Museums and religious heritage : Introduction

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Museums and religions: a comparative perspective

This bilingual special issue of *Civilisations*, comprising 7 articles and 3 thematic book reviews, is part of a broader interdisciplinary conversation on the relationship between heritage and religion. Most of the contributions in the issue first emerged as presentations during the workshop "Religious heritage in public museums: Post-colonial and post-socialist perspectives" held at the ULB in May 2021.[1] The initial aim of that workshop was to pursue a dialogue between anthropology and other social sciences on the evolving relationships between religious and ethnic groups on the one hand, and public, state-funded museums in secular states, on the other. This thematic issue brings together contributions from the fields of the anthropology of religion and heritage, art history and history of museums, as well memory studies.

The multiple interactions, entanglements, and tensions between religion and heritage have become the object of a growing field of research. Scholars of the anthropology of religion are increasingly interested in the processes of sacralisation of culture, as well as in the reverse processes of the heritagisation of religion (Meyer & De Witte 2013; Meyer & van de Port 2018). The anthropology of heritage, on the other hand, questions the place of tangible and intangible heritage in the international politics of heritagisation (Berliner 2012; De Jong 2013; Bortolotto 2011).

The focus of this issue is specifically on museums as a paradigmatic type of heritage institution. The debate on the complex relationship between museums and religion has developed along two broad lines of thought. The first approach explores structural analogies between museums and religions, building on the idea that not only do both museums and religions draw upon a set of authoritative knowledge and shape subjective experiences (Macdonald 2005), but that they also both distinguish between the groups of the "initiated" (curators) and the "laity" (the audiences) (Mairesse 2014). Museums are notably sites of secular "civilizing rituals" (Duncan 1995) and temples of the "unspoken religion of secular priests" (Brulon Soares 2019).

1 The full programme of the workshop organised with the support of the FRS-FNRS at the Laboratoire d'anthropologie des mondes contemporains (ULB), is available at: <https://tinyurl.com/LAMC-relher>.

Keeping in mind these fruitful analogies, the second approach, favoured here, seeks to understand the dynamics that run through the interactions between museums and religion in different national, political, and historical contexts. How do museums operate a complex mediation between the heritage they conserve and display, the political authorities in charge of their governance, and the ethnic and confessional communities which relate to the heritage, and the audiences? In particular, we are inspired by a body of studies in anthropology, history of museums and museology which address the multiple challenges that arise from conservation, scientific study, and the exhibition of the musealised heritage of ethnic and religious communities (Paine 2013; Sullivan 2015; Buggeln et al. 2017; Tythacott 2011; Kasarhérou 2016; Herle 2016, among others). A recent special issue of *Culture et Musées* bears witness to the continuing interest within ethnography and history in the exhibition of religious heritage (Poulot & Triquet 2022).

The contribution of this volume to this conversation is twofold. First, we wish to highlight the relevance of the museum as a new field site for an entangled anthropology of religion and secularity. Historically, museums were the cultural products of the European Enlightenment with its separation between reason and faith (Bennett 2015). In other words, they were *loci* for the emergence of the secular as "a central modern epistemic category" that gradually became differentiated from "the religious" (Casanova 2009: 1049). Yet lived religion is no longer "out of place" in the museum, or, at least, not in all museums (de l'Estoile 2021). The cross-cutting theme that emerges from all the contributions is the intertwining of religion and secularity in a variety of national, ethnic and political contexts. The underlying hypothesis is the idea that the anthropological attention paid to religious artefacts, their management by the museums, their circulations, and their display in museum settings can help us to analytically grasp the evolving public place of religion(s) in different societies.

