



# Heritage out of Control: Today's utopia tomorrow's waste?

Fouad Asfour  
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**Exploring how beliefs and spiritual dimensions of inequality turn today's realities of waste into future heritage and (invisible) monuments**

When I read about the conference *Heritage out of Control: Waste, Spirits, Energies*, I contacted [Vibha Galhotra](#) to ask whether she was interested in a collaborative paper, and she agreed. [After presenting our performative lecture at the conference](#), I want to reflect about the dialogue between Vibha's work and [my](#)



[writing](#).

When I first encountered Vibha's work, stories by Philip K. Dick came to my mind, such as *The Impossible Planet* and *The Defenders*. Both deal with the psycho-geography of humanity after the destruction of planet Earth. Vibha asks further questions in her work through specific choices of material, conceptualisation and performative contexts. When she told me about a new series of works, based on the story of a survivor who roams the planet that was destroyed by an ecological catastrophe, I was reminded of Derrick Bell's paper [Xerxes and the Affirmative Action Mystique](#). Bell uses storytelling to present the independent view of an alien not only to argue for a case, but to present it in a performative way to the reader.

*How could we communicate the thought that humans have ensconced waste as invisible monument and accepted it as heritage?*

We worked on different versions of a fictional story, trying to exemplify the spiritual dimension of Vibha's work and how it relates to social justice. In her short video, a figure dressed in biohazard protective clothing walks through a landscape devastated by waste and pollution.

[https://allegralaboratory.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Vibha\\_video.mp4](https://allegralaboratory.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Vibha_video.mp4)

The work asks not only how a possible ecological catastrophe has become part of our lived reality, but points out that the imagination of this possibility is limited. The survivor appears disconnected from the now uninhabitable world, having destroyed the house they lived in. As this world cannot sustain their life, the human has turned into an alien. We then asked ourselves, what would happen if an alien or future human would visit and present details of an impending apocalypse. How could we communicate the thought that humans have ensconced waste as invisible monument and accepted it as heritage? In the process of working on different framings of this story, we witnessed how it changed into a



complex narrative about waste, spirituality and heritage when placed in context of the visual artworks.

*We re-enacted fable-telling so as to illustrate false consciousness around consumption, waste and pollution.*

The lecture was part of this longer conversation about material realities of consumption, and how conceptual eco-feminist work could evoke imaginations that cause the audience to reconsider their everyday behaviour. In this online paper, we present a short fictional story and a series of fables. Our work is informed by epistemologies from the South, where knowledge is not only lived reality, but an empowering process fuelled by self-critical reflection, world-building and play. We enjoyed imagining our encounter with the alien visitor, finding ourselves acting irrationally as we rehearsed the story over and over again. We also decided to re-enact performative storytelling practice used by Critical Race theorists, borrowing from Aida Hurtado's 1999 paper [\*The Trickster's Play: Whiteness in the Subordination and Liberation Process\*](#). Hurtado draws on Toni Morrison who stated that when reading a text, the reader participates in the re-enactment of violence of that text. Hurtado elaborates how fable-telling exposes unspoken rules of power in language: "Through the use of this fable, I hope to bypass the pitfalls of our 'genderized, sexualised, wholly racialized' language to submit the dynamics of power to closer scrutiny" (Hurtado 1999: 228). As Hurtado's fables unmask white privilege, we re-enacted fable-telling in context of Vibha's work, so as to illustrate false consciousness around consumption, waste and pollution, to the extent that it appears to have turned into an invisible monument.

If you met an alien visiting from the future, what would you say?

On the June 31, 2044, the WHO holds a gala to celebrate the end of a pandemic which had started 25 years earlier. Two guests stroll down towards the southern tip of Roosevelt Island outside the [\*Smallpox Memorial Hospital in New York\*](#) where an art exhibition is about to be opened. Our protagonists chat about the



exhibition and how to continue their collaboration.

They know what it means when the economy dictates for things to go back to normal: warnings about the impact on climate change will continue to be ignored. Just as they are about to return from their walk, they find themselves in an extraordinary encounter.

An alien disembarks from a spaceship that resembles a 1962 [Airstream Tradewind](#) floating in the East River and announces without any preliminaries: “I am supposed to meet you at 2100 hours at the coordinates 40.749550, -73.961540, and present this message:”

“Planet Earth is on the brink of destruction. Five years from now, the ecosystem of the planet will be beyond recovery. This encrypted folder tells you how the planet could be saved.”

*When we think of social processes as invisible monuments, that does not mean that we understand anything.*

A heated discussion ensues, the alien is asked to verify their identity, suspecting a kind of surveillance mission, participatory artwork, or worse. The alien refuses to comply and insists on handing over the encrypted message. Insults are shouted, threats mixed with alcoholic drinks, spiked with paper umbrellas, and glitter is thrown.

Taken aback, the alien checks their mission records, but the unruly humans appear to be the legitimate recipients of the message: visual artist Vibha Galhotra and writer Fouad Asfour.

The visitor pleads for calm.

At the same time, the gala’s exhibition opens with Galhotra’s multimedia installation that is broadcast on vidscreens and 4D sound across the island:



“For 90 days and 90 nights I travelled this planet on dry ground. There is no water left. We were unprepared. I am standing right now on the midpoint between Paris and New York. Twenty years ago, this spot was covered by ocean water, 8000m deep. It is a desert now. In 2015, climate change models estimated this apocalypse was 5 billion years away. 50 years later it happened. Over the past three months, I crossed not only the Atlantic, but the entire world several times, on dry ground.”

“So you knew all along!”, the alien shouts in shock, “but why did humans continue to fill the planet with waste? Instead of using the available technology to reduce pollution and improve the lives of everyone?”

“Duh, we thought you’re here to tell us?” The visitor’s empathy had exposed the despair at the bottom of their rage. “All the time we are convinced art could change the minds of people and make them rethink their actions,” they shout, “and now you come with fancy new schemes. Please keep your message and just do something, will you?”

“Perhaps,” the alien points at a hologram that lights up from a device on their left arm, displaying intricate graphs and statistical data, “take a look at the data from the encrypted folder? This clearly shows a correlation between the rise in social inequality and increased waste and pollution.”

“No. We won’t look at your data, you need specialists for that. In my work, I explore how beliefs and spiritual dimensions of inequality turn today’s realities of waste into future heritage,” Vibha replies, wiping lime wedges from her boots. “My works don’t explain a thing. I think it’s impossible to simply link cause and effect.”

“But that’s why I was sent to meet you,” the alien’s pleading tone slightly less annoying now, “you raise these issues in your work, and this knowledge is supported by reports published much later! Can you tell us a bit more about your work, so we in the future could learn from it?”



“I don’t think so,” Fouad takes another cocktail. “When we think of social processes as invisible monuments, that does not mean that we understand anything.”

The alien shifts slightly to the side, eyeing the drink cautiously, “But there must be something that you would send to the future if you could?”

“But it’s simple, go and look at my work that’s exhibited here,” Vibha scoffs, “it would be great to get a review published in the future, after the apocalypse.”

Fouad laughs. “Great idea! Let’s take a walk through the show, and tell fables which show how people think, like Derrick Bell did in his *Xerces* article. We’ll start with the first fable that is told by Chicana theorist and Professor of Psychology, Aída Hurtado, in her paper, *The Trickster’s Play: Whiteness in the Subordination and Liberation Process.*”

## **Five fables and five artworks**



**Trick number 1 : The center of the universe – naturalizing whiteness**

“If I am not the centre of the universe, you do not exist. If I am not the central actor in the drama, I will not listen to you, I will not acknowledge your presence, and I will remove myself from the situation.

My absence will highlight my centrality to all actions. I will not acknowledge your presence; my ability not to see you is my power. If I do not see you, you do not exist. If you only exist at my will, you are nothing without my attention. I am, therefore, the one that controls who is real and who is not.”



**The Final Feast.**  
The work is a satirical presentation of contemporary times, the latter increasingly plagued by social, political, economic, and especially ecological chaos. The Final Feast is a play on Leonardo da Vinci's renowned painting "The Last Supper", and depicts an allegory of human greed that has taken over the world, leaving it in shreds and pieces, just like the cake in the performed photographs.

With transnational corporations controlling the commons, the access to cultural and natural resources (air, water, and a habitable earth) as human right of all individuals has been hollowed out.

The unbridled growth of economic activity during late capitalism has led to a few individuals holding the financial power that surpasses the gross national product of some nation states.

Hurtado, A. 1999. "The trickster's play: whiteness in the subordination and liberation process". In *Race, Identity, citizenship: a reader*. Edited by Torres, R. D., Minor, L. F and India, J. X. 229-236. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Staged photowork, 60" Dia 2019-2020



**Trick number 2: Building a world**

All information is available to me. I don't need to take action. It is enough that I know about something that is wrong, or to make others aware about it.

I don't need to take up an issue and become active. My technological innovations have surpassed the corruptible body and technical objects have turned into living beings.

I have the right to invent machinery which extract energy and precious metals from the ground, to pollute soil, air and water for the higher cause of my creation.



**Beyond The Blue, Exhibition, 2020**

This exhibition imagines the looming catastrophe on earth as the planet's resources are depleted, and the questions of survival and interplanetary escape. Together, they act as a warning, imparting a sense of urgency before environmental displacement forces the population into space.

The artist's practice centers on environmental concerns and the consequences of industrialization and globalization. Offering a counter to the conventional approach to environmental studies, Gaihotra seeks to expand the discourse to include history, theory, political intervention, economy, tradition, and culture when considering the current state of environmental degradation.

The first part of the exhibition presents works from the series 'Wounded' in molded paper that imagine the earth's landscape after its resources have been exhausted, offering a picture of the consequences of our perpetual denial and refusal to forgo the perceived comforts of development and capitalism. In working with paper, an inherently delicate material, Gaihotra meditates on the ephemerality of the planet's resources and the fragility of our existence.

From the Series 'Wounded'  
Constructed Korean Hany Paper 60" dia x 5", 2019

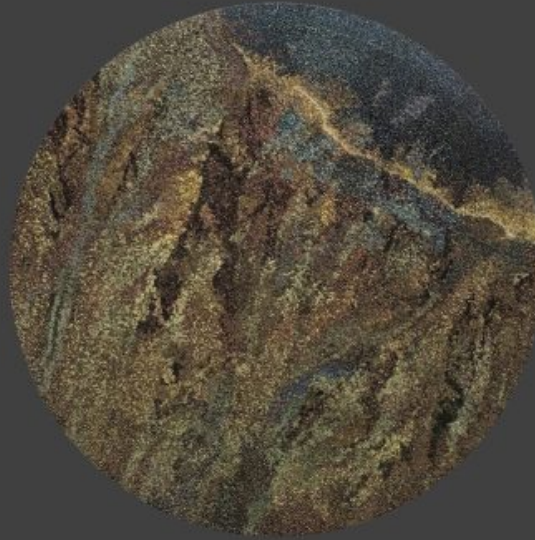




### Trick number 3 / Ownership and naming

I can use language to name and divide land, to invent classes, structures systems. I determine what technologies benefit the future of humanity. I will invent new skills and sciences, independent of our ontology which is based on our bodies, and our organisms are in a biological relation with our existence. I create invisible monsters which will inhabit and haunt this technology.

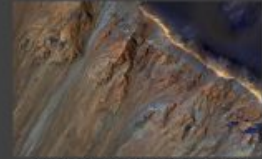
They call for us to extract oxygen from Mars so that the machines possessed by spirits can colonise the planet. I will continue to plough the spiritual land of technologized futures as a dwelling ground for my invisible monsters. I will erect invisible monuments in language for them to dwell in and to be worshipped.



### Beyond The Blue. Exhibition, 2020

Comprising eight large tondees from her current series *Life on Mars*, the second part of the exhibition offers a vision for the future of civilization in response. The speculative image of Mars proposes a new theory of colonization, holding the question of whether a future habitat will be built on the same hierarchical orders that destroyed the earth.

Galhotra also seeks to highlight the absurdity of our times, where we use advancing technology to search beyond ourselves rather than to conserve and invest in the planet's resources. As progress takes the form of avoidance and escapism, Galhotra instead urges us to embrace the wounded, fragile planet. Amidst hope and despair, reality and delusion, the essential question remains one of survival.



Reference from NASA's Mars Exploration Image Gallery Reconnaissance Orbiter

From the series 'Life on Mars' | L - 7.750" | L 86.044"  
Ghungroos, fabric, wood & steel 72" dia x 3", 2019



**Trick number 4:  
Worshipping consumptions  
and production of waste, the  
ideology of dematerialisation**

I worship the spirit of the technological progress. I want humanity to move forward. I will follow the rituals it demands, and will sacrifice everything on the altar for the infinite improvement of technology.

I greet its increasing and suffocating production of waste and pollution as my religious ordinance. I accept that my ritual worship of production, consumption and the market has culminated in the fourth industrial revolution which sends wares across the globe in one direction, and waste in the other.

I am both the master and recipient of this ecstatic circle of an eschatological culmination in destruction. I have the right to conjure up technological spirits which will inhabit waste and pollution as our invisible monument. I worship waste.



*Breath by Breath, 2016-17*

*Breath by Breath* allegorises the element Air or Vayu. While air pollution levels in most urban areas in India have been a matter of serious concern, the data generated through the National Ambient Air Monitoring Network does not cater well to understanding the air quality a common person breathes. The performance was staged at those air monitoring sites in the city to satirise the living situation in the new capital driven urbanity.

The work is also a comment on commodifying natural resources and the inequality that it generates. The neo-colonial realities increase the division of class, where the poor do not have access to clean water or air, while the air purifiers and specially treated water is sold to the ruling class.

*Breath by Breath. Staged photowork. 48" x 96", 2016-17*



#### Trick number 5: The modification of organic nature

I own the world and carve out the optimal distribution of natural resources among my powerful peers. I am the master of nature, in spite of natural processes improving growth and reproduction of plants and animals over millions of years. I know what needs to be changed in the genetics of plants to yield more crop, in animals to grow more meat, and to modify insects to stop spreading diseases.



#### Sediment and Other Untitled....

The Yamuna River is a sacred source of life that flows through the city of New Delhi and is in a critical state of exploitation and pollution. The water of the Yamuna is not simply a medium in this work, but a material visual actor speaking on the contradiction of its image of holiness and its reality as a contaminant dying body of water. In this work, the black sludge of the River is splashed across canvases, emulating the look of the use of India-ink.

Sediment and Other Untitled...., River Yamuna, sediment on wood board, 72" x 48", 2011-2015

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# Heritage out of Control:



## (B) Lasting Bombs

Regina Bendix

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On January 30, 2021, more than 8000 inhabitants of Göttingen, Germany, had to evacuate their homes. Four suspected WWII bombs had been detected underground, and in order to proceed with whatever building construction had been the cause of the find, these objects had to be freed up and detonated by specialists for the removal of warfare materials. Early on Jan. 31, the four bombs of 500 kilograms each were then successfully detonated. Eleven years prior and not far from the 2021 location, three bomb defusion experts died and two others were severely wounded, when a similar bomb exploded prematurely, while the crew was working on preparing the detonation.



In military parlance, such entities are collectively referred to as “unexploded ordnances” (e.g. Byrnes 2008). They occupy large groups of scholars concerned with the detection of “bulk explosives” supported by the NATO Science Programme (e.g. Schubert and Kuznetsov 2002, 2003), while anthropologists increasingly turn to military waste as a long-term transformative agent for life and land (Henig 2019; Reno 2019). Finding them is a frequent experience in Germany – and many other territories involved in past and present wars. Their presence is known in principle, though the longer the timespan since a given war, the vaguer this knowledge grows. The Göttingen event of January 2021 was even relatively small compared to 2017 events in Hanover with 50,000 and Frankfurt with more than 60,000 evacuees during the disarming of bombs. Leftover weapons of (mass) destruction are an overwhelmingly present heritage of humanity, a dark accomplishment for which many nations could jointly write a heritage application dossier. Ever more sophisticated knowledge and skill combine in this tradition of the will to annihilate and the defensive counter-aggression it generates. Yet each war is unique, its duration generally unforeseeable, and its detritus literally out of control, reaching into subsequent peace times in an indeterminate future (Hening 2019:88-9).

