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THAI MONASTERY MUSEUMS

Contemporary Expressions of Ancient Traditions

Scholars of museum history often trace the origin of the museum idea back to ancient monasteries, temples, and shrines. The Latin word *museum* is derived from the Greek word *mouseion*, which originally referred to a temple or shrine dedicated to the nine muses. The term was later used to describe a place of study or an academy, such as the famous Mouseion of Alexandria founded around the 3rd century BC by Ptolemy Soter.¹ The Romans applied the word *museum* to villas reserved for philosophical discussion.² Similar genealogies can also be found in Asia. As the noted historian of museums Bazin suggests, the Shoso-in treasure house in the Todaiji Monastery at Nara, Japan can be considered one of the world's oldest museums founded in 724.³

Scholars have also noted how healers, priests, shamans, and other spiritual leaders in their capacity of overseeing ritual spaces and caring for objects have acted as curators.⁴ In fact, the word curator is derived from the Latin word *curare*, to care for, and was originally used in reference to religious officiates or curates. Etymologically speaking then, museums and religious spaces and practices have enjoyed a long kinship. And while many scholars have likened certain types of modern museums to temples and "ritual structures," in which reverential and contemplative behaviors take place,⁵ today, museums in the Western

world are considered decidedly secular institutions that tend to distance themselves from any association with religion or religious activities. In fact, as Paine asserts, despite the persistent importance of religion in modern societies in Europe and elsewhere, "religion is largely ignored in museums".⁶ This stance elides the fact that much of what passes for "art" in Western museums has been "pulled out of chapels, peeled off church walls"⁷ or extracted from other contexts of sacred meaning in non-Western cultures.

Religion tends to be a difficult subject to address in museums for a number of reasons, one of which, is "the dichotomy that has been established between the sacred and profane, spirit and matter, piety and commerce that constrains our ability to understand how religion works in the real world".⁸ Added to this is the value placed on museums as "temples to reason" and the preeminence of science and rationality in them.⁹ And at the risk of stating the obvious, religion can be a politically charged subject that can arouse unwanted attention and controversy. However, in recent years, questions regarding the place of religion and spiritual values in museums have been raised as, for instance, Indigenous peoples in countries like United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia have enjoined museums to show greater respect for sacred objects in their practice.¹⁰ "Well intentioned curators steer a difficult course between mounting pressure to respect the 'sacred' character of indigenous artifacts and the need to deal gingerly with representations of 'religion' in public institutions," writes Laura Kendall.¹¹

This chapter concerns monastery museums in Thailand where the association of museums with religion does not pose the kinds of dilemmas discussed above. I consider how monastery museums are actually contemporary expressions of ancient traditions of collecting, storing, curating and preserving objects tied to popular Buddhism.¹² I describe

¹ See Alexander 1979, pp. 6–7.

² See Bazin 1969, p. 29.

³ See *ibid.*

⁴ See Cash Cash 2001; Kreps 2003a; Kreps 2003b; Simpson 1996.

⁵ Duncan 1995.

⁶ Paine 2000, p. xii.

⁷ Greenblatt 1990, p. 44.

⁸ Paine 2000, p. xiv.

⁹ O'Neill 2006, p. 101.

¹⁰ See Kreps 2011; Sullivan and Edwards 2004.

¹¹ Kendall 2008, p. 180.

¹² Popular Buddhism refers to 'folk' versions of Buddhism, which can be an amalgamation of Theravada Buddhism, Hindu-Brahmanism, and animism, in contrast to the canonical or official version of state-sponsored Buddhism in Thailand. See Pattana Kitiarsa 2005, p. 210.

how many museums are practicing “appropriate museology,”¹³ whereby “local curatorship” is melded with elements of modern museum practices. Appropriate museology is especially evident when it comes to the treatment of sacred, supernaturally charged, and magical objects. In their embodiment of Buddhist ideology and worldview, monastery museums exemplify what Durkheim observed long ago and that is that a society orders the world of things to reflect the way it orders everything else.¹⁴

One of my objectives is to highlight how people’s emotional, spiritual engagement with and experience of objects in monastery museums stands in contrast to approaches that emphasize “object-based epistemology,”¹⁵ or, the idea that objects have the power to convey knowledge and information. From the latter perspective, museums are largely about information and an element of an informational culture in which objects form part of what Dudley calls an “object-information package”.¹⁶

There is a current, indeed dominant, view within museum studies and practice that the museum is about information and that the object is just a part—and indeed not always an essential part—of that informational culture [...]. It is a view in which objects have value and import only because of the cultural meanings which overlie them and as a result of the real or imagined stories which they can be used to construct. The material object thus becomes part of an object-information package; indeed, in such a framework the museum object properly conceived is not the physical thing alone at all, but comprises a whole package—a composite in which the thing is but one element[...].¹⁷

Seeing objects as merely part of information packages ignores the materiality of objects—their three-dimensionality, weight, texture, surface temperature, smell, taste, and spatio-temporal presence—all of which is what makes museum objects interesting. Given this, Dudley contends, it is time that we paid more attention to “the very materiality of the material,” to see beyond the narrow (but still important) focus on aesthetics and formal qualities of artworks or technical analyses of artifacts and

¹³ Kreps 2008.