The contributions to this special issue show that the presence of religion indeed takes different forms. Curators may reflect on ways to do justice to the ontologies and the spiritual values of the source communities whose heritage they are showcasing to Western audiences (De Largy Healy in this issue; see also Poirier 2011, Jérôme & Kaine 2014). Religion can become a powerful tool to value local heritage in museums and to disseminate local traditions on a national level (Charleux). Museums can also use religious symbols and conceptual categories to sacralise secular historical events such as wars, and to enliven the memory of the "forgotten past", showing the central role of religion in Eastern European memory politics (Tchouïkina, see also Rousselet 2015; Bogumil & Yurchuk 2022). Museum employees may organise rituals on special occasions to strengthen political narratives or solve conflicts (Bondaz, Seiderer), or contextualise religious artefacts to highlight the spiritual – rather than historical or aesthetic – values of the artefacts and to create lasting conditions for visitors' ritual practice (Tocheva, Pimenova). These contributions are therefore in dialogue with several fields of studies, such as the anthropology of politics, ritual and materiality, the history of museums, visual anthropology, and memory studies.

The second contribution of the volume lies in its comparative scope. We wish to bring the dialogue between post-colonial and post-socialist studies into the realm

of heritage and museums. As Chari and Verdery (2009) have argued, "thinking between" post-colonialism and post-socialism is a useful way to analyse the technologies of imperial rule and the political management of the Selves and the Others.[2] In the field of heritage, historical parallels have been drawn regarding the role of museums in the governance of colonised populations and/or religious communities (Anderson 1983; Hirsch 2005). Another point of comparison is the heritage accumulation in the metropolises and the colonial dispossession of source communities.

The contributions show that both post-colonial and post-socialist museums are now more eager than they were three decades ago to acknowledge the presence of religion and bring into their realm the spiritual perspectives on the heritage. However, the reasons for these historical dynamics are not exactly the same. The museum practice in America, Australia and Europe has been shaped by the legacies of colonisation. The debate on decolonisation introduced the idea of the museum as a "contact zone" (Clifford 1997), the concept of "respect" toward the material heritage of the source communities (Paine 2013), as well as the relational ethics in the political management of the Others' heritage (Sarr & Savoy 2018). The post-socialist world is criss-crossed, too, by the legacies of Russian and Soviet colonisation and the decolonial trends spurred by the post-Soviet religious and cultural revivals, but these legacies have long remained a part of specific academic conversations (Kivelson & Suny 2017; Etkind 2011; Tlostanova 2018). Today, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 brings into the public eye the persistence of Russia's colonial ambitions that structure international relations in the post-Soviet space. Numerous Ukraine's cultural and religious sites, museum collections and archives have been targets in the ongoing conflict.[3] The protection of this heritage, its future reconstruction, and the return of looted collections thus become ways of contesting colonial relations.

By contrast with post-colonial contexts, post-socialist museum practice draws on a common legacy of violent repressions against *all* religions, including dominant historical confessions, and a massive return of religion(s) into public life after the fall of the USSR. In the three decades since 1991, the post-socialist museums have become important actors in the renegotiation of the public place for religions. They have evolved into political and social environments in which these religions – be it Orthodox or Catholic Christianity, Buddhism, or Islam, depending on local contexts – are recognised as a central part of national and ethnic identities, and are granted with exclusive rights.[4] Museum professionals are therefore often eager to introduce the perspective of the dominant religion into their practice (see Bogumil 2018). However, they are not very familiar with the decolonial debate, and the concepts of 'sensitivity' or 'respect' toward the objects of the Others are not yet a part of their practices.

2 For a broader comparison between post-colonial and post-socialist countries, see Hladik 2013; Spivak et al. 2006; Tlostanova 2018.

3 For more information, see the Unesco list of damaged cultural sites: <https://tinyurl.com/ukraineunesco>

4 In Russia, the "offence of the religious feelings" constitutes a penal case. The law was introduced after the highly contentious exhibitions of contemporary art, followed by equally heated public discussions in which many non-religious intellectuals argued for the need to protect religion (Bernstein 2014).