*Leftover weapons of (mass) destruction are an overwhelmingly present heritage of humanity.*

Often buried deep in the ground or lying at the bottom of lakes and coastal waters, these bombs constitute the waste of war. They are, unmistakably, a leftover of confrontations, of a (more or less) collective will to destroy. While war memorials and certified [dark heritage sites](#) such as concentration camps (Feldman 2010) offer clearly delineated places and times of remembrance and repenting, aging and unexploded bombs are unpredictable and force themselves disruptively into everyday life. As complex yet – up to a given point in time – hidden objects, they are not part of collective memorial activity and heritage preservation. “Unlike other material reminders” of a war, military waste generally does not “become part of a grand collective narrative” (Henig 2012:23). It is



precisely this blind spot in remembrance activity that renders military waste – among all the wastes that humankind produces (Reno 2015) – most endangering. Unexploded ordnances, as non-included entities and events, are then a good point of departure for examining the logics of the heritage and public memorial categories, and to explore the everyday rationality (Zani 2018), the eerie absence/presence, as well as the moral ambiguity that sits in what is overlooked for heritage-value. With the Hague Convention of 1954, international measures have been successively articulated to protect cultural property in the context of armed conflict, and to act against their illicit trafficking. Within UNESCO, these measures are intricately linked to the growth of heritage valorization and the formation of heritage canons. But the clean-up after armed conflict, a clear and present danger to cultural property as well as all life forms, remains in limbo, not just because military waste often remains invisible but also because the responsibility for its removal falls ultimately to those who inhabit the terrain, perhaps with international support. Discursively circulating questions of guilt and retribution do little to tackle the task of locating and diffusing the unexploded bombs (Henig 2012).

*The clean-up after armed conflict, a clear and present danger to cultural property as well as all life forms, remains in limbo.*

One of the key elements of establishing value regimes such as constituted by UNESCO's numerous heritage conventions are the "operational guidelines". They serve to legitimize not just the bureaucratic procedures through which a site or a cultural practice may achieve heritage status, but they also offer guidance on how the heritage conventions are to be interpreted so as to arrive at characteristics that legitimate their heritage value (cf. Bendix 2018: 96-195). UNESCO's many selection bodies are continuously engaged in adjusting their operational guidelines in order to offer firm parameters for nominating and selecting heritage sites and practices. In so doing, a standard can be set for, e.g., outstanding qualities, rareness, importance vis-à-vis others of similar quality, historical positionality, and so forth. The guidelines ensure that heritage value is bestowed



only on the mutually agreed upon best examples to the exclusion of the rest (Groth 2012; Hafstein 2018; Brumann 2021). Similarly, events commemorating battles, revolutions, independence, etc., are arrived at through dynamic processes of negotiation within a given polity which in effect control which victory and loss or which transformative event is to be added to the “archive of the future” (cf. Appadurai 2003). Against this backdrop, let us look at what is so unworthy about ordnances waiting to explode and landmines waiting to be stepped on, decades after a peace treaty was signed, so that they are not entering this circuit.

Unexploded weapons certainly are powerful evidence of human pasts. They can be labelled authentic – one of the heavily debated hallmark categories of heritage designations – in as much as they are unique in their assembly of weaponry craftsmanship of the 1940s; indeed, the knowledge surrounding their composition and mechanics is somewhat endangered. Yet with their potential for independent agency, they constitute “heritage out of control” for multiple reasons. To begin with, they did not detonate at the time they were supposed to – veering away from the purpose and occasion for which they were built, extracting themselves from the temporal confines of the war, and becoming, so to speak, entities “missing without action”. Any time after their launch and unexploded existence, they are materially and ideologically embodying Ernst Bloch’s much cited “contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous” (1962 [1935]). Materially volatile, they may shape-shift before a team of experts can schedule a protocol for controlled explosion. Their agency or rather the agency of their constituent chemical parts points to loss of human control, the finite nature of expertise and, indeed, a number of potential human failures along the road to a given present, such as the one in January 2021 in Göttingen: failures in the construction of the bomb; failures in where and from what altitude it was dropped, leading to failed explosion; failure to find and defuse it right after it was dropped; failure to foresee what would happen to the combination of chemical matter over the course of time, thus creating an ever bigger danger of spontaneous explosion; and failure to remember — or rather, the will to forget.

The list of unforeseen failures stands opposite to what there was at the beginning





of these bombs' manufacture - and for that matter at the beginning of many instruments of mass destruction: excitement in the scientific development that calculated the power of exothermic reaction of explosive materials, pride in the skill of building a casing and a detonator that would then bring about an explosion at the right place and time. There is, in other words, a great deal of intangible knowledge as well as craftsmanship that - with all due awareness of the horror such devices would inflict - generated excitement and a sense of contributing to the common good. In all cases of weaponry development one can furthermore assume huge monetary investment in development and manufacture, as well as secrecy of the knowledge entailed which in turn is common also for many crafts honored as heritage. The ruins of military installations occasionally turn into dark tourism attractions or even museums (Reno 2019; e.g. Wielgus et al. 2017); weapons of mass destruction are preferably forgotten, once the purpose of their crafting has passed.

Returning to the present and the need to find and detonate WWII bombs resting underground, there is the scarcity of precisely that kind of bomb-building knowledge necessary for the diffusion of bomb waste: familiarity with the specifics of detonators built in the 1940s is hardly part of common knowledge - and could or perhaps should be designated particularly valuable intangible heritage (Bendix 2019:230). The patents associated with it may have expired, the very concreteness of its association with danger keeps it safely in the purview of conferences among NATO scientists and courses of training that likely engender secrecy: it is the kind of expertise that is associated with public and national safety - though by now undoubtedly also found in online sites outside and within the "darknet." It is an expertise which takes on ghostlike qualities, as the bundles of experience and knowledge vanishing with a practitioner weigh so heavily on the future (Ialenti 2020: 265).

Unexploded ordnance proves an interesting case of matter and knowledge outside rosters of heritage- and remembrance-making - which does not mean that one could or should not aspire to place them in that realm. The commonplace regularity with which they surface in German public life suggests, interestingly,



that they are not considered ghouls of the past, but rather inconvenient - if generally carefully scheduled - disruptions of everyday life. They are at once too ordinary and too ambiguous to suit heritage-making practices. Given Germany's thick politics and practices of remembrance acknowledging collective guilt for WWI and especially WWII, finding dangerous waste of war and the necessary work and inconvenience going along with it, are largely grouped with the complex of guilt that explains the weapons' presence in the ground.

*The defusing activities are experienced in the present moment - a sensation within the here and now.*

Thus far, I am not aware of any concentrated effort to assemble and publicly archive the finds of unexploded ordnances. Their serendipitous but frequent finds and their defusing or blasting seems to be considered part of civilian infrastructure. Even as thousands of inhabitants have to spend nights in temporary shelters, sometimes more than once a year, the memory of these displacements neither accumulates nor finds reflection in archival dossiers. Rather, the defusing activities are experienced in the present moment - a sensation within the here and now. There is pride in the extant expertise which, again, is treated as an accomplishment of a well-organized state that will ensure a rapid return to everyday life. The ghosts and guilt of WWII appear to be firmly framed and hence "under control" elsewhere: in the days of remembrance on the calendar and the dark heritage sites from nearby labor camps turned museum (such as Moringen near Göttingen) to Buchenwald or Auschwitz. Indeed, the entire history curriculum in public schools has developed a mechanism of confronting and mastering particularly the fascist past, encoded in the omnipresent term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (dealing, or coming to terms, with the past). Yet on the backdrop of an age so keen to nominate for heritage status even everyday talk (Bendix, forthc.), the "normalcy" or "naturalization" of the debris of war point to a failure in the heritage apparatus that turns a blind eye towards these uncontrollable creations of the human spirit. The knowledge and skill necessary for constructing weapons was and is generally harbored in secret,



but at the very least the knowledge and skill to find and diffuse them ought to be celebrated universally. As such, the very out-of-control nature of unexploded wastes of war encapsulates the limits of human agency vis-à-vis certain kinds of destructive matter.

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Featured [Image](#) by [Adrian Raudaschl](#) (Courtesy of [Unsplash](#))

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# Heritage out of Control: Human bones as inherited waste of Europe

Katarzyna Kwapisz Williams  
January, 2022



Central and Eastern Europe - known as [“Bloodlands”](#), the area where Nazi and Stalin’s atrocities met, leaving behind many sites marked by mass killings - provide an obvious location for reflecting on human bones as material remnants of Europe’s past. Unearthing remains of victims of mass executions has been common in this part of Europe, and has stimulated increased international efforts to preserve and memorialize mass graves and killing sites. Human bones, however, feature as a more complex element of European memory-making and intergenerational process of making sense of who we are.

The prosperous Central European city of Wrocław, known as Breslau, does not often serve as a backdrop to the narratives of violence and death that frame the memory landscape of post-war Poland. This is in spite of massive escapes and deportations of German Jews to the extermination camps, and tens of thousands of lives lost during the [siege of Breslau](#) in 1945, when the city was turned to



rubble. After all, not only was it a German city, but it also remained untouched by the war until early 1945. Yet, with nearly 70% of its population being replaced due to the post-war border shifts, Breslau experienced one of the most radical transformations in Europe's history. It has become a very complex memoryscape and an ambivalent space of belonging, marked by the newcomers' conflicted relationship to the remnants of the past they inherited, including graves and human bones - potential waste, unwanted and threatening with, to use Tony Judt's phrase (1992), "too much memory".

Gregor Thum (2005, translations mine) reflects on this population shift as a deeply disturbing experience for both sides: settlers displaced by the Soviet annexation of the Eastern part of Poland "came to a city completely strange to them, while the Germans had to leave a place that had become foreign to them." The new inhabitants of Breslau were rootless and horrified by the city's "strangeness", its "repellent ... Prussian-German appearance" (2005:40). They were determined to tame the foreign land, eradicate war traumas by changing street names, taking down statues, redesigning city spaces. In 1957, the communist government decided to start liquidation of pre-war German cemeteries: "Bulldozers were let into the necropolises ... Cemeteries were turned into squares, without any exhumations" ([Okólska in Maciejewska 2008](#)).

While the liquidation of cemeteries and graves is a natural process, in Wrocław - due to the official politics and the indifference of the post-war inhabitants - it became an orchestrated operation of imposing oblivion. This and other acts of the refusal to accept testimonies of the past resulted in at least two generations of the city's inhabitants for whom Wrocław was a place of "amputated memory", absences and waste seen in all that was left behind and had to be disposed of.

*The liquidation of cemeteries and graves became an orchestrated operation of imposing oblivion.*

This "[astonishing indifference](#)" and "disgraceful barbarism", as the authors of *Cmentarze dawnego Wrocławia* (2007) see the liquidation of Wrocław's



cemeteries, was finally challenged once the Iron Curtain collapsed in 1989. A long and complex process of sorting out the past began – the past erased from collective memory by the communist politics of “organized forgetting” (Wydra 2007) and deliberate attempts of de-Germanization (Thum 2005). [Writers](#) were first to publicly explore German history of the Western Borderlands; they were followed by artists and photographers interested in Wrocław’s past (e.g. [Unknown City Portrait](#), [The Germans did not come](#), [Palimpsest](#)), collectors of objects found in refuse dumps ([Found. Saved](#)), and enthusiasts looking for the remains of German tombstones in the city’s public spaces ([Breslau Peeks from Under the Ground](#)). With time, acknowledging Wrocław’s past has become in itself a form of the city’s collective identity.

*Acknowledging Wrocław’s past has become in itself a form of the city’s collective identity.*

It seems that the process of re-heritagisation, of taming the landscape and providing meaning and value to the inherited past visible in the material remnants of a foreign culture, was an inevitable response to the sense of unbelonging, a way of coping with shallow roots. While the new settlers had to deal with the trauma of displacement and the fear that the Germans could come back, and were desperately removing any traces of the past, “tearing off the wallpapers because ... the German breaths were preserved in them” (Kuszyk 2019), “[c]leaning and sweeping out this foreignness, this Germanness, which is peeping out from every corner” (Konopińska 1987:53), their children and grandchildren faced a different challenge. They realized that they neither belonged in their family’s eastern homeland, nor in the western lands, and that the myth of “the recovered territories” did not change the fact that they were growing up in the foreign land. The process of turning what could have been perceived as waste back into heritage, of weaving fragmented, discarded and redundant pieces into a coherent narrative, has thus become an integral component of their founding story.

However, this “astonishing indifference” has left its mark on the generations who,





growing up in post-war Wrocław, would often discover the contentious heritages of the city's past in the form of tombstones used as building material or recycled into wall bases, brick fences, paving slabs and street curbs. But sometimes, a more confronting trace of the past would emerge. Human bones – disarticulated, nameless and redundant – were discovered quite regularly in various parts of the city during roadworks, pipeworks, earthworks and other reconstructions of the urban space. Such discoveries evoked both anxiety and awe. They were of a “spectral quality” (Filippucci et al. 2013:6) and often left behind a sense of incompleteness and uncertainty that stayed for years with those who had made the discovery and those who witnessed it. They transformed into memories of *materially experienced absences* which still cause tensions in determining the identity of the place and its inhabitants.

Growing up in Wrocław in the 1980s, I had my own encounter with human bones in the middle of a new housing development, in the excavations made for heat pipes. It was challenging not only because of the sensitivity around human remains or their ambivalent object/subject status, but also because of the unexpectedness and peculiarity of the event. There was no usual architecture of death – no gravestones, crosses, names or dates, nothing to prepare me for this encounter. Human bones were obviously out of place, both in the context of the location where they were found and in a broader picture of my sense of home. There was no context in which the bones could be “assembled” (cf. Harries 2016) and made meaningful. So they were left as they were – abandoned, sometimes picked up by kids, briefly played with and discarded again. I do not know if they were ever collected and buried; at the time, they were a kind of surplus, waste, no longer *meant* to make meaning. But they were also a burden – something that could not be ignored or disposed of, as they “retain[ed] some spectral sense that they could be somebody” (Harries 2016).

The ambivalent agency of human bones, considered “uneasy subject/objects”, complicates the way we respond to and make sense of their materiality (Krmpotich et al. 2010:372), which is indicative of both an affective presence and absence (Filippucci et al. 2013; Domańska 2006a:341). Their materiality does not



encourage a stable meaning, but signals excess as the unwanted remainder of something else, something once articulate and now turned into waste, “left over, neglected, surplus or insufficient to immediate requirements” (Harries 2016:1). This tension between affective presence and absence resonates also in a broader context - in the fact that the ambiguous materiality of human remains finds no support or justification in our narrative of home, it does not belong to our coherent, complete and convenient story, it exists as surplus that falls outside the “networks of consequence and significance” (Bissell 2009:112).

If, over the years, there has been a discomfoting sense of concealments or absences in my and my fellow Vratislavians’ relationship with and understanding of ‘home’, the memory of this ghostly encounter, of disarticulate and nameless bones scattered in a construction site - could amplify it to a haunting sense of absence. However, at times, it could also bring a sort of relief. In fact, the emotive materiality of human bones, the ‘agency’ they exerted, can both increase the sense of absence and provide a means of dealing with it by establishing associations, connecting fragmented stories, filling in the void by providing temporary, even if fleeting, “comfortable proximity.” More starkly, this sense of relief is documented in research on the Rwandan genocide which revealed exhumers’ “inability to ‘stop looking’ at the remains” (Major, 2015:176).

*The emotive materiality of human bones, the ‘agency’ they exerted, can establish associations, connect fragmented stories, fill in the void.*

One of the ways to think about this affective presence/absence implied by human bones is to look at it through the concept of the non-absent past, defined by Domańska as “the past whose absence is manifest”:

By focusing on it we avoid the desire to presentify and represent the past, and instead we turn to a past that is somehow still present, that will not go away or, rather, that of which we cannot get rid ourselves. The non-absent past is the ambivalent and liminal space of “the uncanny”; it is a past that haunts like a phantom and therefore cannot be so easily controlled or subject



to a finite interpretation. (2006a:346)

The memory of unearthed human bones, shared by many inhabitants of Wrocław, destabilizes the images of home and undermines the sense of the familiar, and threatens the stability of the collective identity “erected” together with the new city. It complicates the identity-making process not only because it is anchored in the tension between presence and absence, but also because it is a reminder of something that no longer confronts us in its materiality, but is hidden, removed, covered with new roads, parks and shops – a kind of waste.

The perception of human bones as waste encourages enquiry into the ways we deal with the past as well as the present. It directs our reflection towards disarticulate, nameless, redundant heritage, which is surplus to the requirements of our current, coherent narrative of the past, the place and ourselves. Applying such a lens enables us to look at ourselves not from the perspective of what we keep and value, but what we discard, both materially and mentally. Rejected as irrelevant and excessive to the current needs, the waste matter is a remainder of the past (cf. Harries 2016) and a reminder of our desire to forget and dispose of whatever lacks utility or does not fit neatly into our heritage treasure chest. Thinking of human remains as waste makes us uncomfortable, but also attentive to the ambiguous status of what constitutes both evidence and witness of the past, and critical of the present-absent dichotomy common in our thinking about the past (cf. Domańska 2006b).

Mike Parker Pearson stresses that “dealing with the dead, recent and ancient, inevitably must serve the living” (1999:192). Today’s city has been encouraging conversation about the past. In 2008, in the Grabiszyński Park, the Monument of Common Memory (by Alojzy Gryt Tomasz Tomaszewski, Czesław Wesolowski) was unveiled in memory of the inhabitants of the pre-war city, whose graves had been destroyed and whose families were expelled. The idea was born when a pile of post-German tombstones taken from the Osobowice cemetery in the late 1980s was found in the fields near Wrocław – rubble and waste to be recycled. The city bought two hundred of the best-preserved slabs, which were partially inserted



into the monument. This interesting monument was erected to directly address the city's difficult past and preserve its material and immaterial heritage. It fosters remembering and reconciliation with the past at a collective level. But it does not resolve the challenges of the non-absent past; overcoming this persistent "inability to 'stop looking' at the remains" my generation has to deal with, requires more work. Working between memories of presences and absences we need to keep looking for ways of making sense of our experience and rendering bones articulate again.

