

# Lush Lives

## The Peregrinations of Borobudur Buddha Heads, Provenance, and the Moral Economy of Collecting

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Fig. 1. Borobudur, around 1874. Photograph: Isidore van Kinsbergen. Leiden University Library, Special Collections, inv. nr. KITLV 87568.

Fourteen Buddha heads in the National Museum of World Cultures (NMVW) “probably” originate from the 8th-century Buddhist shrine Borobudur in Central Java. This would mean that they belong to 14 of the 504 Buddha statues that, from the temple, once overlooked Javanese rice fields. They share the same fate with a much larger number of tokens from Borobudur – heads, statues, and reliefs, carried away in colonial times – being kept in museums worldwide. Research into these objects, therefore, cannot be restricted to national or bilateral forms of collaboration; rather, it requires international coordination. That said, research in PPROCE has shown how rich the stories are that objects hold within them, and how lush their lives can be – stories that transcend the interests of institutes, nations, and states. Precisely because of these stories, the results of PPROCE might be treasured and mined: to the benefit of further research and new stories.

The 14 Buddha heads in the collection of the National Museum of World Cultures (NMVW) are all disconnected from what was once an architectonic unity: a temple for local religious-political purposes built under the Javanese Sailendra Dynasty, which flourished between c. 750-850. A millennium later, in the 1810s, when the majority of the population of Java (since the 16th century) had converted to Islam, the ruined temple Borobudur, covered by debris but not forgotten, became the object of huge cleaning operations, research, and conservation programs under changing colonial and postcolonial regimes. Since then, while being cared for by local inhabitants and becoming a site for local tourism, the temple transformed into a colonial, postcolonial, and UNESCO World Heritage Site, drawing mass tourism. On the way, it also got re-sacralized by various religious groups, with various aims. The Borobudur objects were carried away during that modern, 19th- and 20th-century life of the temple. They became part of networks of accidental and scientific collectors and museums worldwide. Since the 1910s, Borobudur Buddha heads have also entered a rising market in Asian art that, if we consider the prices they sold for in the 2000s, is still booming.

In addition to requiring international coordination, research into these objects should ideally be conducted on behalf of the temple and the objects rather than for the diplomatic interests of decolonizing museums and governments. PPROCE – initiated by two national museums and an academic institute, and supported by the Dutch government – is not just a noble beginning of decolonizing diplomacy. Researchers for this project have shown the stories that we find if we dig deep in the archives and trace as many sources and transactions as possible – stories generated by the objects along their journeys. But these stories should not be restricted to the question of provenance.

Provenance, in the narrow sense of “origin,” is not necessarily the most interesting aspect of the life of a museum object.<sup>1</sup> The signification of an object changes, in mechanisms of exchange and interdependence, when it changes owner and place, in the eyes of different users and viewers, and in its journey through time. In this process, time and again, in different places, they become part of heritage politics. The sum of these transactions is what we call the social biography of an object, and it is what makes this biography

political.<sup>2</sup> For this reason alone, the question of provenance is not the same as asking: who is the rightful owner?

While for many objects it is unclear who they should be with – and the answer to this question is always political – for some it is immediately clear where they should be. This applies, for example, to the Borobudur Buddha heads from Central Java, now held in depots and showcases in museums around the world (including in Indonesia). The Buddha heads, to which I restrict myself in this essay, belong on the statues of the Buddhist temple which has stood in Java for over 1100 years.

Notably, in the course of that time, the majority of the population in – what is now – Indonesia had converted to Islam. The temple, in turn, became part of national and international heritage politics, and it also changed as a result of local signification. But there, the Buddha heads – now scattered across the globe – could have continued to play a part in local practices of care, memory creation, and changing signification of that place. The fact that they have been unable to do so is painful. The fact that they were removed in the context of colonial power structures, that they disappear into museum showcases and depots as spiritual “Asian

Art,” or that they are traded in the art market at ever-higher prices, should be seen as an injustice and epistemic violence.<sup>3</sup> This is not necessarily a new idea: PPROCE itself is a result of the discussions on this subject.