These differences also explain the asymmetries in practices of return and repatriation. In post-colonial contexts, repatriations of sacred heritage and ancestral human remains aim at recognising the rights of source communities and at (partially) reversing the processes of colonial accumulation (Curtis 2010; Mihesuah 2000; Plets et al. 2013; Turnbull & Pickering 2010; Tythacott & Arvanitis 2014). In post-socialist contexts, the successful returns mostly concern the heritage of dominant confessions and aim at repairing the harm of anti-religious campaigns and the legacies of the state secularism (Kormina 2021).

Nevertheless, despite these differences and whether they result from the colonial accumulation or the museumification of heritage under state secularism, the heritage of source communities and confessional groups introduces spiritual logics into the secular state-funded institutions of both post-colonial and post-socialist museums. It also raises the question of the interaction between secular and religious actors, and of their cooperation or conflict. This issue of *Civilisations* aims to develop these comparisons and explore the shifting role of religion in museums. The articles in this special issue shed new light on diverse aspects of these conceptual, ethical, and pragmatic transformations. They analyse the conceptual frames and practices used to incorporate "lived religion" (Knibbe & Kupari 2020) and religious epistemic perspectives within the museum realm.

The volume is divided into two parts. The first part, "Post-colonial cases", includes articles by **Jessica de Largy Healy** on the Australian bark paintings at the musée du quai Branly, by **Julien Bondaz** on the possession cult *holle* at the national museum of Niger, and by **Anna Seiderer** on the rituals in the Abomey museum-palace in Benin. The second part, "Post-socialist perspectives", includes ethnographies of religious-heritage nexuses in the context dominated by the Russian Orthodox Church (**Detelina Tocheva**; **Sofia Tchouïkina**), and by Buddhism in Siberia and Mongolia (**Isabelle Charleux**; **Ksenia Pimenova**).

In addition to the articles, three thematic book reviews by **Anna Niedźwiedź**, **Kristina Kovalskaya**, and **Gertjan Plets** offer a broader analytical perspective on the interactions between religion, heritage, and politics. The books under review (Isnart & Cerezales 2022; Guidi 2022; Bodenstein et al. 2022) provide analyses of religious-heritage entanglements in the context of European Christianity, of the French museums' representations of Islam, as well as reflections on the ways the museums deal with their colonial and looted collections.

"Religious heritage in museums": a contextual and relational category

The "religious", "sacred", or "spiritual" in museums are categories notoriously difficult to define (Wangefelt Ström 2019; Mairesse 2019). While preparing this issue, we have consciously rejected *ad hoc* definitions of religious heritage to embrace the diversity of its possible forms in museums. First of all, the former ritual use of an artefact and its "sacredness" before its museumification is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition. Museums across the globe are full of objects that previously belonged to source communities or confessional groups and were created for a ritual purpose. Yet, many such objects are now displayed as "art". Their relations to the present religious or ethnic communities seem extinct. Indeed, in many cases,

the objects displayed do not have a spiritual life anymore, even though they still have aesthetic and historical value. The American anthropologist Ronald Grimes qualified such objects as "zombies in the vitrines" (1992: 424). *Vice versa*, artefacts that never had any ritual use may sometimes attract practices of devotion: this is the case, for instance, for *The Sacrament of the Last supper*, a Salvador Dali painting now on display at the National Gallery of Art, Washington (Buggeln et al. 2017).