*Images, including the featured image: Monument of Common Memory, Wrocław. Photos by the author.*

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# Heritage out of Control: Negative heritage and de-normalizing necropolitics

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Upon entering the Orthodox Christian cemetery in Siret, a town on the Romanian-Ukrainian border, we were met with neatly kept marble gravestones, occasionally adorned with plastic flowers and recently-lit candles.

After passing numerous graves, at the very end of the small road near the church,



we encountered a very different site: the section of the cemetery designated for people with disabilities who had lived at a nearby large children's institution. A criminal investigation had massively transformed the spatial organization of this cemetery between 2018 and my fieldwork in February 2020.

In 2018, a trial had been initiated by the Institute for the Investigation of the Crimes of Communism and the Memory of the Romanian Exile (hereafter IICCMER), a government agency tasked with researching crimes committed during the state socialist period and initiating criminal complaints. Deaths of children with disabilities from the hospital, up until then invisible, were rendered visible through the creation of a site of negative heritage. The limits of these practices and critical reflection of past necropolitical violence against people with disabilities open-up the possibility for a more hopeful future. In this discussion, I center disability-related violence as opposed to views that instead center communist-era violence as the main locus of recognition and change. This is significant, since whereas communist-era violence can be assumed to have ended with the regime, disability-related violence continues into present times.

The hospital was opened in Siret in the mid-1950s, and by the early 1980s, it housed more than one thousand children. Like the other three care institutions against which investigations were opened by the IICCMER, the hospital was dedicated to children with disabilities, most of which bore the pseudo-scientific label of 'unrecoverable' ('irecuperabil'). The hospital in Siret was gradually downsized since the 1980s. Around Christmas 1990 it came to some infamy after international volunteers exposed the living conditions in the hospital as part of the humanitarian BBC reality TV show "Challenge Anneka" in the episode "[The Romanian Orphanage](#)". Several deinstitutionalization projects followed and the hospital was closed in 2001.

*Whereas communist-era violence can be assumed to have ended with the regime, disability-related violence continues into present times.*

In recent years, accounts of hundreds of preventable deaths that had occurred in



the hospital during in the 1980s have come to light through a criminal complaint [initiated](#) by the ICCMER. Most of these deaths were caused by pneumonia during the winter months of the early 1980s, a time of economic deprivation everywhere in Romania. As pneumonia was a preventable and treatable illness at the time, the complaint opens up the space of reflecting on the inhuman living conditions in the hospital (see Safta-Zecheria 2020). The complaint has also transformed the local memory landscape and opened up a space for reversing the invisibility of children's deaths in the institution.

The hospital's main building was demolished in 2015 to symbolically mark the end of the institution. At the time, discussions regarding the afterlife of the building blossomed on a local level. In the end, demolition was preferred over establishing a museum of institutionalization in the building. During my long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Siret in 2015, I learned that one of the reasons behind this decision was that the building itself harbored too many traumatic memories for the people who grew up there and still lived in town. Local decision-makers thus favored erasing the memory of the site over transforming it into a *Mahnmal*.

*In the end, demolition was preferred over institutionalization.*

The demolition of the hospital's main building did not block the re-emergence of the question of where and how the violence that had taken place at the hospital could adequately be remembered. The question re-emerged in relation to the Orthodox cemetery.

The differentiated spatial organization of the cemetery shows that people who died at the hospital are still marginalized in death, as they were segregated and ignored in life. The section of the cemetery where the previous residents of the hospital were buried, as the deathscape of people who had grown up at the hospital, is markedly different from that of other locals. As the photograph taken in February 2020 shows, there are no marble gravestones and barely any neatly-kept graves in this section. The panoramic image creates the impression of a mass grave, as very few graves appear individually marked. A [local press report](#)





revealed that not even the priest who has served in the chapel since 1982 could tell how many children lay buried in the plot – let alone identify them. The haphazard burial practices and the anonymity of the graves continue to render the deaths of children from the institution invisible.

At the entrance, one is greeted with a monument adorned with a marble statue and plastic flowers. It effectively hides the section of the cemetery from the outside view. The statue shows two sleeping angels that are joined by a heart and a cross and is captioned *May God rest them in the kingdom of heavens*. The monument to unnamed children reminds the viewer of graves to unknown soldiers and points to what Jeremy Walton (2020) has called the limits of knowledge in relation to the history of violence: neither the exact number nor the identities of the children buried there can be known today.

*Disability-related violence in institutions must be addressed beyond blanket condemnations of ‘Communism’.*

Locals say the monument erected in 2018 materialized through the efforts of a former nurse who had worked at the hospital and was strongly involved in the efforts to integrate the children into the community. The nurse is rumored to have erected the monument with support from international volunteers who had started coming in the 1990s. Local [press reports](#) state that it was erected as a consequence of the media attention to deaths of the children in the wake of the [launching](#) of the criminal complaint by the IICCMER. Alongside the erection of the monument, the cemetery was also [cleaned](#) of the growing weeds that were hiding the few existing crosses and marked graves, and trees were [planted](#). Yet, this monument at the very entrance still stands in stark contrast to the remainder of the segregated section that, as can be seen in the panoramic image, remains desolate.

This shift in the spatial organization of the cemetery parallels a change in memory practices. On the one hand, religious practices underwent a renaissance in the 1990s, but this alone cannot account for the transformations in the landscape of



the cemetery. This transformation mirrors the repositioning of the social category of people with disabilities in the post-socialist memory landscape, akin to the repositioning of other social categories described by Katherine Verdery in her book [The Political Lives of Dead Bodies](#) (1999, 20). That deaths of children with disabilities are remembered retrospectively and not at the time of the burial points. This repositioning is an act of creating [negative heritage](#). Negative heritage entails the creation of “a conflictual site that becomes the repository of negative memory in the collective imaginary” (Meskell, 2002, 558). In this case, the site of negative heritage is constructed in relation to the condemnation of the state-socialist past and not primarily to enable acts of collective mourning.

Graves that have once been unmarked acquire visibility as the section is weeded. While the section of the cemetery now shows the transformation of a previously actively erased space of burial into a space of negative heritage, the fragmented and sporadic individual acts of mourning are also rendered more visible. The weeding of the [overgrown cemetery](#) is an act of reinscribing the previously ignored and unattended space. Individual metal crosses that had marked graves have now come to light, foregrounding inscriptions such as that in this image: *Here rests God’s servant T.E., 13 years old. We will never forget you.* A tree planted on another grave has also become more visible, showing how time has amplified the effort at remembering embedded in marking the resting place of someone with the planting of a tree. Moreover, close to the path are the graves of people with disabilities that have grown up at the hospital and have died in the years since its closure. The grave of a young man whom I had met in 2015 when he was suffering from a terminal illness is now neatly kept, resembling the graves of other locals buried in the cemetery. Many of my interlocutors in 2020 had been deeply saddened by his death and reminisced about the funeral and their shared memories of his life.

Apart from setting in motion a change in the space of the cemetery, the [investigations](#) lead by the ICCMER uncovered that many of those that have been buried in the cemetery had likely died of preventable causes. Although the ICCMER investigation only focused on the 1980s, continuities with previous and



even later decades were strongly present in conversations I had with survivors of the hospital. This drives home that systematic forms of erasure of the lives and memories of people with disabilities need to be challenged: disability-related violence in institutions must be addressed beyond blanket condemnations of 'Communism'. Associating the violence against children with disabilities only with the communist era as an already completed historical epoch obscures ongoing violence against people with disabilities. This is the case since the violence in institutions is publicly discussed either through the lens of 'condemning Communism' or as an ongoing yet ahistorical phenomenon. In this debate, I argue that the meaning structures that underpin the necropolitics towards children with disabilities risk remaining unchallenged, while the dead bodies of the children in the cemetery are used to legitimize the present day political order as a morally superior one.

The deaths of the people buried here are the deadly consequences of a disability-related politics that actively prevented the formation of what Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) calls an ethical impulse associated with the eventfulness of the death of certain categories of people. Pseudo-scientific labels such as 'unrecoverable' worked to neutralize hope for individual 'progress'.

Accounts of carers from the institution in Siret whom I have spoken to and [an example](#) from another similar institution show that the deaths of children were normalized by being explained by professionals as caused by disabilities and not by the living conditions and practices in institutions. Thus, preventable deaths that can be attributed to the living conditions in the institution, like those caused by pneumonia and in other institutions also [malnutrition](#), appeared as unpreventable likely outcomes of 'unrecoverability', a dynamic which impeded the formation of a public ethical impulse that would sustain action towards safeguarding life. Thus, normalization of the occurrence of these deaths lead them to become uneventful and publicly invisible.

*Other residents who did not go to school continued to receive 'food from the bucket'.*



These deaths suggest that some of the children at the hospital had come to inhabit what Mbembe (2003) calls the necropolitical position of the living dead. Survivors of the hospital told of how when they started going to school, they also began to receive three course meals and were encouraged to use cutlery. They remembered also that other residents who did not go to school continued to receive 'food from the bucket'. I came to understand how serving food was one of the processes through which biopolitics operated in the institution. Those receiving 'food from the bucket' were likely deprived of other life furthering resources as well, pointing to a necropolitical positionality. This positionality is also maintained in the exclusion from practices of remembering those who have died.

Yet, this deathscape is fragmented. As is visible in the space of the cemetery, some individual graves were marked as places of remembering and memory - some received signification and were individualized in death. During the lifespan of the hospital, children with disabilities were brought to the hospital from various places in the entire country, thus being separated from close kin by considerable distances, which effected how visible acts of mourning could be made in the cemetery. After the hospital was closed, the community of people who had grown up at the hospital and other locals came to publicly mourn those members who died more recently. This process is visible in more neatly kept graves, in the memories of funerals and the pictures and stories of the deceased that I was told during my fieldwork.

Most people with disabilities buried in the cemetery were subject to a two-fold violence. First, they were victims of brutal living conditions that contributed to their deaths. Second, their deaths were rendered meaningless, anonymous and invisible. A negative heritage site has emerged that can contribute to the normalization of people with disabilities right to live a full and dignified life. Yet, it should not merely be used to delegitimize the state-socialist past. It should open up a space for critical examination of the violence to which children with disabilities were exposed and how this violence was rendered invisible.



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# Heritage out of Control: Disturbing Heritage

Birgit Meyer  
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## Disturbing Heritage

The past is present through its lasting material forms, in open and hidden ways, marked and unmarked. Whether cherished, taken for granted or dismissed and



left to decay, things from the past are subject to contested and conflicting political-aesthetic significations and frames.

We are in the midst of societal debates about the (in)suitability of certain things to anchor cultural memory and their commemorative value. Exactly for this reason, things are such an excellent entry point into broader matters of conflict, with regard to co-existence in plural religious environments or to the haunting presence of the colonial past, fascism, and other outrageous matters, as other essays in this thread also show.

*Things that have lost their value, were left to decay or targeted for destruction can be scrutinized for alternative understandings of how past things matter in our global entangled world*

While heritage connotes an appreciative stance towards such things and recognizes their cultural value - for better or worse - in being kept in museums or as monuments, waste, is in many respects the Other of heritage. Things that have lost their value, were left to decay or targeted for destruction can be scrutinized for alternative understandings of how past things matter in our global entangled world: as haunting shadows, shady specters, or hidden time bombs, challenging how histories have been written, and the narratives and powers condoned by them. In many ways, heritage has run out of control - politically, but also epistemologically. A befitting scholarly response is to not only call attention to disturbing *heritage*, but above all to *disturb* heritage as a category and regime employed to authenticate certain things from the past as worth preserving. In line with the editors of this thread, I seek to question the boundaries of what counts as heritage, by bringing into the picture “undesirables” as “spirits, energies and waste.” These “undesirables” may be excluded from heritage as we know it, as a secular domain separate from religion, on the one hand, and from waste, on the other.

Based on my research on the rise of Christianity in Ghana, and the decline of Christianity in the Netherlands, in this essay I will take discarded things - and



thus falling into the category of “waste” - as starting point. In Ghana, the rise and spread of Christianity in colonial times implied the framing of material forms central to indigenous religious traditions as “fetishes” and “idols” (fig.1) that were to be discarded, destroyed or taken to ethnographic museums, where they are still kept. In the Netherlands, where de-churching nowadays occurs on a massive scale, Christian things are abandoned and show up in many unexpected, mundane places (fig.2). The disintegration of indigenous religiosity in Ghana and Christianity in the Netherlands involves that things hitherto vested with sacrality are on the move, turned into waste, yet potentially up for being reframed and claimed as heritage.

## **Waste and/as heritage**

As laid out by William Viney, waste is a notion employed to signal the end of the use-time of a thing, which gave it a role for the future. If Mary Douglas’ notion of “matter out of place” regards dirt as a by-product of classification that disturbs a certain order, Viney’s conceptualizes waste as a “matter out of time”: “We make waste by removing a thing from use or removing use from a thing, but in both cases the time of the object becomes divided into a time of use and a time of waste” (2015:68-69). Qualifying an object as waste means that it has no use and future any longer. Discarded objects enshrine a past temporality, indexing a past that has ended and yet is present and potentially out of control.

History and heritage, as main cultural-political forms to remember the past, do not exhaust the past. Hence the need to think about waste, as a category employed in the making of time. Containing what is discarded and no longer of use, waste can also serve as an entry point into the politics that define what is valuable and useful, of what matters and what not. Looked at from this angle, the study of waste makes us aware of the temporality of things and alerts us to the shift undergone by things from a matter “in time” and in “place” to one “out of time” and “out of place”, and the narratives that go with it.

*Religious things are ambiguous and prone to pollution, certainly when placed in*





*settings that differ strongly from those of their previous religious use, meaning and value.*

But there is even more, as these things once were operative in a religious setting, as harbingers of spirit power or as devotional objects. Irene Stengs coined the felicitous notion of “sacred waste” (2014) so as to refer to certain things that were loaded with a diffuse power through a process of sacralization and therefore cannot be disposed smoothly, but require special treatment and evoke a sense of unease. Religious traditions have all sorts of ways of dealing with sacred waste, via practices of cleansing and exit rites. What interests me here, however, is not how sacred waste is dealt with *within* a religious tradition, but how it is dealt with when a religious tradition goes down and its things fall apart in the secular domain. Religious things that become waste still carry some “sacred residue” (Beekers 2016), which makes them ambiguous and prone to pollution, certainly when placed in settings that differ strongly from those of their previous religious use, meaning and value. In high times of un-churching, as currently in the Netherlands, there is an excess of discarded things to worry about. The question arises which instances of discarded matter do not end up and disintegrate on the garbage heap of history, but are found to be eligible for a new status, use and future as heritage. Heritage, in other words, is a container category that is employed, in a selective, value-bestowing manner, to absorb sacred waste, turning it into “religious heritage.”

## **Religious heritage**

*Things qualified as “religious heritage” fall into the domain of secular heritage, with its own custodians, logic and regimes for preservation and display.*

Currently, there is a great deal of Christian “waste” (fig.3&4) produced in the Netherlands, plastically illustrating the material break-down of Dutch people’s earlier strong affiliation with various strands of Christianity thriving through competition and schism. Some of these items are re-framed as “religious



heritage.” The attribute “religious” refers to their past rather than their present use. In the same vein, the current claims laid to Europe’s Christian (or even “Judeo-Christian”) heritage, and the concomitant heritagization of Christianity (Hemel 2017, see also Burchardt 2020), do not require active belief and participation in a Christian church and involve a shift of ownership. The point is that things qualified as “religious heritage” fall into the domain of secular heritage, with its own custodians, logic and regimes for preservation and display. Exactly for this reason, the state and other secular instances can invest in its upkeep without trespassing the proverbial separation of church and state, in a way that would be more difficult to implement if the material forms would still be part of the regime of a church. Employing heritage as a secular frame allows state institutions and a broader secular public to bestow value on churches and other Christian things as relevant to society even though the churches themselves are shrinking and people are losing their faith.

In the same vein, museums are not bound to treat items from the Christian past in a religious manner, even though they may opt to show some courtesy, just as the re-use of former churches by new secular owners is sought to occur in a respectful, befitting manner, to respect the religious history of the building and the sentiments it still evokes. As part of a secular heritage regime, heritage institutions and museums have the possibility to engage with formerly Christian things in their own manner. They can take the risk to trigger a sense of offense in (Christian) visitors or even charges of blasphemy, as was the case with the exhibition [Recycling Jesus](#) in the Noordbrabants Museum in 2017 that displayed all sorts of artworks made of discharged and defunct Christian material forms (Meyer 2019) (fig. 5). Such playful work with the “sacred waste” that is left behind as material reminders of the sobering up of Catholicism in the aftermath of Vatican II, and the steady decline of Christianity spotlights the extent to which religious heritage has been severed from its Christian roots and thus become effectively secularized.