¹⁴ See Conn 2010, p. 21.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁶ Dudley 2010, p. 3.

¹⁷ Ibid.

natural history specimens: “This means not treating the material as something upon which meaning is inscribed—a world of surfaces on to which we project significance, a world where meaning is only ever read into things”.¹⁸ Rather, it calls for

enriching an existing interpretive preoccupation with the symbolic, representational, and communicative dimension of objects [...] with [...] emotion and physical sensation [...]. To make such a shift will inform not only a greater understanding of the ways in which people engage with the material world, but also with the aesthetic and technical explorations and wider social and disciplinary meanings from which the physical objects cannot really, of course, ultimately be disentangled.¹⁹

Dudley suggests refiguring the museum object as an “object-subject interaction” because “it is only as a result of the object-subject interaction that the material thing becomes real at all”.²⁰

In this light, I suggest that monastery museums can be understood as “multisensory museum spaces”²¹ in which the materiality of objects, or the physical and sensory attributes of things, is just as or even more important than the idea of object epistemology. As such, the study of Thai monastery museums offers insight into other ways of ‘knowing’ objects and museums as well as their possible uses. And while Western museums continue to grapple with the proper place of religion and the sacred in museums, Thai monastery museums show us how these worlds need not be in conflict. Indeed, they inspire us to think more broadly about how museums can deal with the reality of religion and spirituality inside and outside the museum as part of people’s living culture, everyday life, and not in the least, the human experience.

I examine Thai monastery museums within the framework of “comparative museology,”²² which is contributing to a growing body of knowledge on the diverse forms museums and museological behavior take in different historical, cultural and national contexts. I begin by outlining the parameters of comparative museology and then describe monastery

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 6–7.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 6–7.

²¹ Golding 2010; also see Classen and Howes 2006.

²² Clifford 1991; see Kreps 2003, Kreps 2008.

museums drawing on material presented by Parrita Chalernpow Koanantakool (hereafter Parrita) in the article 'Contextualizing Objects in Monastery Museums in Thailand' (2006), and my own observations based on four trips to Thailand between 2005 and 2012. I also discuss my work with the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Museum Field School organized by the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre in Bangkok. Here I am concerned with the role Thai monastery museums play in the curation of living cultural heritage and community development.

COMPARATIVE MUSEOLOGY

Until relatively recently, scholarship on museums—on their historical development, nature of collections, and their philosophical and ideological underpinnings—focused primarily on the modern, Western museum. Seen as a uniquely European cultural product that emerged around the 18th century, the modern museum developed in tandem with other developments associated with the birth of the modern age. According to Pearce, "museums are a characteristic part of the cultural pattern of modern Europe and the European influenced world".²³ The museum is said to be an invention of European modernity and an embodiment of the meta-narratives of that modernity—scientific objectivism, reason and rationality, and a conception of time based on a linear, progressive evolution.²⁴

But with the growth of interest in non-Western museum models and curatorial traditions over the past twenty years or so, we now know that while the conventional notion of the museum may be Western and modern in origin museological forms and behaviors are cross-cultural phenomena with great historical depth. Studies in comparative museology have revealed how many cultures throughout the world have long had their own models of museums, curatorial practices, and means of transmitting and preserving their cultural heritage as well as curators charged with looking after this heritage. We now see how many contemporary, modern style museums are built on and mixed with older traditions resulting in hybrid cultural forms. In general, studies in comparative museology provide us with examples of how people in varying contexts value,

²³ Pearce 1992, p. 1.

²⁴ See Pearce 1992; Walsh 1992.

perceive, care for and preserve what they deem valuable. This scholarship has illuminated how the forms museums take, the purposes and interests they serve, and the meanings they embody and reflect are as diverse as the historical, cultural, and national contexts in which they exist.²⁵

Comparative museology is concerned with identifying, documenting, and critically analyzing similarities and differences in museological forms and behaviors as well as examples of the mixing of museological traditions from different cultural and national contexts. Museological forms and behavior may include structures and spaces for the collection, storage, and display of objects (models of museums) as well as knowledge, skills, and technologies related to their care, treatment, interpretation and conservation (curatorial practices). Comparative museology investigates museological forms and behaviors from a holistic and ecological perspective, showing how they can be embedded in vernacular architecture, religious beliefs and practices; social organization and structure (especially kinship systems and ancestor worship), artistic traditions and aesthetic systems, and knowledge related to people's relationships and adaptations to their natural environment. They may also encompass conceptual frameworks that support the transmission of culture through time.