The "religious" nature of the artefacts, their "sacredness", does not exist outside the relationships that people develop with them. The "religious" and the "sacred" in the museum are thus relational categories, and this is true in at least two senses. First, the heritage we consider as religious carries a living knowledge and underlies the ongoing practices of communication with diverse other-than-human entities: God, saints, deities, genies, spirits, ancestors. The material forms of the artefacts that secure this communication can be very different: bark paintings referring to the deep ancestral past of the Yolŋu of the Northern Australia (De Largy Healy); a ritual vase *hampi* used in the possession cult *holle* in Niger (Bondaz); army banners with images of God and saints as well as everyday objects that became "secular-sacred" through a museum contextualisation (Tchouïkina); icons (Tocheva). Sacred objects can form a conceptual continuum with human remains, or more precisely with what today's devotees consider as contacts relics and corporeal remains of the saints. For instance, the Buddhist relics and lamas' bodily remains in the Siberian and Mongolian museums analysed by Charleux and Pimenova mediate visitors' relations to these beings and have an influence on visitors' lives. Several contributions also allow space to question the limits between isolated artefacts and entire museum spaces. Museums occupy the premises of former royal palaces and (re)sacralise entire spaces that had a ritual use before their museumification (Seiderer, Tocheva). In other cases, the museums can stimulate ritual practice and create spaces of sacredness in buildings constructed under or after socialism which never had a ritual use (Charleux, Pimenova).

Religious heritage in museums is also relational in the sense that it is entangled in ongoing relations with contemporary institutions and human communities. Artefacts and relics discussed in the papers in this issue all legally belong to museums that conserve, study, restore, and display them to audiences, and therefore, in most of the contributions, to secular nations. However, relations of ownership and belonging extend far beyond legal forms of property (Hodder 2012). In the field of heritage, they may draw on affective appropriation, collective and individual memories, attachment, and experience (Tornatore 2019). From this point of view, present-day ethnic and confessional communities can also be owners of the religious heritage conserved in museums, because these artefacts or human remains embody the communities' past, their current identities, their ontologies, and moral values. Religious artefacts and relics, as well as former ritual spaces such as palace courtyards or chapels, can be compared to inalienable possessions as in Annette Weiner's definition (1991). The artefacts play a key role in the "cosmic authentication" of the communities and underpin their continuity in time, even though they do not "belong" to them on legal grounds.

These double-layered entanglements of heritage refer to the coexisting and sometimes conflicting conceptions of inalienability (de l'Estoile 2007).

The first conception is expressed through classical heritage laws that grant the national states the inalienable ownership of collections. The second conception recognises the original rights of the present-day heirs of the communities who had produced and possessed artefacts before they entered the museum collections. This original inalienability has been formalised in certain countries as national law (such as the NAGPRA in the USA) and is implemented through international recommendations and the guidelines of some national museum associations. It might (but does not necessarily) lead to actual repatriation. More importantly, it implies respect for the original frames of interpretation of the museum artefacts, and therefore respect for the source communities (Paine 2013). This respect takes different forms: concessions on display and conservation (Del Re & Countryman 1995; Herle 2016); rituals of animation or deactivation of the objects' dangerous power (Kasarhérou 2016; Poirier 2011; Bondaz 2014); or a thorough reflection on the translation of vernacular concepts (Jérôme & Kaine 2014). In this volume, the article by Jessica De Largy Healy shows how the exhibition of Australian bark paintings she co-curated at the musée du quai Branly respected the requirements of the Yolŋu curators. The respect consisted in giving the Yolŋu the authority to explain the richness of their spiritual concepts in their own words, rather than simplifying the translation for the audience. It also drew on the principle of "unhurried time" in the communication with the Yolŋu, whose life conditions did not allow space for the tight schedules of the Western-style preparation of an exhibition.

The recognition of original inalienability is an important trend in contemporary relations between Western countries and formerly colonised populations. It is still very unequally implemented across the globe and has a limited influence on post-socialist museum practice. However, post-socialist museums also deal with the more grassroots questions raised by the ownership of heritage and the respectful treatment of objects. The cultural rights of ethnic and confessional communities to their heritage are de facto often recognised in the "museums of Selves" (de l'Estoile 2007) that represent, and have close connections to, local ethnic or confessional identities. Two types of situations can be considered here.

The first type is connected to repatriation. The indigenous communities within Russia have sometimes managed to obtain the return of artefacts and ancestral human remains. The most well-known case concerns the mummy known as "the Altaian Princess". Its highly mediatised return from Novosibirsk to Altai republic fostered discussions on indigenous cultural rights on the land and the archaeological heritage (Plets et al. 2013). Inside the Altaian museum that received the repatriated Princess, the choice to put her body on display provoked debates on the respect of the Altaian conceptions of death and ancestry and also led to restrictions on her display (Pimenova 2023).