And yet, the process of heritagizing religion is not as smooth a transition from a religious to a secular regime as one might think. This is so because it involves a



move from one value sphere (in the sense of Max Weber) to another, and thus a change from what Walter Benjamin (1999) called “cult value” to “exhibition value.” This pertains not only to Christian waste, but also to religious objects from other traditions. The question how to deal with discarded religious objects from former colonized areas - regarding preservation, display, and the ways in which visitors are invited to engage with them - is a matter debated hotly in heritage and museum circles. The urgency to address this issue is enhanced by the current public debates about the legacy of museums as colonial institutions that assembled a great deal of their objects - on display or in depots - under highly unequal power relations. Colonial collections contain many items from the sphere of outreach of European imperialism, waiting to be unpacked, scrutinized, and to some extent repatriated.

*These items may still be alive and even hungry.*

Against this backdrop, I just started research on a collection of legba-figures and dzokawo (“charms”) hosted by the Übersee-Museum Bremen that were assembled by missionaries of the *Norddeutsche Missionsgesellschaft* during their activities among the Ewe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the German colony Togo. Many of the items were gathered in the aftermath of Ewe converting to Christianity, as converts were to destroy their “heathen” things such as to break with their past - a logic of waste production on the part of missionaries that strongly resonates with Viney as well as with the emphasis placed on rupture in the anthropology of Christianity. Some were saved from the iconoclastic fire and taken to the museum in Bremen. For more than 100 years, they have been kept in the depot, with some on display in the *Schaumagazin* (fig.6). I approach the legba-figures and dzokawo as “religious matters” that enshrine colonial and post-colonial entanglements of people, objects and ideas in Africa and Europe that are to be unpacked in collaborative research that includes museum curators, archaeologists, anthropologists and priests from Germany and Ghana.

A preliminary insight I gained is that the current object-status of the legba-figures



and dzokawo, implying that they have been emptied of their former spiritual forces, may be questioned. Upon seeing images of these items, the Ewe priest Christopher Voncujobi found they may still be alive and even hungry. While I initially thought about these items as having been stripped of the powers they were vested with in their original contexts and as evocative reminders of colonial missions' activities in their fight against what they framed as instances of "heathendom," his response alerted me to the fact that they may be found to still host spiritual forces. Ghana being strongly Christianized, many Christians would agree with the priest, yet in contrast to him regard them as dangerous and demonic and hence find it difficult to handle them even in the secular frame of the museum. Whether and when such things might at all be eligible to be recognized as religious heritage in Ghana remains to be seen.

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*Things in colonial collections may call for being re-animated and brought back into a religious regime, or they remain in between.*

It is fruitful to probe into heritage from the angle of dissonant things that have fallen out of religion as lived. As matter out of time and place, such things are nodes to trace unexpected lines between past and present, and to spotlight unexpected entanglements of waste, heritage, and religion, and the material co-existence of different temporalities. The category of "religious heritage" into which both instances of sacred waste presented here fall appears to be an intriguing hybrid. While heritage is framed as secular, it contains things from the religious domain that still carry along their previous religious or "cult" value, for better or worse, depending on the beholder. This containment, through which the original religious use of things that became waste and were subsequently heritagized is still present, suggests that secularization is always haunted by the prior religious use of the things that it includes by virtue of marking the boundary that separates heritage from religion and waste. So, what we call "religious heritage" enshrines a complex entanglement of religion, waste and heritage, that



can play out in multiple ways. While a likely future for Christianity in Europe may lie in its being recast as heritage, the things in colonial collections on display in exhibitions or kept in depots may call for being re-animated and brought back into a religious regime, or they remain in between. The focus on disturbing *things* that owe their accommodation in the frame of heritage to their becoming religious waste, offers a material ground for *disturbing* heritage in a political and epistemological sense that may have repercussions for politics of identity and belonging in our entangled world.

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# Heritage out of Control: Models of Inheriting Spiritual Love

Çiçek İlengiz  
January, 2022



“Muslims go to Mecca once, if they are not unnecessarily wealthy (laughing), but people of all kinds come to visit Mevlana [‘s musealized tomb] every year. Why? Because one does not come here only to become *hacı* (pilgrim), but to become love itself (*aşk olmak*)” (Interview, Konya 2019).

When I asked what *becoming love* means, the self-identified dervish told me “ah, obviously you are new, and definitely not in love yet”. Because if I were, I would have known that Mevlana’s love is not to be grasped through mental efforts, it could only be felt. He was right in identifying me as a newcomer. This dialogue took place on the first day of my fieldwork in Konya in December 2019, where people from across the globe come to visit the tomb of Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi, the 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi Muslim scholar and poet.



The figure of Mevlana extended its influence beyond just Sufi communities and reached a global audience as a result of diverse policies of heritagization on a both national and international scale. First, as part of Turkish Republic's secularization policies, his tomb, which was part of a [Sufi dervish lodge](#) where the community was gathering to perform devotion and rituals (*dhikr and sema*), was transformed into a museum in 1926. Second, and more recent stage of heritagization happened in the 2000s when his teachings on spiritual love and Sufi rituals attracted UNESCO's attention as intangible world heritage. Fueling spiritualization both in national and global scale, different waves of culturalization of religious places and practices belonging to Sufism also allowed formation of new genealogies. Historically, the travel to God through a Sufi path has been organized around stages of initiation and graduation within a disciplined Sufi community (Sufi order, *tarikāt*) lead by a spiritual master (*şeyh*) who is believed to come from Mevlana's lineage. However currently, the teachings of Mevlana are mobilized by large crowds that are not part of conventional Sufi communities.

*His teachings on spiritual love and Sufi rituals attracted UNESCO's attention as intangible world heritage.*

To celebrate his unification with God, every year in December, the Turkish Ministry of Culture organizes the official commemoration ceremonies in Konya, a city that is branded as [the "City of Love."](#) The visits to Mevlana's tomb during December are considered Mevlana's love-pilgrimage by diverse spiritual and religious communities. During the love pilgrimage in 2019, I stayed with followers of Abrahamic religions and various spiritual traditions, hippies, shamans, mediums and spiritual healers at a community place that is designed like a dervish lodge. I spend most of my time in lodges where rituals were held and in the Mevlana Museum where pilgrims become aligned with Mevlana's love.

I suggest that the heritagization processes generated different models of inheriting the spiritual love of Mevlana outside the conventional dervish order. The practice of becoming aligned with the spiritual love of Mevlana through visits





to his tomb and participation to rituals and redistributing this energy further generates a model of inheritance that is based on sensing rather than a disciplined community organized around lineage ties or shared geographical and historical references. Framing the energetic interaction with Mevlana's tomb as a spiritual modality of inheritance allows us 1) to investigate the spatially and historically specific understanding of heritage and 2) reconstruct the relationality between inheritance and heritage that are being cut by the global regimes managing heritage. As [Regina Bendix](#) eloquently analyzed, by eliminating connections between ownership and responsibility, the global regimes of heritage broke off the semantic and political links between inheritance (personal) and heritage (political). Although the critical heritage literature emerged out of the interest in studying the [tension between the official and unofficial understandings of heritage](#), it primarily remains concerned with contestation over representations, and engages mainly with material places and secularized forms of analysis. The motivation of my research is to think about heritage through a shared capacity of sensing that is imbued with a political sensibility. To illustrate how inheritance of spiritual love is materialized among love-pilgrims, I first give a brief account of the heritagization of Mevlana's tomb and then invite you into an ecstatic ceremony based on repeatedly chanted prayers (*zikir*) and the bodily prayer of whirling (*sema*) where the spiritual love is both inherited and redistributed.

## **Heritagizing Mevlana**

Situated at the crossroads of different culturalization and heritagization processes, and operating simultaneously as an ethnographic museum, a shrine, and a pilgrimage site, Mevlana's tomb offers a complex puzzle that destabilizes the categories of religious and cultural heritage. Although love-pilgrims gravitate around an understanding of spiritual love that does not fit either into the culturalized frameworks (offered by the Mevlana Museum and UNESCO) or to the Neo-Ottoman fantasies of the Turkish government (dominating the official commemoration ceremonies) the politics of heritagization had an effect in shaping diverse ways to relate to the material heritage accorded to Mevlana.



*Mevlana's tomb offers a complex puzzle that destabilizes the categories of religious and cultural heritage*

The history of culturalization of Mevlana's tomb is as old as the history of the Turkish Republic. Considered the traces of imperial legacies, sacred sites such as tombs of saints, dervish lodges and sites for traditional healing were closed down in 1925, soon after the establishment of the Turkish republic. In 1926, as a part of the policies of closing down religious orders (*tarikats*), the dervish lodge that was hosting [Mevlana's tomb was transformed into the Museum of Asar-ı Atika, 'the ancient monuments'](#).

While the ban on dervish orders delegitimized the religious lineages (*silsile*) that have been traced back to Prophet Muhammed, the musealization of a functioning dervish lodge placed the religious power of the site in the past. To put it differently, as the name of the museum 'Ancient Monuments' suggests, musealizing Mevlana's tomb proclaimed a barrier between the experienced time and the homogenous national time, in which secular sovereignty is defined through state's power to hold the monopoly of regulating religious matters.

While the museum represents the everyday life of Sufi dervishes in the past tense [by exhibiting items only belonging inside historical Sufi lodges](#), manifest the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government's fantasies to bring [the glory of the Ottoman Islamic past into the present via Mevlana's heritage](#). The official program includes concerts, talks on spiritual love given by Muslim theologians in mosques, foundations and universities along with *sema* performances which is the bodily prayer requiring heavy concentration on breathing and whirling in which the *semazen* (whirling dervish) is manifesting what the God is revealing in his heart. In addition to these narrative frameworks offered by the museum and the official commemoration ceremonies, UNESCO promoted a de-Islamized version of Sufism, and Mevlana in particular, that has reached a wider audience in the USA and in Europe. Since the declaration of 2007 as [a year of love and understanding, the Mevlana Year](#) and the inclusion of *sema*, the Sufi bodily prayer, to the [List of](#)



[the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO](#) in 2008, the number of visitors of the Mevlana Museum has reached 2.5 million per year.

## Inheriting Spiritual Love

*The walls of this dervish lodge present a pretty unusual picture where the images of Alevi figures are hanging next to images of Mevlana, the seven chakras and energetic bodies.*

On the small streets behind the Mevlana Museum, there are several houses operating as dervish lodges. While most of the Sufi dervish lodges have been spatially organized to accord gender-segregation, during the love-pilgrimage, the lodges host female and queer participants who do not belong to any order and do not conform with gender-segregation. Talks on spiritual love, the life of Mevlana and his teachings are presented both by male and female dervishes and are usually followed by ecstatic rituals of *zikir* and *sema*.

What we see in the photo is a group of musicians and one female *semazen*. A short while after I took this photograph, someone else, this time male, joined her doing [semah](#), a movement ritual initially belonging to the Alevi tradition that has been systematically and violently discriminated in the Sunni majoritarian Turkey. Due to the [systematic state violence enacted against Alevi citizens of Turkey](#), the Alevi religious iconography has been charged with heavy political tension. However, the walls of this dervish lodge present a pretty unusual picture where the images of Alevi figures are hanging next to images of Mevlana, the seven chakras and energetic bodies. *Bendirs*, the wooden framed drums that were used in this gathering, bore symbols of the third eye and the Tree of Life belonging to Jewish mystic tradition of Kabbalah.

*Pilgrims inherit a particular energy of spiritual love that promotes the*



*dissolution of the difference between the divine, human, and non-human love.*

This gathering, where participants could join to the rituals, represents one of the numerous comings-together of the love-pilgrims to align with the energy of spiritual love. In the words of a female *semazen*, these gatherings are “platforms to share the channeled energies of love with the souls (*can*) who would like to merge with one-an-other.” (Interview, Konya 2019). The merging of the committed souls with spiritual love and with one another materializes in a state of trance. Whirling, joining to the repeatedly chanted prayers, watching the *semazens*, and letting the body moving in tune with the music people who gather in small rooms fall into trance. The trance ends with the Surah of El-Fatiha, the first chapter of the Quran. In this particular gathering, El-Fatiha was explained to those who had not mastered the Arabic language as the summary of the Quran and framed as a ritual of aura cleansing; the blessing of the energetic body that surrounds the physical body.

In this example where Quranic references merge with the language of energies and the symbols belonging to diverse religious and spiritual traditions come together illustrates that policies of heritagization indirectly promoted the formation of an eclectic spiritual terminology and set of practices without eclipsing the Islamic tradition that they historically emerged from. Through visits to the Mevlana Museum and participation in gatherings such as the one I briefly described above, pilgrims inherit a particular energy of spiritual love that promotes the dissolution of the difference between the divine, human and non-human love. Explained to me in several interviews in reference to Mevlana’s poem entitled Mingling, love is understood as a path of life where every existence mirrors every other.

### *Mingling*

*Look: love mingles with lovers*

*See: spirit mingling with body*



*How long will you see life as “this” and “that”? “Good” and “bad”?*

*Look at how this and that are mingled*

*How long will you speak of “this world” and “that world”?*

*See this world*

*and that world*

*mingling.*

This understanding is not favoring empathy, as many would assume. Omid Safi, a prominent Islam scholar specializing in Islamic mysticism conceptualizes the Sufi love as [radical love](#), which is based on the idea of ultimate reflection. It invites the acceptance that everything, including those that annoy us the most, are reflecting parts of us that we haven't met yet or we don't prefer to acknowledge. In that sense, Mevlana's idea of mingling and “being one” translates into seeing oneself in others. Different from empathy where the aim is to understand someone else, radical love suggests that there is no ultimate separation between one and others. Grounded on Sufi understandings, the spiritual terminology that is mobilized by the pilgrims suggests that the basic energy that motivates action is love. In this framing, the tomb of Mevlana, which is repeatedly framed by the love pilgrims as a point of high frequencies of love that operates as a portal opening into a higher consciousness. Aligning with higher frequencies of Mevlana's love and distributing it to those around suggest a different model of inheritance than the one served to the preservation of Mevlevi orders. While the dervish order discipline involves a sense of community that is based on religious transmission through becoming part of an order discipline organized around masters who are believed to come from Mevlana's lineage (*silsile*), the process of receiving and manifesting the energy of love through gatherings I exemplified above suggests a model of inheritance based on shared capacity of sensing the energy of love.

Policies of heritagization opened up Mevlana and Sufi rituals to the appreciations



of those outside of Islamic religious orders. However, destabilizing the given genealogies of inheritance as a “[complex cultural technique of preservation](#)” does not disentangle the notion of inheritance from responsibility. The scandal of the fraudulent English translations of Haafez (1315-1390), one of the most popular Sufi poets, is illustrative about the consequentiality of thinking about inheritance through sensing. Omid Safi revealed that the English translations of Haafez’s poems by Daniel Ladinsky are not the products of a translation work as we know. The English poems appeared to Ladinsky in a dream where he saw Haafez as a divine figure. What has been published under Haafez’s name in English were actually poems that Ladinsky wrote himself when he was [channeling the spirit of Haafez](#). Ladinsky’s promotion of his poems under Haafez’ name is regarded by prominent scholars of religion and Muslim activists as an act of [spiritual colonialism](#) that erases the Islamic tradition from Haafez’ work.

*It would not be a prophecy to claim that questions of ownership and spiritual appropriations will become a more visible issue with the increasingly digitalized world of rituals.*

Processes of musealization and heritagization destabilized the master disciple relations and opened up possibilities of thinking about inheritance outside of geographically and historically bounded reference points. While communities are created around the experience of sensing energies of love without following the path offered by dervish orders, as we see in the example of Ladinsky’s translations, disruption in genealogies of inheritance fuels a set of questions of ownership and responsibility. How can we think about a model of inheritance that is politically informed about power relations and avoid reification of historically constructed ownership categories became an even more pressing question with the COVID-19 Pandemic. It would not be prophecy to claim that questions of ownership and spiritual appropriations will become a more visible issue with the increasingly digitalized world of rituals.



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# Heritage out of Control: When Heritage Turns to Rubble

Adeline Masquelier  
January, 2022



In December 2017, Toungouma [was stolen](#), the famed stone said to render justice in the *Département* of Dogondoutchi, Niger. When it was found a few days later, the stone—a plain rock considered by some as an iconic piece of Niger’s religious heritage and by others as a “live” object and the centrepiece of “animist”



power—lay in shatters. The grandson of Baura, the Azna (local non-Muslim minority) priest entrusted with Toungouma’s care, was arrested for larceny after the remains of the stone were discovered in his house by the police. They had been led there by the motorcycle tire marks left on the sand by the thief. Meanwhile, the news of Toungouma’s theft spread across the region, causing consternation in some circles and mild relief in others.

