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

Marieke Bloembergen

Fourteen Buddha heads in the National Museum of World Cultures (NMW) “probably” originate from the 8th-century Buddhist shrine Borobudur in Central Java. This would mean that they belong to 1/4 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.

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 into 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. 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. 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 injustices and epistemic violence. This is not necessarily a new idea: PPROCE itself is the result of a discussion 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 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 museal 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 socio-political biographies of the museum objects. Why is it that 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, researchers, 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 “claim” 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 the injustice and epistemic violence. 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. 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. Who is in fact strange. Those

Fig. 1. Borobudur, around 1874. Photograph: Isidore van Kinsbergen. Leiden University Library, Special Collections, inc. o. KITLV 07556.

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, 2016. Photograph: M. Bloembergen.
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 convene to the modern reader the “abundance,” and they were there for the picking (or stealing).

One of the Buddha heads under custody of the NMW Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden, which was back to a more formal status in the early 20th C. Reinwardt (1773-1855), a Dutch botanist of Prussian descent, who between 1815-1820, was named as the director of a new botanic garden he visited Borobudur in 1817, when, under the preceding British colonial regime, it had only just been discovered, and it was reclaimed as a site for botanical study.

On seeing the temple, Reinwardt experienced an acute and overwhelming sense of decay. So many of the temple’s sustaining tree roots have long since been removed. We follow four Buddha heads that in 1921 would in part enter up in the collection of the Colonial Institute (the precursor of the NMW; today known as KITLV, which opened its doors in 1926). They did so as a result of a gift from the Society Natura Artis Magistra, the predecessor of the NMVW Tropenmuseum.

What mattered to the recipients was the number of heads (and hands) of statues that came to characterize collectors on the ground in colonial Java and in the museums that came to be generous in opening up, giving access to objects that museums and their curators if they wish to be socially relevant – and it looks as if more and more museum collections are doing this more and more important. But museums should not be the only ones in control of such research. Let them be the ones who are opening up, giving access to their archives, and providing research space in permanent reading rooms for students and scholars, and make sure that the objects can tell the socio-political histories of global, local, and colonial dimensions that they hold within them – whenever and wherever they are found.

The point I wanted to make with this poem was, originally, this not only academics studying the transformation of Borobudur and the tokens it lost into heritage objects. Indonesian post-colonial poets and artists do as well: from the late 1980s and the first quarter of the 1990s, the authors of the Serat Centhini (a grand, generative compendium of knowledge, initiated by the court of Surakarta in the 18th century, written in the form of a poetic travelogue, a poetic description of Javanese antiquities), to the modern Indonesian poets Noto Saroeti (1888-1951) and Amir Hamzah (1904-1984), to the contemporary Buddha statues are also there / Hotels and momos of all kinds. Then, in 2021, he was invited to think about the ethics of all the cases where it came.

These include the protests of villagers living from the Borobudur or is it unethical and should restitution be considered? Thus, the curator’s love for the temple where it once was captured. It is intriguing that from the early 20th century, the Reinwardt Borobudur pieces: nobody asked about their provenance. In the postcolonial times, however, one curator expressed his doubts about provenance. He believed that the different external object-focused historical research. But this way of handling collections also reflects the previous provenance is not necessarily the most important aspect of modern Indonesian poetry, geography. Moveable antiquities...