As a case in point, the Indonesian concept of *pusaka* has worked to protect and preserve valuable cultural property and transmit cultural knowledge and traditions through the generations. The word *pusaka* is generally translated into English as "heirloom". However, it takes on a wide range of meanings in the Indonesian language. In the book 'Pusaka: Art of Indonesia', Harati Soebadio states that the two most established Indonesian dictionaries list three separate definitions for the word *pusaka*:

- 1) something inherited from a deceased person (analogous to the English word inheritance)
- 2) something that comes down from one's

²⁵ James Clifford, in his article 'Four Northwest Coast Museums: Travel Reflections' (1991), uses the phrase "comparative museology" to describe his approach to the study of four Canadian museums concerned with representing First Nations' history and culture. Over the years I have developed my own approach to comparative museology focusing on a comparison of museological forms and practices as described in this chapter. For other examples of studies that may not apply the term but yet be considered comparative museology see Alivizatou 2012; Appadurai 1992; Bhatti 2012; Bowe chop and Erikson 2005; Cash Cash 2000; Clavir 1994; Mead 1984; Stanley 2008.

ancestors (analogous to heirloom) 3) an inheritance of special value to a community that cannot be disposed of without specific common descent (analogous to heritage in the sense of something possessed as a result of one's natural situation or birth).²⁶

Tangible forms of *pusaka* include things like textiles, jewelry, ornaments, weapons, ceramics, beads, dance regalia, land, ancestor figures, and houses. Intangible cultural expressions such as songs, dance dramas, stories or names can also be considered *pusaka*. Virtually anything can be regarded *pusaka*, although not everything that is inherited is *pusaka* nor are objects created to be *pusaka*. An object or entity becomes *pusaka* in the course of its social life. As one Indonesian curator/anthropologist, Suwati Kartiwa, explains, *pusaka* are social constructs, and it is the meaning a society gives these objects, not anything innate in the objects themselves, which makes them *pusaka*.²⁷ Because *pusaka* is a social construct, it is more appropriate to think of it in terms of social relationships because *pusaka* emphasize, express, and define relationships within a society.

Pusaka is critical to maintaining kinship ties and keeping track of lineages because it can be among the most important links to the authority of ancestors. An heirloom object, such as a carving, often recalls a founding ancestor in imagery and stories, thus becoming a "visible symbol of the transmission of traditions".²⁸ In many cases, *pusaka* is under the care and protection of specific members of society like ritual specialists, leaders of customary law, or royal functionaries, who act as *pusaka* curators. In the royal courts of Java, for instance, the curators of royal heirlooms are known as Abdi Dalem who are responsible for safeguarding the physical and spiritual properties of the heirlooms in addition to passing this knowledge on to younger generations.²⁹

The curation of *pusaka* conforms to the Native American scholar Phillip Cash Cash's concept of "curation as social practice". Cash Cash suggests (similar to Gell, discussed below) that people's relationships to objects are primarily social ones and therefore curatorial work is a form of social practice. He defines curation as "a social practice predicated on the principle of a fixed relation between material objects and the human

²⁶ Soebadio 1992, p. 15.

²⁷ See Kartiwa 1992, p. 159.

²⁸ Taylor and Aragon 1991, p. 43.

²⁹ See Kartiwa 1992, pp. 159–160.

environment".³⁰ The "principle of a fixed relation" means "those conditions that are socially constructed and reproduced as strategic cultural orientations vis-à-vis material objects".³¹ Cash Cash's definition of curation implies that people's "strategic orientations" in relation to objects, as social constructs, can also become traditions over time. Thus, each society has its own ways of seeing, knowing, valuing, assigning meaning to, and engaging with objects, which, like all aspects of culture, can remain steady or change over time.³²

Traditional practices associated with the curation of *pusaka* continue to undergo change in response to cultural and social changes in general, especially those related to religious beliefs and customs. But the overall idea of *pusaka* has endured. Today, rights to the ownership of *pusaka* may be transferred to a public museum. Under such circumstances, *pusaka* becomes the heritage of not just an individual or family, but also a community or nation. In the words of Adji Damai, in Indonesian scholar and museum professional:

Whether we are talking about sacred and powerful protective objects worn by ancestral heroes or the symbols of modern nationalism [...] it is clear that the concept of *pusaka* is a pervasive one, close to the heart of Indonesian ideas about objects, and therefore the world.³³

MUSEUM DEVELOPMENT IN THAILAND

The Thai word for "museum" *phiphitthapanthasathan*, derived from Sanskrit, literally translates as "a site that houses a variety of things" and was first used in official records in the late 1880s.³⁴ Similar to the development of modern museums in Europe,³⁵ the Thai modern museum concept can be traced back to royal collections. These collections were housed in palace buildings and only open to foreign dignitaries and elite members of society for viewing. In the 1920s, the idea of creating national museums for the general populace began to develop. What is

³⁰ Cash Cash 2001, p. 140.

³¹ Ibid., p. 141.

³² See Kreps 2003b.

³³ Damai 1992, p. 208.

³⁴ Paritta 2006, p. 151.

³⁵ See McClellan 1994.

now the National Bangkok Museum, for example, dates back to 1874 when King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, who reigned from 1868 to 1910) established the country's first art institution by opening King Mongkut's (Rama IV, reigning from 1851 to 1868) treasures to the public. The collection was originally displayed in the Grand Palace's Concordia Pavilion. In 1926, it was moved to its present location and became the National Bangkok Museum.³⁶ According to Paritta, it was during this time that the idea began to take hold that national museums could be part of the "state machinery for nation building whose role is to preserve national cultural heritage in the form of religious objects and objects of antiquity, and which constitutes a symbol of a civilized modern nation".³⁷ Paritta also states that when national museums were initially set up a number of large monastery collections were upgraded and given the status of "national museum". But she also points out that even though what are now called "monastery museums" are a relatively new phenomenon in Thailand, Buddhist monasteries have been places for collecting and storing all types of objects but especially sacred and those infused with supernatural powers since ancient times, and in this respect, serve as a kind of museum "proto-type".