In July of 2018, I met with Judge Mourtala in the town of Dogondoutchi, the administrative capital of the *département* bearing its name, after learning that the shattered remains of Toungouma, which by then constituted evidence in a criminal case, were in his possession. When I walked into his office, the judge unwrapped the cloth bundle sitting on his desk. Nested inside the white cloth were dozens of loose rock fragments of varying sizes. “What am I supposed to do with this?”, he blurted out, expecting no answer. His question nevertheless signalled that despite having been reduced to an unsightly pile of rubbish, Toungouma was not discardable. Waste, [Francisco Martinez](#) suggests, is the opposite of commitment. It entails disinvestment, disaffection. Messy and volatile as they were, the stone’s remains retained an eerie quality that was viscerally affective—akin perhaps to what [Kathleen Millar](#), in her ethnography of garbage collectors, calls a “vital liminality.”

*Messy and volatile as they were, the stone’s remains retained an eerie quality that was viscerally affective—akin perhaps to what Kathleen Millar, in her ethnography of garbage collectors, calls a “vital liminality.”*

Legend has it that centuries ago, Toungouma led the first Sarauniya, the queen-priestess who fled the Hausa kingdom of Daura, to the village of Lougou, where she founded a dynasty. Lougou, situated some forty kilometres from Dogondoutchi, remains a seat of Azna religious power and is now a [World Heritage Site](#). Every female lineage member who had succeeded the first Sarauniya had acted as the stone’s guardian. When a dispute arose between two parties, rather than turn to the “modern” justice system, the parties would travel





to Lougou and request that Tougouma adjudicate on the matter. Here we begin to appreciate Tougouma as a [“sensational form”](#) that simultaneously governs a sensory engagement with spiritual power and conveys a sense of direct other-than-human presence. I never witnessed the procedure but the testimonies of those who did concur: the stone, no more than twelve inches in diameter, would arrive, carried in a net suspended from a yoke resting on the shoulders of two men. If a defendant was innocent, Tougouma would push its carriers away from him. If he was guilty, the stone would pull its carriers toward him. To avoid being crushed, he had no choice but to throw himself to the ground—a sure sign of guilt. The process was said to be infallible: Tougouma did not make mistakes.

The thief, whom I call Salifou, told the police he had not acted alone. It was, he claimed, the spirit of Tougouma himself who had told him to destroy the stone. Tougouma had become a source of ill-gotten gains. Whereas litigants once brought small gifts to Tougouma’s caretakers, they now had to hand over large sums of money before Baura and his acolytes agreed to take on their cases. Loath to be associated with such monetary pursuits, the spirit resolved to put an end to being used for adjudication in dispute resolutions. In reducing the stone to rubble, Salifou had only done Tougouma’s bidding.

Rumour had it that other individuals had previously tried to steal Tougouma. I heard of a man who carried the stone to his car, hoping to drive away with his loot. But the car refused to move, and he was forced to return the stone. Salifou maintained he had managed to cart off Tougouma (the stone) on his motorcycle and carry it home owing to the support he enjoyed from Tougouma (the sentient being). I follow [Tim Ingold](#) (2011: 68) in seeing Tougouma’s animacy as “not the result of an infusion of spirit into substance, or of agency into materiality,” but rather something that is “ontologically prior to their differentiation.” That they did not differentiate between Tougouma the spirit and Tougouma the stone created a “metaphysical imbroglio” for local authorities, to use [Bruno Latour’s](#) words. For one thing, should they treat the theft of Tougouma as an instance of heritage loss (in a conventional sense) or something more?



For some people, the destruction of Toungouma signalled the end of an era. A schoolteacher told me that “a page has been turned in the history of animism.” Already in the twentieth century, successive waves of Muslim religious reforms aiming to standardize Islamic practices had banned spirit-centred rituals and led to the destruction of spirit shrines. A landscape that once throbbed with invisible powers became an inert scenery against which human agency, with God’s assistance, could be deployed. People neglected spirits while trees and other features of the landscape became, to quote a villager, “things.” Yet Islamic iconoclasm did not erase the past. Today, people say, the spirits linger over the places they were banished from, frightening people, making trouble, and causing suffering. Their spectral presence undermines the pastness of the past, raising questions of commitment, debt, and accountability. I ask: Who should care for spirits? Insofar as spirits bear witness to previous epochs, serving as the bridge between the living and the dead—something [Anand Taneja](#) called “jinnealogy”—what form does inheritance take for those who remain haunted by the past? Is inheritance possible when people reject their debt to past generations?

I question the view that the stone’s destruction can be summed up as turning a historical page. Instead, borrowing from Ann Stoler’s understanding of the past as both “over” and pervasive, I try to “[think with the multiple tenses](#)” that Toungouma’s spectral presence invokes. Rather than focusing on the stone’s fragments as inert remains, as Muslim iconoclasts and “secular” actors do, I consider the histories they recruit and which unite disparate temporalities, topographies, and agencies. Dispensing with the discrete temporalities required by “page turning” means letting go, along with [Dipesh Chakrabarty](#), of temporal models in which time unfolds in a sequential, teleological, irreversible fashion. Put differently, our understanding of heritage must make room for the ways in which the past is alive, infiltrating the present—and weighing on the future.

*Our understanding of heritage must make room for the ways in which the past is alive, infiltrating the present—and weighing on the future.*



When summoned by the authorities to verify the provenance of the rock fragments recovered from Salifou's house, the guardians of Toungouma declared the rubble were not the remains of the famed stone. Not only were the fragments fake, but the real Toungouma was now hidden away in the bush, they insisted. Such claims align with the broader narrative that ties (Islamic) iconoclasm to a diminishment of knowledges and ecologies while framing the past as a haunting presence. Toungouma was now out of most people's reach. Although Lougou's residents claimed the stone would return, most people were not fooled.

At another level, by denying the theft of Toungouma, the stone's guardians rejected the notion that the stone was part of the historical trend involving the vanishing of marginalized practices, suspended at the moment of impending disappearance. While ostensibly simplifying the judge's task, they actually complicated it. Had a crime actually been committed? Was the pile of rubble evidence of this crime? More importantly, perhaps, what should be done with it, once the presumed thief had been sentenced? The reputation of Toungouma, known among educated Nigeriens as *la pierre sacrée*, had spread beyond Niger's borders. Foreigners had met Toungouma, treating Azna theories, metaphysics, and ontologies with varying degrees of seriousness. As a fixture of the "animist" landscape, the stone had inspired [journalistic](#), touristic, and [anthropological](#) accounts. Judge Mourtala was aware of this. He also knew the fragments could not be returned to their rightful guardians, who refused to recognize them as genuine. He now faced a quandary. Turning them over to a museum would draw unwanted attention to the incident and solidify the narrative promoted by educated elites of a waning "animist" tradition. The alternative—getting rid of the debris—was equally objectionable.

To complicate the case further, Salifou claimed that Toungouma (the spirit) could no longer arbitrate disputes in an Azna fashion because he had converted to Islam. By ordering Salifou to destroy the stone, the spirit performed an act of iconoclasm, severing his ties to Azna history and cosmology. But let us consider the act from the human agent's perspective. By shattering the stone, Salifou rejected his own inheritance. That is, he refused to endorse the priestly mantle



that, as Baura's grandson, would one day be bequeathed to him, as well as the duties associated with it. In theory, individuals selected through an ordeal involving the dead priest's corpse cannot escape their obligations for they are regarded as the custodians of a collective heritage. But since the 1980s, I have heard of Azna abdicating their responsibilities as members of priestly lineages. Salifou appeared to be one of these reluctant legatees, eager to follow an alternative path.

As descendants of the region's first settlers, the Azna still claim (largely symbolic) ties to the land through their propitiation of spirits, but they constitute a precarious minority. Their role as ritual experts has been progressively eclipsed by other, mostly Muslim, religious specialists. The last few decades have witnessed the rise of a "reformist" Muslim movement, known colloquially as Izala, seeking to purify Islam of local accretions and re-moralize society. Today Izala and its offshoots denounce all engagements with spirits, even efforts to cast them off, as idolatry. Rather than following Izala, I suspect that Salifou embraced the message of Sufi preachers who describe spirits as evil creatures in the service of Satan. While Sufi religious leaders speak dismissively of Azna practices and other forms of spirit veneration, which they associate with *jahilci*, the ignorance of Islam, they are still committed to battling spirits, in some cases by converting them to Islam. By declaring that Toungouma had converted to Islam and wanted the stone destroyed, Salifou exemplified how Muslims claiming to fight the malevolence of "traditional" culture traffic heavily in its concepts and categories.

Salifou's inheritance was burdensome—requiring commitment, dedication, sacrifice—and he wanted none of it. By smashing Toungouma into pieces, he depleted some of the power of the office held by his grandfather. Far from demonstrating that he was a "buffered subject," who was "no longer open, vulnerable to a world of spirits and forces," Salifou's iconoclasm illustrated how in criticizing spirit devotees (including Azna, whom educated Nigeriens call *les animistes*), Sufis tend to adopt their ontologies and cast as supreme adversaries the more-than-human powers these ontologies posit. Put simply, if the stone's destruction signalled a rupture with Azna traditions, it did not make space for a



spiritless modernity.

Having pondered what Toungouma's destruction exposes about the transmission of heritage in a place where the past, rather than being domesticated by the present, is experienced by some as a haunting presence, I return to the question Salifou's words and deeds raise for me and which has relevance for the broader discussion of "heritage out of control." Inheritance, for [Jacques Derrida](#), is "never a *given*, it is always a task." "There is no inheritance without a call to responsibility," Derrida further notes. What shape does the past take when people refuse to assume their inheritance? Unlike educated Nigeriens who claim *l'animisme* as heritage—a past they are insulated from and which they safely consume as "culture"—Salifou sought to distance himself from Azna tradition. Yet his actions did not seal off the past. One might argue that while heritage serves to make the past legible, iconoclasm is a means of "[silencing the past](#)" by erasing its material traces. While he destroyed the stone, ostensibly mimicking "reformist" Muslims combatting idolatry, Salifou did not sever his ties with Toungouma, on the contrary. Here the stone's remains, in their volatile materiality, help us grasp what became of Salifou's heritage. As waste, they were not only "out of place" but also "out of time." Rather than relegating Azna practices of adjudication to a repository of bygone traditions, Toungouma's destruction threw into relief the indeterminacy of the past. Faced with a past that leaked into ordinary life, restraining action and shaping trajectories, Salifou could only defer the matter of his inheritance.

*Featured image by the author.*

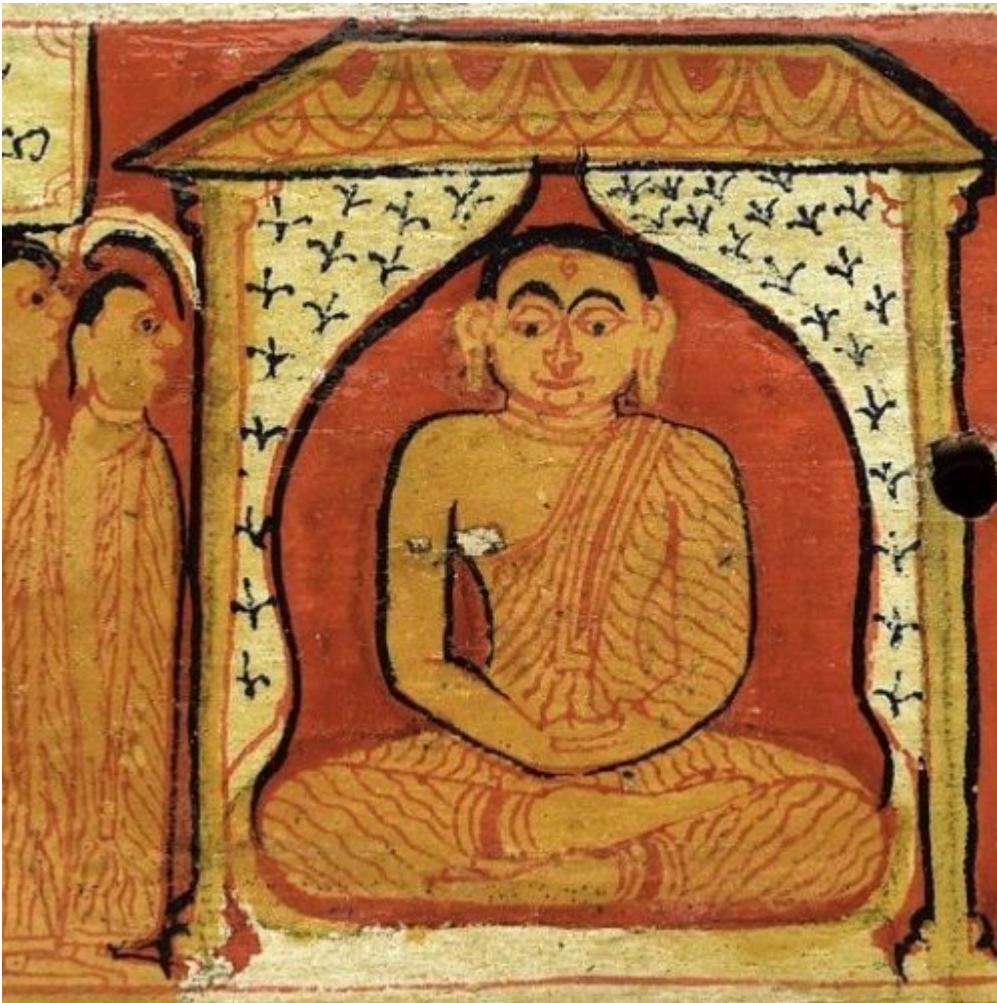
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# Heritage out of Control: Present Gods, Absent Nation

Eva Ambos

January, 2022



The sun had already set when the night-long live broadcast of a *kohombā kankāriya* ritual in a Sri Lankan town begins. A larger-than-life image of the leading national politician who is, together with ‘the nation’, the addressee of the ritual, towers over the space. The omnipresent cameras spotlight the twenty performers whose elaborate dance movements are keeping up with the rhythm of the drums. Their sacred headdresses are held upright even as they sway their bodies back and forth. Once the drums fall silent, they press their palms together



and bow towards the state officials who sit on a mat facing the altar for the *kohómbā* deities, the trinity of gods invoked in the ritual. With the first sunlight flooding the venue, everyone approaches the altar to make offerings and the ritual is over.

*These acts of ritual labor turned the venue into an appropriate place for the gods.*

The leading ritual practitioners, however, had been at the venue for days to conduct a series of elaborate purification ceremonies. These acts of ritual labor, that are based on knowledge preserved in traditional performer lineages, were of utmost importance since they have turned the venue into an appropriate place for the gods. They are thus practices that mediate the sacred. Yet the live broadcast omitted these acts and encompassed only the second night of the ritual that centered on the enactment of its myth of origin with its allusion to kingship. In this way, the mediatization of the *kohómbā kankāriya*, as a practice of mediating heritage, sought to evoke a particular idea of ‘the nation’ whose heritage is allegedly staged there.

## **Heritage Rituals**

This sketch allows some impressions of a spectacular performance designed around two forms of mediation to render the presence of ‘the nation’ and the gods tangible (Meyer 2008): the mediatization of its visually appealing elements as ‘national heritage’ on the one hand, and the creation of a temporary space for deities through ritual labor on the other hand. I call such performances ‘heritage rituals’ (cf. Brosius 2011) to account for the materialization of the gods within what is staged as heritage – not as an indicator of heritage ‘out of control’, but reflecting the hybrid nature of *kohómbā kankāriya* nowadays (Reed 2010: 177): performed to celebrate the heritage ‘of the nation’ *and* as blessing rituals.



The *kohómbā kankāriya* is a pre-Buddhist ritual tradition, conducted for warding off misfortune. Its myth of origin states that the first *kohómbā kankāriya* was held in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE to cure king Panduvasudeva from a curse that was inflicted on the lineage of his uncle Vijaya, the mythological Ur-father of the Sinhalese. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, during the British colonial period, its elaborate dances have been adapted and put on stage as entertainment. After Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, the *kohómbā kankāriya* tradition and *ves* dance, a generic term for dance forms based on the ritual, have been turned into national icons of Sinhalese Buddhist heritage (Reed 2010). Sinhalese Buddhists form the ethnic majority of the country and *urumaya*, the Sinhala term for heritage stemming from the realm of kinship notions of inheritance, evolved from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onward as a buzzword for nationalists (Roberts 2001).

The *kohómbā kankāriya* sketched above featured in the period immediately following the end of the war in 2009 when heritage spectacles all over the country were organized to mark the allegedly reunited island as Sinhalese Buddhist, thereby further marginalizing Tamil-speaking and other minorities. The *kohómbā kankāriya* under discussion also sought to invoke 'the nation' as Sinhalese Buddhist. It was supposed to align the politician and 'the nation', the *āturayās* or addressees of the ritual, with a ritual tradition that is associated with what is read by Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists as Sinhalese kingship. Yet it was not intended as a mere show but as a *ṣāntikarma*, an 'act of blessing', thus ritual practitioners from traditional performer lineages were entrusted with its performance as the only ones skilled in interacting with the *kohómbā* deities.