The second type of situation has more to do with a sort of 'moral duty' to respect religion as an important part of cultural life and local identity. Many post-socialist intellectuals and museum professionals, without necessarily being believers themselves, have close family, personal and professional ties with religious communities active in their regions. We find this feature in all four post-socialist cases presented in this volume. In the case of the Danzanravjaa museum in the Mongolian Gobi, analysed by Isabelle Charleux, a key role is played by Altangerel,

a local enthusiast who was not a cleric but a schoolteacher, and a descendant of the first curator of the Display Temple created in the 19th century by the great Buddhist lama and poet Danzanravjaa. Despite the modern setting of the museum building, Altangerel choose to display the ancient artefacts and the remains of the great lama according to the Buddhist perspective, to value both his own family's legacy and to have some continuity with local traditions of heritage conservation. In Tocheva's and Pimenova's papers, museum professionals are acquainted with the respective Christian and Buddhist perspectives on heritage, because they are themselves, to varying degrees, members of these ethnic and/or religious communities. Their choice is to display the religious artefacts in a way that does not constrain visitors to aesthetic contemplation only, but which explicitly stimulates them to engage ritually with the heritage. In her article on the First World War centenary celebrations in Russia, Sofia Tchouïkina shows how the symbolic resources and conceptual categories of the Russian Orthodox Christianity resonate with the political ideas and professional trajectories of secular curators. While the artefacts analysed were not originally religious, the transfer of the religious symbolism to these everyday and military objects allows for the creation of a whole category of 'secular-sacred' objects intended to provoke strong affective and quasi-spiritual reactions among the museumgoers.

Museum agencies and external influences

According to Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, ethnographic objects in museums "are made, not found […]. They *became* ethnographic through processes of detachment and contextualisation" (1998: 3). Museums exhibit heritage by recreating a new conceptual framing. The interpretation of heritage as "religious" and "sacred" depends, therefore, on the agencies of the professionals who are key actors in introducing confessional, spiritual, and affective perspectives on heritage, rather than keeping only historical or aesthetic perspectives. The interpretive frames they build may also invite visitors to enact ritual relations with the artefacts and the other-than-human beings.

The concept of "museum agency" is a useful shortcut to evoke such processes of framing and reframing but it needs to be ethnographically broken down into the actions and decisions of directors, curators, scenographers, researchers, room guardians, and many other employees. As Sharon Macdonald argued, every exhibition is the fruit of a distributed authorship: it results from a complex decision-making process "behind the scenes" which is invisible to the museumgoers (2001). From this perspective, it is important to understand museums as "places of politics" (Abélès 1983) where the choices about displaying religious heritage are negotiated between internal but also external actors, such as political authorities, ethnic communities, and confessional groups. How much agency does the museum staff have regarding these external pressures? And what can the employees do (or what do they want to do) to enhance a spiritual frame of interpretation?

There is a dialectic between the agencies from inside the museums, and those coming from the broader political and institutional context, including confessional groups. The decision to introduce spiritual conceptual frames and rituals inside the museum can emerge from charismatic founders or other professionals, and be supported – or

on the contrary, be limited – by the action of the political authorities. This dialectic is particularly explicit in the articles by Isabelle Charleux and Julien Bondaz. In the first case, the creation of the Davzanravjaa museum in 1991, and its further development, are based on the commitment and the energy of the museum founder. His recent death calls into question the viability of the whole project which is not attracting now enough support from authorities and national heritage institutions.