Political, thus, are the objects that travelled from sites in formerly colonized regions, to other places in the world; political are the many, many objects that ended up in museums worldwide and that were categorized as subjects of archaeology, ethnography, history, art, or a combination of the four. The Buddha heads have been all. Likewise political, moreover, and never neutral, is the research we do – whether as academics, curators, activists, or artists – on histories, social biographies, and provenance of museum objects recognized as “heritage” and as “collected during the colonial era.” This is also the case for PPROCE. It is all part and parcel of the politics of heritage formation. PPROCE provides, in that sense, just a new phase to the social-political biographies of the museum objects, which in their perhaps much longer life, also got loaded by a colonial burden.

It is important to emphasize here: heritage, in itself, is nothing. Heritage, here in the guise of museum objects, “becomes,” “transforms,” and will always change in meaning over time. Yet it can only do so when people, private parties, collectors, institutions, or governments decide they want to keep it, to take care of it, to trade it, or to lend it to other parties; or it can do so when governments, groups, or individuals “reclaim” or “restitute” objects. All of these activities imply a set of choices: What are we going to keep, scrutinize, restore, or return? For whom? How and why so? Heritage is therefore essentially political. Critical research into the politics of heritage, into provenance, or into biographies of objects gives insight into choices, changing valuations, and conditions of exchange. In this way, such research can, therefore, have an impact on new socio-political choices regarding the politics that transform objects into heritage, to the effect of marginalizing other options.<sup>4</sup> As researchers, we always also make choices, and thereby leave out other options.

Provenance research, as conducted within PPROCE, encompasses not only the question of origin but also the socio-political biography of an object: the histories and circumstances of the various transactions (including pillage) that have occurred from the moment an object disappeared from its original site to the moment it ended up in a museum. Whilst the research by PPROCE produced salient descriptions of looting or donation under duress, often, despite thorough research, this transactional history remains shrouded in mystery. These transactions were seldom or never recorded – by collectors, donors, or recipients. Which is in fact strange. Those

Fig. 2. Gallery of Borobudur, with headless Buddha Statues, 2016. Photograph: M. Bloembergen.

Fig. 3. Three of the Buddha heads – TM A-5945, 5946, 5948 – kept at the Museum of World Cultures, on display as ‘Souvenirs’ at the exhibition ‘Encounters: Hidden Stories from the Tropenmuseum’s Collection (2012-2013)’. In the background, ‘Study of the Borobudur’ by Jan Pieter Veth (1864-1925). Photograph: M. Bloembergen.



who, for example, removed the Buddha heads from Borobudur, saw the original site and entered into an actual transaction. However, most did not take the trouble to note down how, from whom, or under what circumstances and conditions of exchange they had obtained the heads. More importantly, this did not seem to bother collectors and curators of the archaeological, ethnographic, and art historical museums that purchased or received the heads. There was virtually no change to this passive stance until the recent worldwide restitution debates and, for the Netherlands, PPROCE. Why was the provenance of colonial acquisitions held in museums never a burning issue?

Let us follow a few of the donors and recipients of Buddha heads from Borobudur. What did they write down? Perhaps that will give us an answer to our question. Three motifs stand out: firstly, a sense of abundance without embarrassment; secondly, and seemingly contradictorily, a sense of decay and mission (i.e., a compulsive mission to save the material witnesses of disappearing civilizations); and thirdly, love of the object – in other words, greed motivated by scientific curiosity, aesthetic appreciation, and a desire for status. This love, or greed, dispelled all thoughts of moral and ethical questions regarding an object's provenance. In some cases, patriotism – a frequently used argument for shipping objects off to the Netherlands – could be a factor connecting all three motives. But patriotism was just as much a façade for these. This combination of motives paradoxically resulted in indifference towards the objects and alienation from their collections. I give two examples crossing different periods.