*Any allusion to the ritual as a pre-Buddhist tradition has to be concealed.*

The organization and funding of the *kohómbā kankāriya* under discussion was hence rooted in both its heritagization as an icon of Sinhalese Buddhist identity *and* in its ritual aim to solicit blessings from the deities for the politician and 'the nation'. Such heritage rituals underscore that processes of heritagization, though





they are often ingrained in secular-rationalist regimes, do not necessarily entail secularization (Brosius & Polit 2011; Balkenhol 2018). Notions of heritage and the sacred as material/spiritual or tangible/intangible assign them to separate, fixed fields, yet as Meyer and de Witte (2013: 280) argue, ‘heritage and the sacred are not given but fabricated’. This fabrication ensues in ‘political-aesthetic regimes’ (Van de Port & Meyer 2018) and through what Meyer (2011) calls ‘sensational forms’ that render the experience of heritage and the sacred real and palpable. *Kohombā kankāriyas* as heritage rituals constitute such sensational forms. They receive their ‘ethnonationalist’ marking (Sykes 2018) as Sinhalese Buddhist through processes of institutionalized state-driven ‘heritage making’ such as the introduction of *ves* dance into the school curriculum and its omnipresent staging as heritage. The *kohombā kankāriya* under discussion was one of many events contributing to this heritage-making process.

*Kohombā kankāriyas* as heritage rituals offer a rich array to explore how the tangibility of both heritage and the sacred are negotiated through practices that mediate the presence of ‘the nation’ and the gods. Their analysis points to a paradox: to solicit blessings from the deities, the ritual labor of traditional performers is indispensable; yet in order to upscale the *kohombā kankāriya* as *national* heritage, read as Sinhalese-Buddhist, any allusion to the ritual as a pre-Buddhist tradition dedicated to regional gods and as a property of performer lineages who have long been discriminated on the base of their caste has to be concealed.

Traditional performers, who hail from the *nākati* caste community, have experienced caste-based oppression as well as colonial exploitation ([Mantillake 2018](#)) and serve regional deities like the *kohombā* gods. While the latter stands not necessarily in conflict with Buddhism – the performers identify as Sinhala Buddhist and the deities are integrated into the Sinhalese Buddhist pantheon – ritual practitioners frame the *kohombā kankāriya* tradition in statements on stage as a pre-Buddhist lineage tradition. In our conversations, they moreover emphasized that their ritual labor draws on hybrid sources of knowledge such as *mantras* from India and frequently referred to caste-based discrimination at



*kohómbā kankāriyas.*

Hence, the lineage-based ritual labor of traditional performers at heritage rituals that is grounded in caste inequalities and marks the *kohómbā kankāriya* as a pre-Buddhist ritual tradition, hints at what is considered by national elites as embarrassing for the nation state (cf. Herzfeld 2004). As it thus runs counter to the invocation of a particular idea of the nation pursued through the staging of 'its' heritage, the mediatization of the *kohómbā kankāriya* under discussion sought to obscure this ritual labour.

## **Absent Nation, Present Gods**

Birgit Meyer (2008) argues that 'religion as mediation' is dependent on media that materialize it, i.e. render persuasive the experience of being in touch with the divine. Likewise, heritage cannot exist outside of media (De Witte & Meyer 2012: 45). Yet there is often a tension between different practices of mediation in heritage rituals: the ritual labor of traditional performers to engender the tangible presence of the gods, and mediatization to materialize a particular idea of the nation. I argue that in order to render the appeal to 'the nation' in the *kohómbā kankāriya* sketched above tangible, its mediatization sought to obliterate the work of traditional performers of creating an appropriate space for the gods by obscuring the elaborate purification ceremonies before the live broadcast. Yet while the gods materialized, the presence of 'the nation' remained elusive.

The purification ceremonies that began the night before the live broadcast and continued until the next day, included the ceremonial pounding of rice, interspersed with prayers and auspicious drumming. Only then were the images and insignia of the gods placed on the altar and 'the first dance steps' offered. While these acts rendered the presence of the gods tangible, they were also powerful reminders of the ritual's pre-Buddhist and caste-based nature. These crucial sections were therefore only sparsely videotaped. Even during the live broadcast, only a few people were present but I argue that the mediatization of



the *kohombā kankāriya* aimed at materializing ‘the nation’ by generating a two-way immediacy (Meyer 2011): first, by drawing on notions of an un-mediated – live – transmission to make up for the nation’s physical absence (Meyer 2011: 29); and second, to performatively realize the presence of ‘the nation’ as owners, and signified, of the heritage staged, by meticulously orchestrating the performance of ‘its’ property that obscured traditional performers’ ritual labour.

*While the gods materialized, the presence of ‘the nation’ remained elusive.*

Yet the appeal to ‘the nation’ remained an empty signifier. According to the ritual practitioners, the mediatization could not make up for bodily and sensual engagement. While the organizers ensured that throughout the ritual state officials sat on the mat facing the altar to substitute for the politician and ‘the nation’, performers stressed the importance of the physical presence of the *āturayās* of the ritual who would also experience the ritual. The community to whom blessings should be conveyed is not a given but established performatively, and rendered tangible, through transactions with the gods that include making offerings, praying, but also through immersion into the affective dimensions of the ritual. The community in *kohombā kankāriyas* also materializes through acts of hospitality to performers and the gods: yet until the final night no one took care of performers’ well-being and the bench set up in front of the altar, that is usually packed with offering baskets, was only sparsely filled. To my interlocutors, these physical absences were problematic *because* the gods were present.

*The mediatization, with its shrill nationalistic connotation, could not completely overwrite the caste-based ritual labour.*

The materialization of the nation was also eroded because the mediatization, with its shrill nationalistic connotation, could not completely overwrite the caste-based ritual labour that made the presence of the gods tangible. This labour, which undermines the notion of the *kohombā kankāriya* as *national* heritage, surfaced vigorously in the photos Ajantha<sup>[i]</sup>, the by then 10-year-old son of the leading



ritual practitioner, took with my camera: the installation of the images of the gods; his family members backstage where the offerings were prepared; and their embodied performances to consecrate the venue. He made visible the media that materialize the sacred, in Meyer's sense (2008: 127). Traditional performer communities are the guardians of these media and of the knowledge to interact with the gods. It is only in their villages, where we find *kohombā* shrines in which the images of the gods are kept and it is their bodies through which drumming and dancing are offered to the gods.

The gods' presence was also temporally and spatially tangible. In the multiple negotiations with organizers, performers repeatedly invoked a notion of ritual danger if the gods are angered. The organizers took this warning seriously which is not only indicated by the concessions they made to the performers, e.g. starting at an auspicious time, but also by the vow for holding the ritual in due time that a state official made at the *kohombā* shrine in the leading ritual practitioner's house. Ritual practitioners also warned that no one should enter the ritual space after its purification, an instruction everyone followed diligently. The offerings and praying at the end of the ritual were further indicators that everyone present acknowledged the gods' presence. Ritual practitioners hence ensured that the purpose of celebrating heritage, and the politician, was subordinated to creating a proper space for the gods.

## Conclusion

During my fieldwork with traditional performers, they frequently alluded to caste discrimination, the erasure of their labor from the national heritage narrative, and their treatment, not as ritual practitioners who mediate the presence of the deities, but as dancers and drummers for hire in heritage rituals. To analyze these absences and erasures in the conceptualization of heritage is to make space for their ritual labor that renders the presence of deities in heritage tangible. Such an analysis also calls into question the nationalist imprint of heritage in Sri Lanka:



the invocation of a nation imagined as Sinhalese Buddhist that marginalizes minority communities and obscures the caste inequalities in which ritual labor is rooted. The elusiveness of the nation stood in sharp contrast to the tangible presence of the gods, materialized and contained through performers' caste-based ritual labor: their careful mediation of the sacred through objects, embodied performances and purification ceremonies. The gods' presence was hence neither unwanted, nor was it uncontrolled or remote. It was thus not their presence, but the conjuration of the nation that was out of control.

## Footnote

[i] Ajantha is a pseudonym. This post is dedicated to him, his family and all the performers who shared their precious knowledge and experiences with me.

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*Featured image by [Wellcome Collection gallery](#), courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons](#).*

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# Heritage out of control: Is Libation a Prayer?

Mariam Goshadze  
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## Religion as Heritage in Ghana

In 2009, Ghana celebrated its 52nd birthday as an independent country with the usual pomp and circumstance. The parade was held at the Black Star Square – an imposing modernist monument commissioned as a symbol of progress by the country’s first leader, Kwame Nkrumah. As usual, people from all walks of life crowded the immense space with bated breath. As usual, too, the freshly elected president, John Atta Mills, arrived in a flashy vehicle amidst the cheers of the supporters. What was surely not usual about the festivities, however, is the manner in which the opening prayers transpired. Multi-religious prayers have inaugurated Independence Day ceremonies since 1957 when Ghana celebrated its first year as a free state. In the spirit of unity and tolerance, ritual specialists representing the country’s main religions – Traditional Religion(s), Christianity, and Islam – used to be present for the occasion. At least, that was the case until 2009, when without prior notice, “traditional prayer” was conspicuously removed from the program. The party responsible for the initiative, as the public would later learn, was the president himself who evidently felt that the prayer was offensive to his Pentecostal/Charismatic persuasion. The term “traditional prayer” refers to the act of pouring libation – customarily a bottle of gin – accompanied by invocations uttered by a ritual specialist. The elimination of libation from the Independence Day ceremony reflects the shifting conceptualization of “traditional prayer” as “culture” rather than “religion” in Ghana’s post-colonial present. Examining how and why a religion is “culturalized”, in turn, speaks to the latter’s standing in a given socio-cultural context.

*Without prior notice, “traditional prayer” was conspicuously removed from the program.*

How did it come to be that “traditional prayer” had been incorporated in Ghana’s symbolic nationalism in the first place? There has been much talk of the negative implications of the adjective “traditional” in relation to prayer, customs, or religion of African peoples. I resort to the label “traditional religion” exclusively





when examining state and media discourse, especially in Anglophone West Africa, where indigenous religion is ubiquitously known as “traditional religion” in colloquial, official, and scholarly discourse. The choice can serve as an entry point for investigating the historical and ideological legacy of the concept, emphasizing the equivocal nature of the word “traditional,” which Pentecostal/Charismatic denominations and the state frequently instrumentalize with both negative and positive consequences.

Whether performed at a festival or the Independence Day celebration, libation, as a ritual offering to the spirit world, marks the act of entering in a reciprocal relationship with suprahuman beings. Nonetheless, libation pouring has long vacillated between the categories of “religion” and “culture”, a tendency significantly shaped by Kwame Nkrumah’s cultural revival program, “Sankofaism”. Inspired by Sankofa, the Akan symbol of a bird with its head turned backwards, the program encouraged reaching back into the past to forge an African identity informed by regional forms of cultural and spiritual expression. In this framework, the libation was assigned two distinct meanings.

*There has been much talk of the negative implications of the adjective “traditional” in relation to prayer, customs, or religion of African peoples.*

On the one hand, it was incorporated in the Independence Day celebration and other national functions alongside Muslim and Christian prayers to betoken Ghana’s spiritual legacy. The use of the word “prayer” in reference to the exercise corresponds to the aspirations of African-born theologians and scholars of religion at the time to disengage “traditional religions” from the alienating grips of the missionary narrative and to present them as upstanding cosmologies comparable to monotheistic belief systems.

On the other hand, libation pouring became an indivisible attribute of cultural display programs that pieced together visual and ritual elements of distinct communities to boost the sense of a common national identity. These “culturalized” renderings of “traditional religions” were informed by missionary



and colonial attitudes towards African lifeworlds and significantly downplayed their spiritual dimensions in favor of their ceremonial and artistic value. Even if “culturalized” practices remain central to national identity, they are often watered down to “drumming and dancing” and are increasingly associated with entertainment rather than spirituality.

The second rendering of libation pouring as a “cultural practice” is far more established today compared to its religious counterpart. In fact, the Independence Day celebration is the only instance when “traditional prayer” carries an explicitly religious meaning. If “culturalized” renditions of the indigenous lifeworld allow the libation to be overlooked in “cultural” settings, the same treatment is challenging against the backdrop of the Independence Day celebrations. Here, the primary purpose of the performed prayers is to celebrate Ghana’s three main religions, and clearly not its three “cultures.” Evidently, the special antagonism reserved for the “traditional prayer” on this occasion arises out of its pointedly religious connotations.

*The fret and agony that haunts Christians as they face the act of pouring libation at a public function is virtually existential.*

Independence Day is one of the most widely publicized events in Ghana’s history, both nationally and internationally. As such, it serves as the paramount occasion for communicating the country’s strides into “modernity”. The notion of “modernity” here is rooted in the dictates of neoliberalism and Christocentric secularity. It has been argued that secularization as an ideological process profoundly informed by post-Reformation ideals manifests a particular hierarchy of religious traditions with Christianity at the top. In the course of the colonial enterprise, these ideological connotations solidified into a racialized taxonomy of religions bolstered by missionary teachings, generating an apparition of modernity where Christianity and secularity coalesce. While Western secularity has discursively aspired to disentangle the public/secular identity from the private/Christian identity, in Ghanaian secularity, modern, Christian, and secular



identifications overlap in public discourse. The tremendous popularity of Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity in Ghana since the late twentieth century, with its emphasis on “leaving the past behind” in order to transition to a more prosperous future, further corroborates the already existing association of “traditional religions” with backwardness and obsolescence. Following from this, the “[Christian modernity](#)” that largely dominates the Ghanaian public discourse today, especially in the capital, implicitly demands breaking away from African religions imagined as the domain of the devil in theological terms, and as “backward” in modernist evolutionary terms. In practical terms, the break also requires eradicating public visibility and influence of “traditional religions.”

The fret and agony that haunts Christians as they face the act of pouring libation at a public function is virtually existential. This is when the desire to contain the polluting effect of deities and ancestors overpowers the *de jure* secular ideals of the Ghanaian Constitution. While sweeping “traditional religions” under the carpet of “culture” allows for the maintenance of an aura of safety, its appearance among the country’s “religions” in a national context renders its spiritual dimensions undeniable. Media discourse illustrates the theological charge of the Christian position. Many newspaper contributors who applauded President Atta Mills’ ban on libation extensively quoted from the Bible to corroborate the moral rectitude of the decision. Among others, we [find references](#) to Exodus 20:2-3: “I am the Lord your God... You shall have no other gods before me,” and Deuteronomy 18:10: “Let no one be found among you [...] who practices divination or sorcery [...] or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does this is detestable to the Lord.” A less existential yet still intrinsically moral argument concerns the use of alcohol in libation pouring, a substance deemed sinful by Pentecostal/Charismatic Christians. In online media, defenders of the ban on libation have [argued](#) that deities do not represent good role models for society since they are all drunk from the libations, or because they corrupt [children](#) by encouraging them to drink alcohol.

*Deities do not represent good role models for society since they are all drunk*



*from the libations.*

The reach and impact of the vilification of “traditional religions” go far beyond Pentecostal/Charismatic, or even mainline, circles. It also manifests in the nature of the defense that the practitioners mobilize. Broadly speaking, three arguments are advanced in favor of performing “traditional prayer” in the framework of the Independence Day celebration: the state is responsible to respect equality and uphold religious neutrality, the country’s national culture needs to be preserved, and the libation as a practice is theologically consistent with Christianity. “Traditional communities” tend to rely on the third line of defense in this particular context while they underscore their right to culture as guaranteed by the customary law when advocating for contested “cultural practices.” When tensions arise with regard to festivals or ritual prohibitions, we regularly find newspaper articles preaching to stop the censure of the country’s culture, suggesting that in cultural heritage lies the strength and dignity of the people. In light of the Independence Day dissension, however, supporters of “traditional religions” rarely articulate their defense in constitutional terms, that is, by demanding equal treatment and visibility for all of the country’s religions. Instead, they endeavor to boost the credibility of libation pouring as a legitimate religious practice by arguing that “traditional religions” exist on the same ontological plane as Christianity albeit in a less sophisticated form. In these formulations, ancestors are completely removed from the discussion and instead, the presence of libation in the Old Testament is spotlighted as a sign of legitimacy. A prominent [Ga priest justified](#) the shunned practice in the following way: “Jacob poured libation [...] and then Moses was also commanded by God to pour strong wine in the Holy of Holies.” In other words, although equality of religions is enshrined in Ghana’s Constitution, followers of “traditional religions” rarely benefit from their right to religion when “traditional prayer” is framed as a religious exercise. Instead, they choose to justify the practice from a Christian point of view. This position, I believe, follows from the strongly pronounced Christian bias in the public domain.