The emergence of the monastery museum can be seen as part of a "larger movement towards modernity" in Thailand.³⁸ In traditional Thai society, monasteries were the primary sites for the religious and literary education of young boys and men, and were home to the first modern schools for secular education in the 19th century. Despite this stature, they began to lose ground as King Mongkut and his son Chulalongkorn launched an aggressive program of Westernization to modernize the country.³⁹ In addition to overhauling government bureaucracy, they instituted educational reforms that emphasized the study of Western languages and sciences. Instead of building *wats* (monasteries) and temples, like former kings, they built roads, schools, government buildings, and hospitals.

³⁶ See Seow and Gopal 2004, p. 144.

³⁷ Paritta 2006, p. 151.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Although Thailand was unique among mainland Southeast Asian nations in having escaped direct colonialization by European powers, Thai kings were under constant pressures from Western powers to secede territory and grant commercial privileges. They ardently promoted Westernization as a means of safeguarding Thai's independence and strengthen its standing with the West (see Tambiah 1995).

They also employed Western teachers, engineers, architects, painters and sculptors to teach Western technology and art to the Thais.⁴⁰

Over the decades, modernization and secularization undermined the educational role of monks and monasteries in society as secular schools and other institutions gradually took over their previous functions. The larger, lay society began to perceive monks as intellectually old-fashioned with their traditional ecclesiastical education and adherence to traditional knowledge systems. In response to such changes, a movement emerged during the 1960s among some Thai activist and scholar monks to recover their educational role within society. Monks and monasteries were encouraged to not only pursue secular knowledge and education in worldly subjects, but also to play an active role in community development and social work.⁴¹ The changing status of monks and monasteries in Thai society as well as the evolution of monastery museums can be further understood within the context of political and social changes taking place in the country during the 1970s and 1980s.

The political uprising of 1973, in addition to raising political consciousness of the masses, spawned increased interest in and appreciation for local identities and histories. Scholars, intellectuals, and activists called for greater emphasis on "local histories of the common people and a history from below,"⁴² leading the Ministry of Education to implement educational reforms that incorporated local history. As Thongchai Winichakul describes: "One of the key issues was decentralization of the curriculum, and encouragement of the idea that local people should know more about themselves and their history".⁴³ Local studies became part of the national educational plan in 1978, and in addition to new courses and textbooks, the Ministry of Education provided funds for local teachers' colleges and high schools to set up cultural centres for the collection and preservation of local cultural materials. In 1981, the Department of Religious Affairs issued a policy that encouraged monasteries to similarly develop libraries and museums for their communities.⁴⁴

Today, there are approximately 200 monastery museums in Thailand of differing types and architectural styles. Paritta states that monastery

⁴⁰ See Thongchai Winichakul 1995.

⁴¹ See *ibid.*

⁴² Thongchai Winichakul 1995, p. 110

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ See *ibid.*, p. 111; also see Paritta 2006.

museums are usually located in ceremonial and gathering spaces within the monastery or *wat*. In some cases, existing buildings such as libraries and archives are converted into museums while in other cases new buildings are constructed to be a museum. For example, the museum located at the Wat That Phut monastery, that dates back to the Ayutthaya Period (roughly mid-1300 to mid-1700s) and is located in Nakhon Prathom Province, was first set up in the monastery's scripture house. The collections are now housed in three buildings on the monastery grounds (Fig. 1–3). The museum was established for fear that the temple's collections might get lost or stolen after the death of the abbot, Phra Khru Phisarnsathuwat. It was officially opened on December 7th, 1997, the day of the abbot's royal cremation.⁴⁵

New buildings are often times built using traditional architectural styles or forms, such as a stupa (Buddha reliquary). Some combine the functions of stupa and museum within one building as in the case of Wat Chan Sen in Nakhon Sawan. The museum was constructed as a two-story stupa wherein the upper floor is a stupa for housing sacred relics and the ground floor is used as a space for museum display. In general, monastery museums are spaces for storing many classes of objects: objects of worship, objects related to the functioning of the monastery and the



1 Wat That Phut, Tambon Rai King, Sam Phran District, Nakhon Prathom Province—the first monastery museum I visited in 2005 with Dr. Paritta Chalernpow Koanantakool

⁴⁵ Personal communication with Paritta Chalernpow Koanantakool, January 16th, 2010.



2 Dr. Paritta Chalernpow Koanantakool at Wat That Phut, 2005



3 Sacred objects displayed with offerings at Wat That Phut, 2005

daily activities of monks; and objects representing the history, culture, and activities of the local community.⁴⁶

Paritta groups monastery museums into four main categories: *Stupa museums* are dedicated to the memory of a famous monk who has become a saint. The museum may house and display his corporeal relics, his belongings such as amulets, fans, and other religious paraphernalia, published works and honorific materials.⁴⁷ *Monastery heritage museums*, which she states are the most numerous, collect and display objects donated to the monastery or head monks of the past. Their collections consist of a diverse range of objects, including ritual and ceremonial objects, local crafts, historical and archaeological artifacts, Buddha images, furniture, photographs, old newspapers and bank notes, as well as old televisions, typewriters, radios and other examples of modern technology. *Folk and ethnic museums* display crafts and artifacts of a specific ethnic group. These museums are influenced by a community empowerment agenda, and are designed to be a forum for stimulating community awareness of and pride in local history and culture. *Art and antiquities museums* are similar to heritage museums, but have more specialized collections such as shadow puppets, stone sculptures of Hindu divinities, stone sculpture, pottery, manuscripts, and cabinets.⁴⁸