### Colonial abundance without embarrassment

Abundance without embarrassment is what perhaps best describes the attitude that came to characterize collectors on the ground in colonial Java and in the museums in Europe. Even today, 19th-century descriptions of the abundance of Hindu-Buddhist antiquities in Java convey to the modern reader the idea of “obtainability,” as if they were there for the taking.

One of the Buddha heads under custody of the NMVW Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden goes back to a gift of Caspar G.C. Reinwardt (1773-1854), a Dutch botanist of Prussian descent, who between 1816-1821 led a prestigious scientific mission to Java. Notably, the Reinwardt Academy in Amsterdam, where heritage professionals are trained, is named after him. Reinwardt visited Borobudur in 1817, when, under the preceding British colonial regime, it had only just been reclaimed from the jungle. On seeing the temple, Reinwardt experienced an acute and overwhelming sense of decay. Seeing the ruined temple sprouting tree roots and watching the behaviour of its visitors, Reinwardt observed an apparent “freedom” to remove the statues: “This piece which is remarkable to the history of Java [will] quickly [...] decline and disappear, now everyone is free to remove statues from it.”<sup>5</sup> Apparently, this freedom implied that Reinwardt himself could take hold of a number of heads (and hands) of statues from Borobudur, and these were shipped to the Netherlands. He did not note how he had acquired them, and nobody in the Netherlands seemed to care about this. What mattered to the recipients was the head itself, what it might represent, and to which science – and hence in which emerging museum – it belonged.

Now let us move to the museums. We follow four Buddha heads that in 1921 would end up in the collection of the Colonial Institute (the predecessor of the NMVW Tropenmuseum, which opened its doors in 1926). They did so as a gift from the Society Natura Artis Magistra (or Artis), the zoo in Amsterdam, which had closed its own Ethnographic Museum in 1910. They were described as “possibly from Borobudur.” In the Colonial institute, we can trace their journey from highly refined imperial showpieces to items “unfitting” to the stories the museum wished to tell and finally to objects in the museum depots. But otherwise,

these four Buddha heads suffered a similar fate to the Reinwardt Borobudur pieces: nobody asked about their provenance. In postcolonial times, however, one curator expressed his doubts about provenance. He believed that the different external characteristics of the various Borobudur Buddha heads in the Tropenmuseum, by now eight in total, may suggest that they could not all have come from the same temple. Nothing was actually done; no historical research was conducted. These doubts, and the reasoning behind them, were eventually copied over into the digital registration system TMS, and in exhibition texts well into the 2010s.

In 2012-2013, three of the Buddha heads resurfaced in the exhibition *Encounters: Hidden Stories from the Tropenmuseum's Collection* – on display as ‘Souvenirs’. Visitors were invited to think about the ethics of all this: “Is it prestigious to have a Buddha head from the Borobudur or is it unethical and should restitution be considered?”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the museum publicly subjected itself to critical self-examination, and the exhibition's curators should be commended for this. But their question about ethics also seems non-committal. In a rather bizarre way, the museum text questioned the provenance of the Buddha heads without mentioning research being done, nor the necessity of such research. The biggest let-down came at the end of the museum text, which included language implying abundance and availability: “Near Borobudur there are also other monuments which once housed thousands of Buddha statues. You did not need to walk far to find a so-called ‘authentic’ Borobudur Buddha head.”<sup>7</sup>

Abundance may lead to alienation. The more a collection grew, the less time a collector or curator could spend on object-focused historical research. But this way of handling collections also reflects the priorities set by the museums and their financiers. And then there is the curator's love for the object. That love is always also exclusive, reflects particular forms of curiosity, and tends to disconnect that same object from the place where it came from and from the violence with which it once was captured. The tragedy, once again, is that in that double way, through love or greed, and abundance without embarrassment, the museums became alienated from their collections.

