip. It is of concern that, in following on from decolonization

(defined as a political event), restitution may only appear to lead to decoloniality (defined as a cultivated quality in and of social-epistemological realms), forging a path of forward progress, when in fact it comprises a seamless return to an old order whereby nationalism serves as cover for a still invincible coloniality.

To fend off such an imminent pairing of despair and repetition, this talk will consider the potentiality of the (de)colonial museum in Cambodia today. With an anticipatory nod to the creative intervention made by *The Art of Ikat: A Cambodian Renaissance* exhibition, the talk will highlight how dressing statues can comprise a powerful performative gesture deflecting the colonial gaze in reflecting Cambodian idiom.

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