The great variety of objects in monastery museums demonstrate how anything can become a 'museum object' in the course of its "social life",⁴⁹ and how the meaning, value, and function of objects is contingent on their social and cultural context. Although monastery museums vary in their architectural styles, collections, and history, they also share commonalities. For example, many monastery museums are built to commemorate the founder of the monastery, and objects in the collection may serve to keep the memory of the venerated monk and the stories of his legacy alive. According to Paritta, similarities can also be seen in their development. Typically, a monastery decides to open a museum and then pre-existing objects are turned into exhibits. Then local community members start to donate items to the museum. They donate objects to monasteries for a variety of reasons, many of which are directly related to

⁴⁶ See Paritta 2006, pp. 150–151.

⁴⁷ See Gabaude 2003 for a description of museums devoted to Buddhist saints in Thailand.

⁴⁸ See Paritta 2006, pp. 154–155.

⁴⁹ Appadurai 1986.

Buddhist customs as well as popular beliefs about the power and agency of particular kinds of objects.

Donating gifts to a monastery is a primary means of making merit, generating karma, and gaining prestige for community members. In addition to objects, gifts can take the form of financing the construction or repair of monasteries and significant structures like stupas within them. The donation of Buddha images is an age-old and especially meritorious act, and the collection and display of these images is a distinctive feature of Buddhist monasteries and their museums: "In popular conception, the donation is expected to result in the accumulation of merit on the part of the donor resulting in a happy and prosperous life now and in the future".⁵⁰

While donating a Buddha image to a monastery is a meritorious act, removing or disturbing one is socially unacceptable and potentially dangerous. This is because "a key tenet of popular religious culture in Thailand as well as other parts of Southeast Asia is the idea that material things are magically empowered. This is especially true for Buddha statues, images, and religious artifacts".⁵¹ Legends and stories abound that recount the consequences of removing an image from a monastery, causing illness, bad luck, and even death. Respectively, there are ritual prohibitions against removing images as well as other objects from monastery grounds. Such prohibitions can be seen, from a museological perspective, as a traditional means of safeguarding and preserving objects that has continued to function in present times.

The belief that objects possess magical powers and can thus be harmful extends to almost any category of ancient object, including ceramics, prehistoric stone tools, broken pieces of house shrines, and curiosities like fossils and natural oddities. Monasteries have historically been a safe and appropriate place for depositing these objects. By donating such objects to a monastery, donors cannot only accumulate merit but also nullify or neutralize their potentially negative effects. In this instance, "monasteries become a zone of neutralization of other powers, and cleansing pollution".⁵²

During my ethnographic study of the Provincial Museum of Central Kalimantan, Museum Balanga, in Indonesian Borneo, I observed similar attitudes toward and beliefs about objects to those in Thai monastery museums. Certain kinds of objects in the museum's collection, such as *hampatung*, *sapundu*, *karuhei*, which are carved wooden figures created by

⁵⁰ Paritta 2006, p. 157.

⁵¹ Byrne 2007, p. 156; also see Kendall et al. 2008.

⁵² Paritta 2006, p. 161.

ritual specialists (*basir*) for use in traditional Dayak, Kaharingan⁵³ religious ceremonies, were also thought to possess spirits and supernatural powers capable of both benevolent and malevolent acts. Because of their powers and potentially dangerous effects, museum staff was particularly respectful of these objects and took precautions in their handling and interpretation. Each *hampatung* or *sapundu* is considered a singular creation, endowed with meanings and powers known only to the *basir* who created it. Knowledge about these kinds of objects is sacred, non-public, only acquired through lengthy apprenticeship, and apprentices must 'pay' for the right to own such knowledge. Out of respect for the knowledge and authority of the *basir*, as well as traditional rights and ritual requirements surrounding these objects, museum staff would look to *basir* for guidance on how to interpret and display them in the museum. They also periodically called upon *basir* to perform purifying rituals to cast out any malevolent forces and spirits lingering in objects and the museum and to summon good ones.⁵⁴

Hampatung, *sapundu*, and *karuhei* are, in essence, embodied knowledge created to intentionally provoke sensory engagement with them, which in turn, compels people to perform certain social actions. Such "subject-object interactions" resonate with Alfred Gell's concepts of "object agency" and "affect," explicated in his posthumous book 'Art and Agency' (1998). To Gell, material objects, images, and works of art have an impact on people in their capacity to evoke emotional states and ideas, but also in their power as social agents. Objects have social agency in terms of being social actors enmeshed in a network of social relations. In short, "social agency can be exercised relative to 'things' and social agency can be exercised by 'things'".⁵⁵ Gell was also interested in how people attribute agency, such as magical powers, to things; a process which in itself shapes their capacity to be social agents. Objects can be used to capture powers and perform magic, but their "virtuosity" and "efficacy" rests on the socio-cultural context in which such actions are being performed.⁵⁶ He described magic as the artful means of trapping spirits and seducing them to one's

⁵³ The generic term "Dayak" is used to refer to the non-Malay, non-Chinese, indigenous populations of Borneo even though each Dayak group has its own name, language, and cultural traditions. Kaharingan, or more appropriately, Hindu Kaharingan, is the official (government assigned) name of the traditional animistic religion of the Ngaju Dayak of Central Kalimantan.

