The Newsletter | No.57 | Summer 2011

Authenticity and hybridity: Scrutinising heritage

This essay revisits some of the author's earlier work on hybrid objects in Sri Lanka under colonial rule that traced the genealogy of the idea of authenticity, a concept central to all heritage claims, back to pre-colonial and colonial pasts. Writing as a historian whose archive was and still is colonised Sri Lanka, she has argued that hybridity could only fail to become an instrument of empowerment. Indeed it contradicted itself by implying the existence of 'pure' and separate parents and, taken in this sense, extended rather than contradicted the colonial and national privileging of 'purity' as the supreme value.[1]

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Left: Throne displayed in the Colombo Museum. Photo by Sumaya Samarasinghe.

Right: Columbo Museum. Image courtesy of Calamur, Flickr.

WHILE THE IMPURITY OF ALL CULTURAL formations and products is no longer a subject of dispute among scholars, the concept of heritage remains implicitly tied up with notions of cultural purity[2] and is often invoked by proponents of social and political conservatism in the public sphere. It is no accident that in Sri Lanka the party created in 2004 by Buddhist monks to defend traditional values is called *Jathika Hela Urumaya* or National (Pristine) Heritage Party.

Hybrid heritages

But outside the circle of the few who believe that cultural heritage is not a given and is constantly being shaped and reshaped, heritage has a reassuring, self-congratulating effect on peoples in search of certainties about a fictional unmoving national culture in a world in constant flux. Walter Benjamin warned against the 'appreciation of heritage', describing it as a greater 'catastrophe' than indifference or disregard.[3] Can hybridity, one of postcolonialism's most debated ideas but somewhat passé, act once again as agent provocateur and inject power dynamics into the staid realm of national and international heritage practices by subverting authenticity claims?

Interestingly, the best known theorists of hybridity, Homi K. Bhaba and Salman Rushdie, do not refer to hybrid things, most probably because they understand hybridity as the result of the internalisation of subjectivity. For them hybridity marks a valid movement away from the perception of divided subjects towards the perception of divisions within the constructed subject. Things have little place in their analysis.

It is, however, possible to envisage rekindling 'hybridity' as a potentially transformative and creative notion to think through cultural production in contact zones. Hybrid heritages read as rhizomes seem to offer a suitable counterpoint to the international and national focus on authenticity. Things would not be conceived as beholding a single origin from which they sprout like a tree but could be likened to rhizomes, root-like organisms that spread and grow horizontally, with no centre, beginning or end, and which live in a state of constant play.[4] While value accorded to things based on authenticity as 'genuineness' plays into the hands of majoritarian cultural politics, a turn to heritage conceived as temporally unbound rhizomes could diffuse such state-centred tendencies and privilege criteria as communal memory, aesthetic pleasure, and dionysian play rather than truthfulness.

The role and source of authenticity

The move away from authenticity for heritage scholars and practitioners is perhaps as disconcerting a thought as asking historians to drop linear narratives. Yet many historians working on colonial pasts have expressed doubt over the Venice Charter of 1964 and UNESCO's endorsement of 'authenticity' as a guiding principle of its heritage policy. The attribution of 'world heritage status', based on a materialist understanding of authenticity as something that exists, can be measured or tested and that is the basis of hierarchies between listed and unlisted sites, is also a cause of concern. The dangers inherent in the folklorisaton of cultures were highlighted long ago by historians of colonial societies.[5] Yet even the attempt to move away from euro-centric notions of built environment in the Nara Document on Authenticity remains committed to 'the wholeness, realness, truthfulness of the site' and to tools of measurement to assess these features.[6]

There is, however, a clear difference between the materialist understanding of authenticity as something that can be verified and tested in order to confer upon objects the seal of originality, genuineness, and truthfulness and the more complex reading of authenticity by critical scholars. These scholars argue, for instance, that authenticity is constructed,

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objects embedded in regimes of meaning and exchange, regimes of value always produced and negotiated by a variety of experts.[7] Authenticity, they would contend, is defined by the authority and gravity of expert knowledge through a discourse of calculability that is not inherent to objects or sites but ascribed.