The question of provenance is not necessarily the most important aspect of the socio-political biography of a museum object, but this is not to say that provenance does not matter. Object-focused historical research should become the main task of museums and their curators if they wish to be socially relevant – and it looks as if more and more museum deem this more and more important. But museums should not be the ones in control of such research. Let them be generous in opening up, giving access to their archives, and providing research space in permanent reading rooms for students and outside researchers of every kind. So that the objects can tell the socio-political histories of global, local, and colonial dimensions that they hold within them – wherever and to whomever. So that we can ask questions about what makes these histories colonial (or not). So that we can learn from the objects and see and understand the wider world, beyond our own horizons and outside the context of heritage institutions.

### Home is where the heart is

It is intriguing that from the early 20th century, outside the world of restoration expertise and research-in-development, scholars scrutinizing the temple's history and meanings normally do so by re-imagining the temple in the state it was built around c. 800 – thus, as a complete unity. They

rarely contemplate its missing parts unless in the sense of regrettable loss and decay. Yet, ever since its so-called “rediscovery” in the early 19th century, the missing tokens are just as well a part of the stories Borobudur has to tell. Borobudur has become more and more incomplete over time, suffering losses in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries due to the looting of objects belonging to a temple by individuals who saw no problem with that. It is, moreover, a site of national heritage, world heritage, and global Buddhist commemorative festivals like Waisak. It is and has been part of the local landscape, in which local inhabitants build their own relations with the temple. Many Indonesian citizens occasionally celebrate *Lebaran* (the feast marking the end of the Islamic fasting period) at the site, and others profit from a local and international tourist industry and its politics generated by a world heritage site designation.

This raises the question: to what kind of temple would Borobudur Buddha heads return if they do. Perhaps part of the answer lies in the kind of stories people tell each other about the temple's possible meanings, to themselves or to others – academically, architecturally, artistically, privately, socially. Examples are the forms of local activism showing various forms of belonging. These include the protests of villagers living around Borobudur, who were forced to move for the UNESCO-supported restoration project in the 1980s; the “*ruwat-ruwat Borobudur*” (*lit.* ritual meant to liberate, to cleanse) those villagers have been organizing since 2003;<sup>8</sup> and also the story-telling project recently initiated by the Indonesian ministry of tourism and a research team from Universitas Gadjah Mada.<sup>9</sup>

I end this essay, however, with another story – or actually a poem – by the Javanese Roman Catholic activist and poet Linus Suryadi (1951-1999), entitled “Borobudur.”

I do so precisely because, in the 1980s, Linus Suryadi pondered Borobudur and its headless Buddha statues, and what this meant – then, and there – in his eyes, to Indonesia, and for Indonesian identity. I would like to thank Taufiq Hanafi, who helped me in locating the full original of the English translation of Linus Suryadi's poem I had encountered myself; and in understanding the translator's liberties. In the poem, Suryadi poignantly writes:

“The statues of Buddha are without heads / Headless in their places / Quiet imprisoned by the old world / You guess full of anger: / Is this a riddle Or is it reality? / I see only Javanese peddlers / Groups of tourists sightseeing / Shops and restaurants are also there / Hotels and markets at the foot of the temple.”

He proceeds to reflect further on a sacred landscape transformed by tourism and commerce, wondering what all of this might entail for Indonesian identity:

“When it is lush the *Bodhi* tree falls with a crash / There is no replacement / There is another version without the centres / For shopping and handicrafts / There is another meaning without the reality / Of the sacred building commercialized [...] The legacy replaced by arenas for entertainment [...] A diverse identity”<sup>10</sup>

The point I wanted to make with this poem was, originally, this: not only academics study the transformation of Borobudur and the tokens it lost into heritage objects. Indonesian poets/activists do so as well: from, in the first half of the 19th century, the authors of the *Serat Centhini* (a grand, generative compendium of knowledge, initiated at the court of Surakarta and written in the form of a poetic travelogue, which includes descriptions of Javanese antiquities), to the modern Indonesian poets Noto Soeroto (1888-1951) and Amir Hamzah (1911-1946) in late colonial times, to Linus Suryadi after the big UNESCO restoration in the 1980s. But Taufiq Hanafi corrected me, and he was right. It is the other way around: not only Indonesian poets reflect upon Borobudur, and make us think about

its possible meanings for multiple identities of and beyond Indonesia; but (other) poets, academics, artists and tourists – anyone, anywhere – do, and might do so, too.