⁵⁴ See Kreps 1998 and Kreps 2003.

⁵⁵ Gell quoted in Kendall 2008, p. 186.

⁵⁶ See Chua and Elliott 2013, p. 9.

will, placing special emphasis on the object's beauty and artistry as key to the object's efficacy.⁵⁷ Gell's ideas are also useful for understanding how objects are known and made to perform in monastery museums.

Paritta asserts that curatorial work in monastery museums should be understood within the context of how a monastery space has been transformed into a museum space wherein exhibits can be contextualized by the legacies of the monastery. As such "it would be pointless to approach or evaluate these museums purely from the point of view of museology that does not take into account local curatorship".⁵⁸ Indeed, based on my own observations of monastery museums, they vary widely in the degree to which they conform to conventional museum models and professional museum practices. What's more important and more interesting from the perspective of comparative museology, however, is how local curatorship reflects people's on-going relationships to objects in museums. Local curatorship also speaks to the spiritual power and social agency of certain objects. For example, Paritta describes how donors who have given objects, such as Buddha images, to a monastery museum continue to maintain strong ties to the image and want to periodically repair or "renew" the piece now in the museum collection. Renewing objects by repainting them or replacing parts is a long standing and common practice throughout Southeast Asia, and in Thailand can be a means of making merit. The objective is not to restore the piece or stabilize it as in the Western sense of conservation and restoration, but rather, to make it look new again and more attractive. This practice increases the image's power and makes it more efficacious.⁵⁹

As discussed earlier, there are many different types of monastery museums with different kinds of collections, architectural styles, and administrative bodies. Because monastery museums can be created from existing collections and monastery spaces and are often run by monks and other community members not trained in professional museum, each is unique in its organization and approach to presenting collections. They can be the expression of a particular monastery, local community, or individuals' ideas about what a museum is and how collections should be cared for and presented. As such they can conform to neither professional museum methods nor local curatorship or customary practices.

⁵⁷ See Kendall 2008, p. 185.

⁵⁸ Paritta 2006, pp. 156–157.

⁵⁹ See Byrne 2007, p. 156.

Parrita gives the example of one museum in which Buddha images that are considered particularly valuable are displayed behind locked iron bars. This approach not only makes the Buddha images appear as if they are imprisoned and obstructs careful viewing it also does not allow visitors to pay respect to and worship the images in the manner to which they are accustomed, that is, prostrating themselves before the images and making offerings to them.⁶⁰ Indeed, I noticed offerings of flowers, incense and fruits put before Buddha images and other sacred objects in nearly all the museums I visited, and in many cases, 'exhibits' appeared more like altars rather than conventional museum displays. As a gesture of respect, museum visitors also remove their shoes before entering the museum space.

In some monasteries I visited, collections were displayed in cases, hung on walls, or were placed on pedestals, and seemed to be organized in some orderly fashion. But in others, museum spaces appeared to be more like storehouses where objects were placed haphazardly. Furthermore, whereas some museums provided interpretative texts, object labels, and didactic materials others did not. In these latter cases, the lack of interpretive information may have been due to the fact that as 'community museums' most of the visitors were locals who were familiar with the objects and thus did not require interpretation. But a more likely explanation could be that the 'informational value' of objects was of less importance than their physical appearance and material presence as an embodiment of Buddhist spirituality.

In these examples we can see how monastery museums are practicing their own "appropriate museology," or "museum practice" that fits the local cultural context. Appropriate museology can be a way of honoring long standing curatorial traditions and approaches to objects while integrating the new and different. Thai museums, in this respect, are not unlike many other museums throughout the world where modern museum methods are overlaid onto or mixed with older traditions. In many major anthropology museums in the United States, for instance, Native American 'traditional care methods' are used alongside standard museum practices when it comes to dealing with sacred and ceremonial objects. Working in collaboration with Indigenous curators and tribal representatives, staff are housing, displaying, and curating collections in accordance with tribal cultural protocols. This can include the ritual cleansing and blessing of objects; removing objects from display or from general storage areas; and

⁶⁰ See Paritta 2006, p. 159.

modifying conservation measures to preserve the soul, spirit, and powers of the object. In these situations, it is important to not only preserve the physical integrity of the object but also its spiritual integrity, and to show respect for the diverse ways in which people engage with objects.⁶¹

Earlier I described practices in the Provincial Museum of Central Kalimantan, Museum Balanga where staff collaborated with local ritual specialists out of respect for their knowledge and authority and in attempts to practice culturally appropriate museology. However, some museum administrators and government officials viewed these collaborative efforts as unprofessional, too closely tied to religion, and out of step with the idea of the museum as modern, secular institutions based on scientific principles and professionalism. As a result, such practices were being discouraged in the museum despite the fact that they embodied local curatorship and represented the living culture existing outside the museum. This stance contradicts the current idea that if one of the main functions of a museum is to preserve a community's cultural heritage then the safeguarding of its intangible heritage, for example in the form of traditional knowledge and customs, should be as important as the preservation of its tangible heritage.⁶²

In the following section, I describe how, in contrast to the Indonesian case, one Thai monastery museum is helping to safeguard and perpetuate local cultural traditions, and how the preservation of tangible culture is inextricably tied to the support and preservation of intangible culture.