The same dynamic is discernible in the statements of the few intellectuals and public figures who allegedly approach the libation prohibition from a secularist perspective, yet in reality offer an amalgam of the arguments discussed above. On the one hand, these individuals maintain that President Atta Mills' decision clashed with Ghana's constitutionally reinforced secularism underpinned by interfaith tolerance and freedom of religion. Simultaneously, however, they speak of the "traditional prayer" as part of national heritage or enter into a theological polemic, insisting that libation is [not a "pagan practice"](#) as it is a means to reach the supreme and omnipotent God, or because "great [scholars of Christianity](#) do not see anything wrong" with it. The tendency to prove the worth of "traditional religions" by stressing their compatibility with Christianity, instead of arguing exclusively from the perspective of religious equality, betrays the deeply ingrained discomfort with public visibility of indigenous religiosity conspicuous across social groups.

*Their criticism is usually met with admonitions from state officials and ordinary citizens, who insist that "culture" is the backbone of the citizen's national consciousness.*

It is the outwardly religious association, as I have argued, that renders the Independence Day libation especially vulnerable to attacks from Christians. Although many Pentecostal/Charismatic leaders have long considered the practice paramount to "[playing with the Devil](#)", this emblem of Ghana's "religious tradition" adorned public functions until the "pentecostalization" of the public sphere. Even today, its inclusion in the Independence Day ceremony largely depends on the personal convictions of the country's leaders. Interestingly, libation continues to figure uninhibited in celebrations that are designated as "cultural", as in the case of annual festivals. Since the 1990s, the National Commission on Culture has been actively involved in the popularization of these "cultural" events, investing significant resources and workforce in promoting their visibility. Libations, along with other observances performed by ritual specialists, are an inseparable component of these initiatives. Granted,



Pentecostal/Charismatic Christians, who are notorious for their condemnation of everything “traditional,” and by extension, “cultural,” continue to denounce these practices, yet their criticism is usually met with admonitions from state officials and ordinary citizens, who insist that “culture” is the backbone of the citizen’s national consciousness.

The libation debate is captivating because it speaks to the fluidity of the categories of “religion” and “culture,” and by extension “heritage.” This fluidity is perceptible not only across national borders but also across various public spaces within the same national context. Depending on the discourses that are being mobilized, a particular practice can be conceptualized as several different things. Observing patterns of apprehension and labelling allows us to acquire a more nuanced perspective on interfaith dynamics, religion-state relations, and public attitudes in any given socio-political environment.

**Image:** Pouring Libations (cropped), by [Sweggs](#). Found on [Flickr](#). (CC BY-NC 2.0)

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# Heritage out of Control: Jinns Matter

Nathalie Arnold Koenings  
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## **Contested mystical heritage in Pemba, Zanzibar**

On the island of Pemba, off the coast of Tanzania, jinns play a key role in shaping human lives and the material world. Oral histories hold that the island was once ruled by a huge population of jinns. Over centuries, others accompanied settlers from the Arabian Peninsula and enslaved persons brought to labor on Pemba's clove plantations. Islam, long vital on this coast, treats them all [as beings made of smokeless fire](#), created by God well before Adam. Although humans are now officially in charge, jinns, inherited and passed down over the generations, continue to participate in human social life. Surely they constitute a form of spiritual, cultural heritage. Yet, in 2019, Pembans across the island complained that jinns were going wild: "They're in control of us!" they said. Jinns today are unruly, make people sick, and generally wreak havoc. Increasingly, people are



ambivalent; some want to be rid of jinns altogether. What happens when ancient forms become 'negative heritage' that causes people anguish? And what if jinns, too, have opinions, and cultural heritage of their own which they feel humans should protect?

## **Jinns in history, place and knowledge**

Anthropologist [Linda Giles](#) proposes that the constellation of Pemba's diverse jinns encodes the complex flows of people, ideas, and faiths that have shaped this region. Knowing jinns means knowing Pemba's history. Important people have prayed with and deployed them, and stories of 19th-century contests between villages feature mystical battles between each side's jinns. Knowing jinns also means understanding Pemba's landscape. Features of the land and water bear jinns' names. Their presence influences the flow of persons - here, some pass unharmed, others must seek permission; there, strangers mustn't go after dark; unknown children will be swallowed; pregnant women will miscarry. In one village, jinns are so numerous that humans can only squeeze in beside them, building homes so close that Pembans describe them as *pachapachapacha* - 'twin after twin after twin.' Land that might seem empty teems with demanding jinns.

Jinns in Pemba can be inherited, purchased, or may freely latch on to someone. Inherited jinns may be local, original to an area - a tree, a cave, a well, a hill, a path - to which, ancestrally, a family also belongs. In this case, jinns confirm a family's rights of ownership over a place, their deep belonging there. Other inherited jinns may have been purchased by an ancestor centuries ago in Oman or the Hadhramaut; here, jinns may signify a family's antecedents in 'Arabia', as well as involvement in a business or craft, which such jinns protect. Pemban jinns are also sold by people who claim jinns are more disciplined and satisfied when in contractual relations with humans than when they are alone. And diverse jinns may also come upon a human being - young, old, of all genders - and decide to love or punish them. All jinns, according to their kind, demand regular offerings from their human partners: some, rose water and saffron ink, others, sweet bananas and dates, chickens, goats, or cows, while still others demand *ngoma* -





events involving music, dance and feasting.

*In 2019, Pembans across the island complained that jinns were going wild.*

Crucially, all jinns *also* have highly expert, intricate knowledge about diagnosing and influencing reality. It is jinns who have known for centuries how to heal illnesses, protect people and properties from sorcery, and how to achieve success. Without jinns, who themselves have genealogies and histories they convey through their hosts, humans would not be able to identify the source of their problems or combat them. While international heritage discourse might consider traditional healing to constitute *human* heritage - a fund of cultural knowledge to be protected - these knowledges and their associated practices arguably belong not to humans but to *jinns*. Any human-worker-with-jinns has learned all they know from their jinn partners, and no healing, attack, or protection can be carried out without their essential participation.

## **Approaching jinns**

While Northern thinking might strongly differentiate jinns from *people*, Pembans know them as very much *like* humans. “They’re born...they marry, they have children,” a woman said in 2019. “They get sick and die, have things they like and don’t like. Aren’t they just like us?” As others repeated: “They’re here and we live among them”.

*Land that might seem empty teems with demanding jinns.*

Alongside the ethical considerations that should be proper to anthropology, the ontological and decolonial turns increasingly press Northern-trained scholars to take ‘other’ ways of knowing seriously; the idea that anthropology explains what is ‘actually’ going on elsewhere - that what people themselves have to say, particularly about unseen, mystical things, is symbolic or metaphorical - is finally indefensible. Accordingly, ethnographers have recently come to approach jinns as more than products of human creativity and psychology. As ‘imaginal’ agents who



also have a material presence, jinns are increasingly proposed as opinionated historical actors themselves ([Østebo 2018](#); [Masquelier 2008a, 2008b](#)). [Straughn](#), speaking to archaeologists in a register ethnographers increasingly know well, has asked what it would mean to fundamentally “acknowledge and respect the Unseen” (2017: 197). Doing so, he suggests, is to take “an ethical stance, a position of humility in the face of ... the potentially unknown.” What happens when an inquiry engages not only human beings’ experiences of social change, but the perspectives of the jinns, who, together with humans, witness (and often resist and opine on) it? And how to think of heritage when not only humans have it?

## **Disruption**

While sometimes simplifying history, Pemban discourses often posit that, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, human relationships with jinns, while always potentially dangerous, were manageable. People, they say, had the time, means, and knowledge to engage and control them. But 1964 saw a dramatic interruption: the [Zanzibar Revolution](#) transformed the meanings of the land, the communities in it, and the mystical knowledge that enabled humans to protect themselves. While its effects were multiple and deep, one - dramatic, far-reaching [poverty in Pemba](#) - is particularly important for human relationships with jinns. Maintaining good relationships requires money, and, for decades, people in Pemba have complained that they don’t have enough to survive. “Will you give a jinn a goat when you can’t buy your child’s medicine?” a woman asked, explaining that her meagre funds are spent immediately in the realm that most visibly requires her attention. “We can’t buy food for ourselves. How can we take care of jinns’ needs, too?” a teacher said, feeling that jinns’ requirements were increasingly untenable.

*But the peace was uneasy. Eventually, the jinns would ask again.*

Upset at this neglect, jinns materialize their dissatisfaction and desires through the bodies of their hosts and of their descendants. Every village has residents



whose aura of anxiety and confusion, frequent illness and inability to function appropriately, is attributed to angry jinns. In 1998, an acquaintance took me to visit his old childhood friend. Before the revolution, the family had been wealthy clove plantation owners. They'd excelled in various businesses, partly through their own labor, but also with the assistance of several family jinns brought from Oman centuries before. With 1980's economic liberalization, most of the family left Pemba for the Tanzanian mainland, leaving behind the jinns and the people they spoke through - a now elderly woman and her middle-aged son in an otherwise abandoned homestead.

The absent family didn't want the jinns anymore; also increasingly influenced by Islamic revival, in which humans must avoid contractual relations with jinns, they refused to spend hard-won money on them. The woman's son, whom the jinns had chosen as their host, was suffering from this inescapable,



and now clearly negative, inheritance. The son could no longer work. He filled his room with twigs and leaves. He hardly spoke, and when he did, it was in the voice of jinns. The woman couldn't help him. They needed meat, rice, and dates, which they hadn't had for months, to placate the jinns.

As neglect of jinns increases, so jinns inflict greater agonies. In 2018, jinns punished a neighborhood of about twenty homes for not having held a *ngoma* in several years. Inheritors became possessed at all hours; locked storerooms were



ransacked, goat droppings on courtyard floors where no goat had been. The troubles lasted weeks. The problem ended only when residents across the region chipped in to hire a healer to satisfy the jinns. Assisted by jinns of her own, she held a *ngoma*, with music and food for humans and jinns both, and things went 'back to normal.' But the peace was uneasy. Eventually, the jinns would ask again.

## **A changed landscape**

In this context of mystical agitation, another thread of change contributes to jinns' anger: the landscape is undergoing dramatic transformations. Since the 19th century, Pemba's landscape has been described as 'fertile,' 'forested' and 'rural' - an unchanging description that does not reflect the island today. For landscapes and people's relationships to them are in constant flux. Although most people remain forest-dependent, [deforestation](#) due to greater population and an ever-increasing demand for cleared land have been noted since at least the 1990s. Global warming, soil depletion, the commodification of natural products, and ongoing construction have put relentless pressures on the lived environment.

Locally initiated transformations today include the creation of new clove plantations, the cultivation of previously wild fruits, and, at great collective expense, the continual building of new homes and mosques. Uncultivated land is shrinking. Family compounds grow even as lands are sold. And so humans increasingly compete with jinns for spaces that had long been left to the latter. Their homes, a farmer explained, "are being dismantled".

*What should be done with heritage when humans cannot tend to it? What if people disagree about the meaning of a legacy?*

In a rural family homestead indebted to ancestral jinns, houses were being built in several directions. Old houses were falling apart and deemed unsafe to occupy. New houses were being built beside them. The elders of this area explained, "When we build, we ask permission. We know we're pushing into where they live. But in other villages, people don't ask, they just build, or they clear a field and



plant. They say, ‘The jinns are gone,’ or ‘We shouldn’t deal with them.’ They don’t want to know. And they’re surprised when there’s illness and all kinds of trouble”.

At the edges of bigger towns, habitations multiply, sometimes encroaching on areas once treated as important mystical centres. People who hadn’t had relationships with jinns before are now especially vulnerable to attack and the expensive suffering that goes with it. “Jinns are everywhere! They used to stay in the countryside, but we’re building there, too”, a young woman said. For a year, she’d been suffering pains in her arms and legs, from a jinn who’d caught her in an alley on her way back from work. “They don’t have their own place and they get angry at us all”. As land-pressure increases, jinns continue to lose their homes. Without people to take care of them, they are battling for their lives.

## **Jinns/heritage**

I have treated jinns in Pemba as a form of contested, potentially negative, heritage. While they might be termed ‘intangible,’ for human beings in Pemba, jinns are materially experienced, and not ‘intangible’ at all: [they \(are\) matter](#). Taking contemporary challenges posed by jinns seriously suggests several intriguing questions about how the topic of ‘heritage’ might be approached.

What should be done with heritage when humans cannot tend to it? What if people disagree about the meaning of a legacy? While some Pembrans feel that maintaining relations with jinns is essential to maintaining peace, and is part of Pembran identity, others increasingly feel tormented and oppressed. Life has changed, they say, there’s no room anymore for jinns. But thinking about jinns as having a heritage of their own leads to questions that have implications for *human* wellbeing. Might the protection of jinns’ cultural heritage be seen as a [“foundation for other human rights”](#)? Could, for example, rivers, thriving forests, and ‘wild’ land where jinns once lived, be heritage worth protecting? Could economic wellbeing that permits humans to maintain ancient practices also be considered heritage? Could soil depletion and commodification that lead to deforestation be seen as a threat to heritage writ large? And finally, if non-human



agents were viewed as having a heritage of their own, what might humans owe them?

Feature Image: Pemba (Cropped), by [Sigrid Ekman](#) on [Flickr](#). CC BY-NC 2.0.

Other image by author.

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# Heritage out of Control: Buddhist Material Excess in Depopulating Japan

Paulina Kolata  
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Inherited Buddhist objects and their associated ritual care connect the dead with the living.

Buddhist things are not only material. They contain spiritual and emotional power, even when deemed unwanted. If mistreated or mismanaged, they can become dangerous and need to be handled carefully through ritual action (Gygi 2018). They represent inherited connections but what happens when such inherited sociality is rejected?

On the outskirts of Fukuyama in Hiroshima Prefecture, sprawling across 10,000 square meters of Fudōin temple grounds, [is a graveyard where old tombs \(\*furuhaka\*\) and family Buddhist altars \(\*butsudan\*\) come to rest](#) in peace. In 2001, the gravesite of the graves (*ohaka no haka*) replaced the temple-owned forest to become a densely populated home to Buddhist death-related objects without



anyone to care for them. *Ohaka no haka* embodies the material excess of Buddhist practices and the absence and fragmentation of kin relations in contemporary Japan. This materialized absence poses a challenge to the socio-economic continuity of Buddhist community structures. Buddhist practices and associated karmic obligations are lived out through the inter-generational material heritage like family Buddhist altars, graves, and other charged items. Buddhism thus involves ritual care for such objects and the nourishment of karmic ties (*en*) involving donations (*dana*) to and ritual labour of Buddhist professionals.

At Fudōin, for a donation of 2,500 yen, the head priest Mishima Kakudō looks after this death-related material excess: from tightly arranged abandoned headstones to out-of-use wooden Buddhist altars destined for ritual disposal by burning. Such material becomes excessive and burdensome as it imposes on a person entrusted with it a duty of care they may be unable or unwilling to provide. Those who moved away from their hometowns often struggle to accommodate the elaborate Buddhist altars and the physically remote gravestones of their parents and grandparents. Mishima, as a ritual specialist, sees himself as a trusted custodian of the karmic relations that those decommissioned Buddhist objects represent. As [Fabio Gygi \(2018\) argues in his work on rubbish houses \(\*gomi yashiki\*\) in 'post-bubble' Japan](#), materiality can often outlive meaning and utility, thus rendering it excessive as objects move through time and space. But this excess is also generative of new meanings and structures of care.

*Such material imposes on a person entrusted with it a duty of care they may be unable or unwilling to provide.*

Besides Fudōin, many local temples are facing an ever-increasing number of requests to assist with the disposal and care of emotionally, morally, and spiritually charged things. These objects are not always strictly Buddhist but are [affectively “sticky”](#) insofar their stickiness emerges from cultural and personal exchanges that result in the accumulation of affective value and, here, also of





karmic and care value. Among the proliferating cases of Buddhist altars left abandoned anonymously at night within temples' grounds, Buddhist priests in rural Japan often encounter more problematic objects, two examples of which I discuss below: a stone statue of Kannon Buddha and a plane propeller entrusted to the Myōkōji temple in Hiroshima Prefecture.

Since Buddhist temples are seen as places where such material excess can be handled meaningfully, they increasingly face the moral and practical dilemma of managing it. Decommissioning of karmically volatile materiality reveals the fragility of Buddhist care structures and highlights growing concerns about how religious activity generates waste. The management of religious materiality in the world's fastest ageing society has extensive spiritual, moral, and practical implications.

*Decommissioning of karmically volatile materiality reveals the fragility of Buddhist care structures.*

## **Homeless Kannon**

In March 2017, I lived with temple custodians of Myōkōji, a mid-size True Pure Land Buddhist temple in northern Hiroshima Prefecture. The family of a recently deceased parishioner called on the temple to drop off a Buddhist statue they had found when clearing out the family house. They intended to downsize and relocate the family *butsudan* to their Hiroshima apartment, but they did not know what to do with the statue found among their father's belongings. The son who dropped it off felt uncomfortable just throwing it away, so he hoped it could be stored safely at the temple or that the head priest would know how to dispose of it properly. "It would be wasteful (*mottainai*) to simply throw it away," he said. The head priest, Suzuki Shōdō, took the statue and placed it on the kitchen table laughing and shaking his head. It was still wrapped in a green piece of cloth, and he asked me to unwrap it. When I removed the cloth, it transpired that it was a statue of Bodhisattva Kannon — usually associated with esoteric Shingon Buddhism and its founder, Kōbō Daishi (or Kūkai, 774-835), who is considered one of the founders



of the Japanese esoteric tradition.