This expert knowledge has been shown to format and shape social relations.[8] It is thus important to regularly remind ourselves when we marvel at the success of the global technology of heritage at creating and preserving a new cultural canon, of the lineages between the national identity fostered by states in conjunction with world heritage practices and colonial state policies on archaeology and knowledge.

The King of Kandy's throne

Hybrid things have a life of their own, sometimes more revealing for the historian as they can span many centuries and reflect long-term trends and breaks that are not encompassed in the average life of a human being The story of the throne of the King of Kandy in the central Sri Lankan highlands –the last of the indigenous rulers to fall to the British in 1815 –and how it was ceremoniously returned by the Duke of Gloucester to the people of the island in 1934 tells us much about the way a national identity was fashioned, what elements were left out and why some features were valued above others.

The throne was covered in gold sheeting and encrusted with jewels: its arms formed a pair of lions of Sinhala; a large sun, symbolising the origin of the Kandyan monarchs, surmounted its back. From the outset the identity of the throne was contested as politicians debated whether it should be placed in Kandy or in the lowlands. At stake was the contours of the identity that an independent state would assume in the future, whether it should privilege Kandy, the lowlands or another locale, while hybrid symbols were never discussed.

Heritage policies of well-meaning international bodies such as UNESCO are clearly continuations of colonial and nationalist or patriotic state desires to create an unambiguous cultural past where the majoritarian culture is endowed with the quality of pristineness and purity.

Ironically, the throne was itself a hybrid object, modelled in the Dutch style, sculpted possibly by South Indian craftsmen, fashioned by the Dutch Governor Thomas van Rhee in 1692 as a present for King Vimala Dharma Suriya II (1687-1707). In 1934 after its ceremonial return to Kandy, the throne was taken out from the Audience Hall in Kandy and placed in the King's pavilion for inspection by the people. It was then taken to the Colombo museum and placed in the Bronze Room as an exhibit. Trapped in a glass cage, the throne became an object of awe. After this, the throne was placed in the Treasury Room and taken out only for special exhibitions, as in 1936. This was in lieu of the initial plan to return it to the Old Palace in Kandy. Through this symbolic act it became the property and the pride of the state and the people, and no longer a Kandyan cultural object.[9]

Pearson has argued that the basic style of the throne is French, specifically Louis XIV, but the decorative motif is 'Eastern'.[10] In this sense, hybridisation had taken place during the construction process, in the working of the wood and the carving of the motifs. But once the chair was gifted to the King of Kandy, its hybridity was under-emphasised; it was transformed into a symbol of the authentic Kandyan royalty. Upon its return to the island in 1934 it eventually became vested it with a new identity, that of the nation-state that was to emerge after independence.

A nationalist agenda

The throne could have been read and projected in other ways: as the symbol of the reconciliation between a declining colonial power and an assertive colonised people, or more likely, as the symbol of the hybridity of all things and the celebration of the hybrid nature of works of art. But hybridity was quite unceremoniously dethroned in the nationalist agenda. Nationalists chose to forget about the origins of the throne, a gift from the colonisers and a product of non-Kandyan artisans. There was no place for multiple or layered origins.

Later, nation-builders rewrote the history of the throne in the explanatory vignette that was attached to it in the museum. In their alteration of its origin, the identity of the throne was made more clearly Sinhalese and traced back to the early seventeenth century, in the reign of Rajasinha II when Kandy had reached the peak of its power, driving away the Portuguese and extending the kingdom. Rajasinha II, the father of the king to whom it appears to have been donated, was deemed undoubtedly the best contender to lay claim to the throne.

Heritage policies of well-meaning international bodies such as UNESCO are clearly continuations of colonial and nationalist or patriotic state desires to create an unambiguous cultural past where the majoritarian culture is endowed with the quality of pristineness and purity. Just as the census report of colonial times that denied the possibility of mixed identities was un-problematically adopted by the independent state of Sri Lanka, culture lost itself by what Aime Cesaire called a walled segregation into the particular. Scrutinising hybrid objects in history allows us to understand how authenticity has been used, who needs authenticity, and why.