THE TON KAEW MONASTERY MUSEUM

The Ton Kaew monastery is located in Ban Wien Yong, a Yong neighborhood in the town of Lamphun. It was one of the first Buddhist monasteries established by the Yong, which is an ethnic group originally from Muang Yong in present day Burma/Myanmar that was forcibly resettled in Lamphun during the 1800s. Today, the monastery continues to serve the spiritual needs of the community, but has also become an important center for helping sustain Yong identity and heritage. Abbot Praku Paisanteerakhu, head of the monastery, has been actively promoting Yong culture through a variety of activities, one of which is the development of a community 'museum' inside the monastery.

⁶¹ See Kreps 2011.

⁶² See Kreps 2009.

I was first introduced to Thai monastery museums in 2005 when I was invited to participate in a conference on community museums in Bangkok organized by the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (SAC),⁶³ at which time Dr. Parrita Chakernpow Koanantakool was the director. I was invited back to Thailand in 2009 to serve as a “resource person,” or instructor, for the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Museums Field School (hereafter Field School) organized by SAC and sponsored by the Asian Academy for Heritage Management and the Bangkok office of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

The Field School grew out of SAC’s Local Museums Research and Development Project, which began in 2003. The Project has been dedicated to creating a digital database of local museums in Thailand for sharing information and promoting collaboration between SAC staff and local communities in museum research and development. The database currently contains entries for 1221 museums.⁶⁴ The Project has also been dedicated to strengthening the research capacity of both local communities and SAC staff in local museum management through on-site workshops.

Ton Kaew museum, like other Thai monastery museums, is an assortment of monastery buildings and spaces that have been transformed into a museum, or rather, perform museological functions of storing, displaying, and preserving collections of things that the Abbot and community members value (see Fig. 4). These can be things that are part of everyday monastic life, such as the Abbot’s personal belongings as well as things he has collected or community members have given to the monastery. They are ‘museum objects’ only by virtue of being in a place now labeled a “museum”. And as true for most other monastery museums, Ton Kaew does not have a ‘collection policy’ nor is it staffed by professional museum workers trained in professional museum practice. Rather, it is first and

⁶³ SAC is a public organization, non-profit academic institution that was originally established by the Silapakom University in Bangkok in 1991 in commemoration of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn’s 36th birthday. The Centre was created to fulfill the Princess’ wish to develop a national institution dedicated to anthropological research on Thailand and Southeast Asia. In keeping with HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn’s SAC’s mission is to “support research and the dissemination of knowledge in the field of anthropology and related disciplines”.

⁶⁴ See <http://www.sac.or.th/en/resources/local-museums-database/> (last accessed 3.9.2013).



4 Ton Kaew Monastery and Museum, Lamphun, 2009

foremost a monastery that in addition to serving the spiritual needs of the community and being home to the Abbot and novices also functions as a museum and community cultural center. I first visited Ton Kaew in 2009 and then returned in 2010 and 2012. Over this period of time, I saw how the Ton Kaew museum continued to reflect “local curatorship” while progressively integrating more and more elements of conventional museum practice.

When I first visited Wat Ton Kaew in 2009 there were two buildings devoted to housing and displaying collections. One building was newly constructed to replace an older building in which religious objects like Buddha images, clay amulets, palm leaf scriptures, lacquer and metal ware used for offerings were displayed. This building also contained historic photos and documents; coins, weapons, paintings; household utensils, old radios, and other miscellaneous objects. The second building was an older wooden structure that formerly functioned as the Abbot’s living quarters. It displayed the Abbot’s and other famous Lamphun monks’ honorific materials like status fans and amulets. This building was also used for ceremonial functions, such as life lengthening ceremonies.

An atelier for weavers was also located on the grounds of the monastery and was home to a weaving association the Abbot established in the 1980s (see Fig. 5). This initiative grew out of the Abbot’s wish to preserve the Yong weaving tradition, which had long been a marker of Yong identity. The weaving association provided weavers, mostly elderly



5 Abbot of Ton Kaew Monastery, 2009

women, with a modest income and the atelier, in addition to giving the weavers a place to work, gave them a space to get together and socialize.

In 2010, the monastery finished construction on a new museum building, designed in keeping with traditional Yong architecture. At that time, the upper level consisted of a large meeting hall and there was a new area for the weavers to work below. When I returned in 2012, an exhibition on Yong weaving had been installed on the upper level, complete with mannequins wearing traditional Yong style clothing and labels on the different textiles. The exhibition room was located next to a hall where the Abbot received guests and devotees in front of an altar replete with Buddha images and offerings of fruit, flowers and incense. Photographs of venerated monks, historical figures and events with explanatory texts lined the walls, and the Abbot's collection of locally made ceramic water jars hung from rafters.