Suzuki was amused: Kannon was not worshipped at his temple and, as such, he felt that the statue could not be placed in the temple hall for safekeeping. Since it was carved in stone, it could not be disposed of through burning and Suzuki felt unsure about how to handle the object ritually. At first, it was stored in one of the alcoves in the temple's *butsudan* room, disguised in the green cloth so as not to anger Amida Buddha. Later, it was placed behind the altar in the main temple hall, the original green cover still hiding it away from the residing deities. Despite the denominational conundrum, the temple was selected as the best place to deal with an object believed to host spiritual beings. While the family of the deceased were careful to not just throw it away, they were also not prepared to home it.

The notion of wastefulness invoked by the son is interlinked with Buddhist ritual practices of dealing with decay and death of objects and people. As Hannah Gould (2019) notes, the notion of *mottainai* refers to “an affective condition of guilt or sadness when disposing of something before its potential utility has been exhausted.” In the early twenty-first century, *mottainai* was deployed as a lost Japanese value (Siniawer 2019), but the current public discourse on *mottainai* attempts to evoke an era of post-war thriftiness to face challenges of mass waste and a perceived disease of affluence.

Buddhist rituals of separation, known as *kuyō*, show respect for the life of material objects, but also remove waste from the life of individuals, allowing them to part with the things and the connections that these objects signify. *Kuyō* practices developed as a hybrid of Buddhist and animist beliefs that cannot be easily separated (Kretschmer 2000: 145-48, 193-96).

Buddhist priests can liberate the owners from the burden of material affects and also help them dispose of their karmic connections – in some cases, disposing of entire family legacies, as in the case of abandoned Buddhist altars and graves. Although no such ritual took place in case of the stone statue of Kannon Buddha



brought to Myōkōji, partially due to the durability of its material, the disconnect was created through the act of giving, thus resulting in the re-orientation of the ownership.

## Communal Afterlives

Objects stored at local temples narrate stories of disconnect, as much as they convey narratives of belonging. One morning in early January, I joined a group of Myōkōji's male supporters for their winter *o-migaki* duties, when all the temple's golden and brass ornaments are removed, taken apart, washed, polished, and reassembled. As we huddled around the stove sipping freshly brewed tea, I asked a couple of my companions about the propeller hanging on one of the hall's walls. Most ornaments and items in the temple's hall were engraved with the names of their lay donors, but the propeller was unmarked. Considering Hiroshima's history, I imagined that it might have come from a warplane. I was told, however, that the propeller came from a plane owned by one of the temple parishioners who moved away a few years ago. My companions explained that he was a pilot who after his parents' passing relocated his family. They were unsure whether the family moved to Kantō or Kansai region and encouraged me to ask the head priest to fill in the gaps. The family was never able to return to live in this community but the men remembered the pilot continued to fly regularly over the village out of his sentiment for it. When he retired, he asked for the propeller to be stored at the temple. As to why Ishida decided to store the propeller at the temple, my companions saw this as the most obvious (*atarimae*) place to record one's history and create a connection with the community. One of the men remarked that their generation will still remember the propeller story, but the next generation might not. For them, the temple seemed like the safest place to keep it, hoping that the head priest would guard and pass on this story to the next generation of temple custodians. My other companion looked around the hall and added, "Amida Buddha willing, all this might even survive. Then again, the way we are all going, it will all become rubbish (*gomi*) one day. What a waste, eh?" We emptied our cups of now lukewarm tea and got on with the job.



*I asked a couple of my companions about the propeller hanging on one of the hall's walls.*

The propeller embodied the affective connections that the pilot had maintained by flying frequently over the region and eventually by storing the propeller at Myōkōji. Since he and his family are not there to tell the story, the people left behind must (re)construct and keep the memory of his connection to the place and to ascribe value to this relationship. The propeller, like many other objects stored at the temple for safekeeping, are both markers of continuity of and disconnect in members' affective links and the responsibility of care that people ascribe to their local temple. The materialized presence and absence of that care is a tangible marker of people's desire to manage their Buddhist belonging and heritage that has been entrusted to or accidentally passed on to them.

Choosing a Buddhist temple as a site of decommissioned care for (and, sometimes, abandonment of) inherited things has moral implications. Such things become the moral responsibility of the receiving party, imposing the duty of care to retain their emotional and karmic value. Japanese Buddhist materiality and sociality are rooted in the contemporary Japanese view of karmic causality that is characterised by the recognition that physical events and actions have repercussions. Karma (*innen*) can be transmitted and shared, especially through familial and blood ties. In practical terms, the Japanese Buddhist notion of karmic connections (*en*) is usually related to practices of memorialisation whereby the bonds between the living and the dead are affirmed and nurtured. Therefore, karmic connections and the associated inherited Buddhist death-related material excess that contains them can become sources of material and emotional pollution. Equally, they can also be fruitfully reinvested into stimulating Buddhist systems of belonging.

*Karmic connections and the associated inherited Buddhist death-related material excess that contains them can become sources of material and emotional pollution.*



## **(De-)commissioning Care**

Temples are imagined as sites where emotionally and karmically charged materiality is dealt with in meaningful ways and where unaccounted-for death-related inheritance is stored. The moral choices people make about the afterlives of such material inheritance expands the category of Buddhist 'heritage' for which a temple must assume care. These choices, however, are not a sign of naïve hope that the karmic connections they represent will survive against all odds. Dependent on its congregation's donations and on fees for ritual services, Buddhist temple communities are likely to become economically non-viable as the need for a sustained ritual care disappears. People's actions point to a belief that a continuity of Buddhist care will endure, collectively rather than individually. That promise often seems to be enough for the donors. So, people in rural Hiroshima are making choices to disengage from their responsibility for their individual material histories by transforming them into symbolic matters of communal concern.

*Such moral choices are acts of resistance.*

Conversely, such moral choices are acts of resistance: a rejection of a burdensome inheritance and the demands it makes on people's time and economic resources. While it is a conscious act of entrusting that legacy — along with the karmic entanglements and problematic materiality — to those deemed appropriate, knowledgeable, and emotionally prepared to take it in their care, it is also an act of disposal and boundary-making. It is an intentional displacement of care that threatens the cosmological and practical circularity of Buddhist things, thus producing a volatile present and an uncertain future for Japan's Buddhist tradition.

*Featured Image provided by Author*



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# Heritage Out of Control: Musealising (Hi)stories of Migration

Annika Kirbis  
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Since the early 2000s, coinciding with the 40th anniversary of the recruitment agreement between Austria and Turkey in 1964, there have been increasing initiatives in Vienna that involve municipal institutions to capture the (hi)stories of labour migrants, the so-called ‘guest workers’, as integral part of the city’s memory. For example, in 2015-16 the Wien Museum, a key institution for the city’s memory, hosted the project [“Migration Collection”](#) (*Migration sammeln*). The recurring difficulties regarding the acquisition of objects for the collection reflect the tensions inherent in the musealisation of migration (hi)stories and their transition into the city’s officialised canon. Particularly the differences in value attribution (and role allocation) among the various stakeholders involved, such as the museum with its specific criteria for collection, on the one hand, and migrants as bearers of (hi)stories and possible object donors on the other hand, highlight the complexities in the process of revaluing previously neglected pasts. The



seemingly neat and stable distinction between heritage as valued and waste as disposable pasts becomes unsettled.

*Migrants as bearers of (hi)stories and possible object donors.*

The discrepancy between the objects which the museum envisioned as valuable for collection and display and the objects which labour migrants themselves considered worthy of keeping resulted in a perceived 'lack' of representative objects for the "Migration Collection". The museum prioritised aesthetically appealing, multidimensional objects both in intangible and tangible ways. Objects should thus transmit complex (hi)stories in order to be applicable to a variety of contexts and hence exhibitions. And, most importantly, they should not constitute two-dimensional 'flat goods' (*Flachware*), like documents, letters, and photos. In the context of migration, however, it is commonly 'flat goods' that are imbued with high personal value, such as portable memories from 'home' in the diaspora, correspondence across geographies and of course the [paperwork emerging from the bureaucratic processes of residency, work permits and citizenship](#). For example, when the mother of one of my interlocutors decided to move back to Turkey upon retirement, she handed over several paper boxes of documents to her daughter. Treasured and stored carefully as inheritances from her mother, the boxes enjoy space in the living room like regular furniture. Yet, the abundance of these two-dimensional, paper objects rendered them even less valuable to the museum, whose [criteria for selection](#) also require the object to hold a certain element of rarity and originality. Thus, the museum's imagination about which objects should be preserved as museal representations for labour migration to the city of Vienna was often at odds with the objects emerging from migrants' living realities.

*The criteria for selection require the object to hold a certain element of rarity and originality.*

Moreover, the often cramped housing conditions and frequent changes of





residence of labour migrants impacted severely on storage space. As a result, many objects considered 'relevant' nowadays by those institutions shaping the narratives on the city's memory have already been thrown away. As one interlocutor told the collection team of the ["Migration Collection"](#): "We didn't know that this would be of value one day." (interview, 2015) Consequently, objects that have in fact endured these adverse circumstances and have been guarded for decades tend to hold a high emotional value. For example, [objects that eventually became part of the "Migration Collection"](#) include a cooking pot, which the donor had bought from her first salary in Vienna, as well as a pair of scissors that another donor had used for decades during her employment in Vienna's textile industry. The range of what may constitute an object of migration is thus nearly unlimited, as long as the object narrates particular experiences or memories of migration from the donor's life and can be generalised into the larger historical context. Again, not all objects that are considered by their individual owners to hold a specific meaning met the museum's collection criteria and were thus not approved to enter its collection. The difficulty for the museum to acquire objects it deemed suitable for a collection on migration thus relates not only to the sometimes diverging value attribution to objects by the museum vis-à-vis migrants. It also relates to the fact that the museum's 'sudden interest' in migration arose in a situation in which for addressing the gaps in its collections it had to rely on the participation of migrants, whose existence and (hi)stories the museum had long neglected and treated as disposable. The revaluing of migrant (hi)stories by the museum thus highlighted not only a lack of representation in its previous collections, but also the absence of a relation to a significant part of Vienna's population.

To complicate this even more, in opposition to what the museum defined as two-dimensional objects, multidimensional objects do not allow for the option of preparing a copy for the donors before being handed over permanently to the museum. This aggravated the collection team's discomfort in asking for the donation of objects. [As a team of five](#), all active as academics and/or activists, who had been hired to conduct the project, they had to navigate the ambivalences of



the project, which they themselves considered both flawed yet also an important step in the right direction. That the donated objects would be preserved and (temporarily) displayed in the museum, moreover in one of Vienna's key institutions for the city's memory, did not always constitute a value or sufficiently convincing argument for people to donate objects, they realised. In light of the institution's long, multi-layered neglect of migrants as an audience to be considered, as staff members to be hired, or as residents whose (hi)stories constitute a valued part of the city's memory, this is not entirely surprising. In the project's closing exhibition [„Geteilte Geschichte. Viyana - Beč - Wien“](#) (“Moving History. Viyana - Beč - Vienna”) in 2017 at the Wien Museum, space was made for life story interviews with some of the object donors as one way to mitigate the object-centred focus of the project and to extend the possibilities for donors to participate beyond the provision of objects by narrating and interpreting their own (hi)stories of migration.

Thus, various ethical concerns emerge as migration transitions from the realm of being disposable to becoming heritage in the context of the museum. The incorporation of new participatory approaches for building a collection on migration may not adequately compensate for the difficult or even absent relation between the museum and the 'communities' it aims to represent, more so because the extent of participation is limited. Particularly these first focused attempts by official memory institutions to recognise migration as integral part of the city's memory, like the “Migration Collection” at the Wien Museum, may only capture selected traces and fragments of migration (hi)stories and beg the question of whose memories are accessible to the museum. Personal, trusting bonds with potential object donors are therefore key for the collection process, especially as the response among the 'communities' was more reserved in comparison to the museum's enthusiasm about the project. Yet, the collection team also highlighted the importance of not relying exclusively on one's personal network in order to



demonstrate the internal diversity among labour migrants from former Yugoslavia and Turkey, challenging the idea of a coherent community. Another important resource therefore came from people engaged in activist work or holding a leading position within the 'communities', for example as chairperson in an association. The resulting collection is thus an assemblage reflecting (hi)stories that were accessible to (and accepted by) the museum, while other stories remain untold.

*The response among the 'communities' was more reserved in comparison to the museum's enthusiasm about the project.*

After the closing exhibition of the project, the collection was moved to the museum's storage. Since the goal of the project was to build a collection based on object donations, the collected material was not returned to the previous owners after the exhibition. The perspective of having the collection deposited in the storage added yet another layer of ethical discomfort to the collection. It seemed to undermine the project's efforts and its declared significance in retrieving the previously unvalued (hi)stories of migration from private homes and often cellars to the public space of the museum. Being temporarily displayed, the "Migration Collection" did thus not become part of the permanent exhibition, although this may still (at least partially) happen, since the Wien Museum has been closed since 2019 for a comprehensive restructuring process. Out of sight and inaccessible to the public, to what extent did the objects of the "Migration Collection" (and their related (hi)stories) then become part of the city's memory and heritage? One might ask if its storage may in fact add to forgetting by simply "delegating to the archive the responsibility of remembering" (Nora 1989:13). Not only does the collection run the risk of becoming [frozen in time \(and essentialised\)](#), the museum may consider the theme of migration sufficiently engaged with, a box ticked off. Thus, while for the museum the material transition of the migration collection to its storage may be a sufficient recognition of its status as heritage, other actors – such as members of migrant 'communities' – may disagree in the absence of more profound changes. Thus, there seems to be a dissonance among the various



stakeholders concerning the question when neglected pasts have become heritage indeed and what the process of revaluing should entail.

*Out of sight and inaccessible to the public, to what extent did the objects of the “Migration Collection” then become part of the city’s memory and heritage?*

In early 2020 a group of activists, artists and academics gathered, including Arif Akkılıç, Ljubomir Bratić and Regina Wonisch of the “Migration Collection” team, in order to found the [MUSMIG collective](#). In their opening exhibition, they announced the birth of a museum of migration (Akkılıç and Bratić 2020). Focussing on past struggles for its realisation, the museum of migration was turned into a museum object itself. While initially they intended to leave most of the vast exhibition space empty in order to symbolise [the absence of a museum for migration](#), they eventually found the gallery stuffed with objects (and people). Maybe tempted by the title of the exhibition, many visitors showed up with materials they wished to donate to the museum. As opposed to the Wien Museum, they have no (storage) space at their disposal, yet they were being overwhelmed with object donations, highlighting the strong demand for a museum of migration vis-à-vis the lack of political will to realise it. Two aspects seem key here: first, the personal migration experiences of various members of MUSMIG collective and/or longstanding, close relations to various migrant ‘communities’, thereby moving beyond the sometimes narrow association of migration in Vienna with the labour migration of the 1960s, and second, the nature of the collective as collaborative work-in-progress with a wide expertise among its members. Contrary to a museum aiming to address gaps in its collections and representation of the city’s memory, the approach of the collective can be more open-ended and pose fundamental questions towards existing narratives.

*Initially they intended to leave most of the vast exhibition space empty in order to symbolise the absence of a museum for migration.*

In Vienna, the musealisation of migration (hi)stories thus demands an



examination of the [“difficult heritage”](#) of the World War II, and Holocaust remembrance more specifically, which has been addressed, for example, by the initiative [“#HGMneudenken”](#) (literally, rethink Museum of Military History), in which the MUSMIG collective participates. Increasingly also the lingering [colonial and imperial legacies of the Habsburg empire](#) are brought into focus, examining [its continued effects for today](#). Also the anti-Muslim racist discourse of right-wing populists in present-day Austria heavily relies on the remembrance of the sieges of Vienna by the Ottoman army in 1529 and 1683 (Feichtinger and Heiss 2013). Yet in its museal representation, it so far [remains a key narrative on the city’s memory without any reference to its use as vehicle for discrimination and racism](#).

Thus, the revaluing of pasts previously considered disposable is not a straightforward path and certainly not a one-way road. Diversity in perspectives and experiences in a city’s memory cannot be appreciated as long as exclusionary narratives remain unquestioned. In activism and academic discourse, heritage moves from being understood as fixed and permanent towards being in motion. Thus, heritage that has long created a hostile environment for large parts of the population is increasingly being scrutinised and potentially declared ‘waste’ – sometimes by being literally dumped in a river. In examining the underlying structures and historical narratives that have rendered migration (hi)stories disposable in the first place, the focus shifts from an additive approach limited to the inclusion of neglected (hi)stories towards an approach of unlearning that paves the way for (re)learning.

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*Featured image provided by author - Annika Kirbis (2015)*