Proof positive of authenticity

Looking at local notions of authenticity in the past helps us comprehend present-day popular acceptance of national authorities sanctioning a certain understanding of authenticity, what Arendt called the 'modern art of self-deception' inherent in democratic politics.[11] I would argue that in Sri Lanka the notion of authenticity of objects is tied to issues of proof. For example in ancient Lanka relics were accepted as genuine only after some miraculous event proved their authenticity.

The arrival in Lanka of relics that were parts of Sakyamuni Buddha's corporeal remains after cremation, plus his right collar bone and his alms bowl, is recounted in the Mahavamsa, a fifth century chronicle 'of varied content and lacking nothing' that narrates the ancient mytho-history of the island of Lanka from the coming of the legendary ancestor of the Sinhalese people, Prince Vijaya, to the present day.

Once a suitable monument had been prepared for the installation, in accordance with the prediction of Sakyamuni Buddha himself, "the relic rose up in the air from the elephant's back and floating in the air plain to view, at the height of seven *talas*, throwing the people into amazement; it wrought that miracle of the double appearances".[12] The relic then rested on the head of the monarch, and full of joy the king laid it in the *cetiya* (a dome shaped shrine). With the performance of a miracle any doubt about the origin of the relic was dispelled. People could rest assured that these were truly the remains of the Buddha sent to them by King Asoka with the blessing of Sakka, king of the gods. Relics as pure and exceptional objects were not subject to human scrutiny but still needed to prove their authenticity in order to be worshipped by the people. There was no need for experts or intercessors. Later practices of authentification of genuineness had to rely on more prosaic procedures.

Return to history

Heritage as a present-centred cultural practice and instrument of cultural power will only gain from being historicised. Apart from the obvious political role of such a position, delving into past notions of heritage and authentication and uncovering the principles upon which such ideas were based can lead us to question some of the fundamental premises of today's heritage practices by states. A return to a historically grounded view of heritage and authenticity remains vital to engage with debates about the production of identity, power and authority in the colony and post-colony.

David Harvey calls for the historicisation of heritage studies by tracing the assemblage of notions of heritage in the past rather than thinking of heritage purely from the standpoint of the now. Acts of remembering were performed in the past well before the 20th century and need to be read in a longer temporal framework. Heritage processes were not simply recent products of post-modern economic and social tendencies.[13]

Historians who, over the centuries, have been uncovering the selective remembering of past events by states and nationalists have been studying heritage much as how Mr Jourdain wrote prose: unknowingly. Regretfully, seminal work produced by historians of colonialism and modernity is rarely used or referenced by scholars in the field of 'heritage studies' where the Gordian knot between peoples of the past and their everyday lives is too often severed. When writing about heritage under colonialism scholars draw more predictably on studies of colonial representations of lost heritage and miss the fundamental connection between modernity's need for order and purity and the endorsement of authenticity by ordinary subjects through the production of self-deception.

Heritage studies would be enriched if scholars would also draw upon the variety of works that explore peoples' perceptions and world views in the past and the practices through which they engaged with objects, relics, monuments or spaces. When international heritage bodies begin to give official value to the hybridity of all cultural products, a first crucial step will be taken towards subverting dominant state narratives on cultural heritage and breaking down the tendency towards popular self-deception.

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Notes

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3 Mathur, S. (2007) *India by Design: Colonial History and Cultural Display*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 168.
4 Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1980) *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie 2. Mille Plateaux*, París: Minuit.
5 see Ranger, T. and Hobsbawn, E. (1992) *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
6 Jones, S. (2010) 'Negotiating Authentic Objects and Authentic Selves: Beyond the Deconstruction of Authenticity', in *Journal of Material Culture* 2010, 15 (2), p. 186.
7 Ibid.
8 Mitchell, T. (2002) *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
9 This section draws from Wickramasinghe (2002).
10 Pearson, J. (1929) 'The Throne of the Kings of Kandy', in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon)*, Vol. XXXI, no. 82.
11 Harendt, H. (1961), 'Truth and Politics', in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, New York: Viking, p. 256.
12 Geiger, W. (2003) (first publ. in 1912) *The Mahavamsa or the The Great Chronicle of Ceylon*, XVII 43-45, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, pp. 119-120.
13 Harvey, D. C. (2001) 'Heritage Pasts and Heritage Presents: Temporality, meaning and the scope of heritage studies', in *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 7, pp. 319-338.