Because of the importance of weaving to the Yong community, participants in the Field School in 2009, 2010, and 2011, worked with the Abbot and members of the Wat Ton Kaew community to develop strategies for promoting and preserving both the tangible and intangible aspects of Yong weaving. That is, they were concerned with protecting not just the materials and technology devoted to the craft but also knowledge of its history, the meanings of designs, and stories about weaving. To this end, they established a partnership between the weaving association and a nearby primary school. Weaving has now been instituted into the school curriculum. Classes are held at the monastery where students have the opportunity

to work directly with the weavers who are keeping the weaving tradition alive by passing on their knowledge and skills to the younger generation. Students are learning how to use the floor looms and about the intricate *yok dok* pattern for which the Yong are well known. During the 2011 field school, participants also produced a short documentary film on Yong weaving. In the course of making the film, they interviewed the Abbot, weavers, community members, pupils and teachers, and collected archival materials all as part of their efforts to safeguard and promote Yong cultural heritage.

Although the Field School was inspired by international cultural policy, that is, the 2003 UNESCO Convention, and its participants are professionals from various cultural sectors, its aim is not to impose standardized practices and approaches to the documentation and preservation of cultural heritage. Instead, and in contrast to many professional international museum training programs,⁶⁵ it acknowledges and respects local museological forms, curatorial practices and the cultural diversity they represent. The work of the Field School, in this sense, is not intended to replace one tradition with another, but rather, is about helping foster the conditions under which local traditions can continue to survive.

Over the years, Ton Kaew has expanded and upgraded its facilities to become a focal point for educating community members and visitors about the Ban Wien Yong community's history, culture, and art while continuing to be an active monastery. It is also contributing to community socioeconomic development and empowerment through its weaving program. And while certain parts of Ton Kaew are increasingly coming to resemble a 'typical' museum, it can be seen as a contemporary expression of age old practices related to collecting and preserving things of value to the monastery and its community. Furthermore, as both a religious leader and custodian of local culture (or curator), the Abbot of Ton Kaew is following in the footsteps of his ancestors.

CONCLUSION

This study of Thai monastery museums demonstrates, once again, that a diversity of museological forms and traditions are to be found throughout the world; and that there is not one universal museology but a world full of museologies. Seen through the lens of comparative museology, it

⁶⁵ See Kreps 2008.

also highlights how what is seen as problematic in one context is not in another. In the Thai context, the blending of religion and museums represents the perpetuation of ancient traditions, along with the integration of the new.

Moreover, the case of Thai monastery museums offers alternate perspectives on how we might approach the vexing issue of religion in museums. This is especially important as we are increasingly being asked to not only show greater respect for religious and sacred objects in our collections, but also to join source communities in their ways of engaging with these objects; ways that are multi-sensory and more complex than simply seeing objects as part of 'information packages'.

A number of Western museums have been, for some time now, collaborating with Indigenous as well as other communities to accommodate the spiritual maintenance of objects, the performance of rituals, and the veneration of sacred objects. Gaskell describes, just as one example, how the Newark Museum, in New Jersey (USA) worked with members of the Tibetan Buddhist community from New Jersey and New York in re-designing and re-installing a Tibetan sacred arts exhibition from 1988 to 1990. For the curator, Gaskell relates, it was imperative for the museum to honor its responsibilities and obligations to the Tibetan community that saw the objects in its collections as invested with sacred powers. The centerpiece of the new installation was an altar, upon which, a gilded copper image of Shayamuni (Gautama) Buddha was enthroned. The altar was not designed and built by museum staff, but by a Tibetan trained in a Tibetan monastery. Gaskell writes that "most importantly, this altar was not conceived as a stage setting, but a true religious structure [...] for the altar was consecrated by the Dalai Lama himself".⁶⁶ The Dalai Lama, by invoking the Buddha to enter the altar and remain there, spiritually activated the objects on display thereby making them "function in a more complex manner than might have been the case had they merely been activated by the museum in an aesthetic or art historical manner".⁶⁷

And just as Dudley contends that it is time for museums to pay more attention to the "very materiality of the material," Gaskell asserts that

those who are responsible for museum collections might ask themselves how they should best meet their responsibilities toward objects

⁶⁶ Gaskell 2003, pp. 152–153.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

in those collections in all their complexity, rather than solely in respect to their aesthetic, art historical and educational characters. The paradigm that holds that the latter criteria as exclusive validation for museums' attention to objects is coming to the end of its cultural life, and we must develop means of meeting a far wider range of expectations regarding objects and their uses on the part of a variety of publics than has generally been the case in the past.⁶⁸

What the cases of the Newark museum, Thai monastery museums, and the others presented in this chapter confirm is the need to perpetually question the ideological and epistemological assumptions embedded in museums. Studies in comparative museology allow us to see museums and museum practices in a new light and in their multifarious manifestations for "we begin to discover the artifice of our practices when we look at them in comparison to those in other cultural contexts".⁶⁹ And even though the Western, modern museum concept has now become a global cultural form, "every society appears to bring to these forms its own specific history and traditions, its own cultural stamp, its own quirks and idiosyncrasies".⁷⁰

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⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 160. For other cases of museums working with Buddhist communities see Chuang Yiao-hwei 2000; Kendall 2008; Wingfeld 2010.

⁶⁹ Karp and Lavine 1990, p. 1.

⁷⁰ Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988, p. 5.

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