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#### Notes

- 1 This paragraph, and the next, elaborates on M. Bloembergen 'Colonial abundance without embarrassment. Provenance of museum objects and the moral economy of collecting', *Clues. Research into provenance history and the signification of cultural objects and collections acquired in the colonial era*. Final Report PPROCE (NIOD, Rijksmuseum, National Museum for World Cultures) 67-71.
- 2 Literature and theorizing on this problem is huge, beginning with the classic study of Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge: CUP, 1985. Just to compare, here: Richard H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997; and in the framework of restitution debates: Salomi Mathur, 'A parable of postcolonial return: Museums and the discourse of restitution', *India by design. Colonial History and cultural display*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, 133-164; and the essays in Louise Thyatcott and Panggang Ardiyanshah ed. *Returning Southeast Asia's Past. Objects, Museums and Restitutions*. Singapore: NUS, 2021.
- 3 Compare Marieke Bloembergen, 'The politics of 'Greater India', a moral geography. Moveable antiquities and charmed knowledge networks between Indonesia, India and the West', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol 63, 1 (January 2021), 170-211.
- 4 Bloembergen, Marieke and Martijn Eickhoff, 'Exchange and the protection of Java's antiquities: A transnational approach to the problem of heritage in colonial Java', *Journal of Asian Studies* 72,4 (2013): 1-24; Bloembergen, Marieke and Martijn Eickhoff, *The politics of Heritage in Indonesia. A cultural history*. Cambridge, CUP: 2020.
- 5 Reinwardt, *Journal van de reis naar Indië en excursies op Java, Oct. 1815 - Oct. 1818*. UBL Leiden, Special Collections, BPL 2424: 5. Digitalised version, pp. 86-87. With thanks to PPROCE research-assistant, Melle Monquill.
- 6 Museum text, Exhibition 'Encounters: Hidden Stories from the Tropenmuseum's Collection', Tropenmuseum, 2012-2013.
- 7 Idem.
- 8 On the protests, as well as the Ruwat-Ruwat Borobudur: Sucoro, *Bumi Karma Borobudur*. Borobudur: Warung Info Jagad Cegluk; Bloembergen and Eickhoff, *The politics of heritage*, 258-260.
- 9 'Borobudur Heritage Trail. Menghidupkan kembali Legenda Borobudur'. Gadjah Mada University and Ministry of Tourism, 2019. With thanks to Louie Buana.
- 10 From the translation of Linus Suryadi's poem 'Borobudur', translated as 'At Borobudur', in: Iem Brown and Joan Davis, (eds. and trans), *Di Serambi = On the verandah. A bilingual anthology of modern Indonesian poetry*, Cambridge: CUP, 1995, 113-115. The original, much longer poem is published in Linus Suryadi's *Kembang Tunjung: Sajak Sajak*. Ende: Nusah Indah, 1983: 68-72. Suryadi also gave a presentation, entitled 'Beyond Borobudur', at the 2ND ASEAN writers conference in Bali, 1985, translated by J. Lindsay. The paper is on the role of local oral traditions and formal literary education in his formation, and on the problem of illiteracy and politics of education in Indonesia. There he gauges Borobudur as a proof of the collective creativeness of his Javanese ancestors; as reflecting a time lost, given the fact that it is now (in the 1980s) used as national park for local and foreign tourism, representing the language of intercultural communication in modern times; but also as an object of hope that grasps the spirit of local spoken language and literature, and as a 'symbol of the openness of the Javanese people'.



Fig. 4. Linus Suryadi (1951-1999). Photograph: private collection Sunardian Wiradono.