Bondaz' article analyses the trajectory of the IFAN museum established in Niamey, the capital of Niger, under the rule of French authorities. It shows how the French anthropologist and filmmaker Jean Rouch played an important role in the museum's foundation. He notably organised and filmed the installation of the ritual vase *hampi* in the premises of the museum. The vase is central to the songhay-zarma cult of possession *holle* because it attracts protective genies. Bondaz analyses the animation of *hampi* as both a ritual gesture and a political action. The ritual paved the way for the organisation of ceremonies in the museum and provided ritual protection for its visitors. The possession cult inside the museum attracted external support because it contributed to the post-independence political construction of the nation of Niger, in which the Songhay-Zarma populations had a central place. Yet the article also shows how these regular ceremonies came to an end later, against the backdrop of the growing role of Islam and the secularisation of the Niger state, reminding us of the contextual and contested nature of the sacred in the museums.

In other cases, the museums are rather exposed to external influence. Anna Seiderer analyses the history of Abomey, the ancient royal palace of the Dahomey (Benin). Transformed into a museum by the French colonial authorities, the Abomey museum-palace never became a purely secular institution since the heirs of the royal dynasty conserved partial control of the museum administration. The article shows in particular how the recent politico-religious rituals of commemoration of the death of King Behanzin organised on its premises reflected the competition between different branches of royal power and epitomised their contemporary reconciliation through the celebration of common royal ancestors and *vodun* processions.

In Sofia Tchouïkina's article, the curatorial choice to transform military artefacts and everyday objects of the dead soldiers into a "secular-sacred" heritage reflect a strong general trend in Russian society and politics, whereby the patriotism and the heroism on the military field become a civil religion (Daucé et al. 2010; Rousselet 2015). This trend was already very well established for the Second World War celebrations, and is extended here to the First World War, an event that occupies a much smaller space in Russian collective memories. In most of the exhibitions analysed by Tchouïkina, the choice was made to sacralise war, to present human losses as useful sacrifices rather than useless victims. The article reminds us that museums depend on ambient ideologies and implement "cultural technologies of rule" to shape visitors' perception (Hirsch 2005: 13). From a more general perspective, such sacralisation of war as a part of political construction of post-Soviet Russian identity needs to be further analysed in the light of the current invasion of Ukraine.

The question of museum autonomy regarding external influences, including those coming from source or confessional communities, is therefore a complex issue.

The contributions to this special issue sketch a range of possible responses. In De Largy Healy's contribution, curators consciously stepped back and transferred the authority to the Yolŋu partners. At the national museum of Tuva (Russia), described in Pimenova's contribution, the religious perspective adopted by the museum staff crowded out the interpretations of Buddhist artefacts and relics in terms of regional history, art history, and as memories of anti-religious persecutions. Tocheva's article provides a nuanced ethnographic perspective on how museum professionals, some themselves believers and parishioners, managed to negotiate some autonomy from the powerful local parish of the Russian Orthodox Church. Against the desires and pressures of this parish, they preserved their ability to invite the priests of their choice to conduct baptisms and liturgies in the royal chapel they had restored inside the museum.

Religion and secularity in museums

The question of the museums' agency and their autonomy from religion raises another important question concerning the relationship between secularism and religion in modern states. Museums – in particular the state-funded museums that represent the majority of the cases presented here – lie at the core of an entangled anthropology of religion and secularism. The contributions to the special issue approach the museums as important actors in the interaction between the categories of the "secular" and the "religious", with their intersecting (or conflicting) sets of practice, discursive grammars, and epistemic regimes. What political and ethical changes do these new practices reflect in Western, post-colonial, and post-socialist societies? What do they bring to the understanding of the changing place of religion(s) in states that define themselves as secular? And how can museum practices regarding religious heritage help us critically reflect on the very concepts of "religion" and "secularity" and the historical interaction between the two?

In social sciences, the religious and the secular have been analysed as interacting, yet distinct domains. Secularism as a range of modern worldviews is not a nonreligion but is a distinct "epistemic knowledge regime" (Casanova 2009: 1051). It is also "a cultural program with strong values, ethical investments and political stakes" that manifests itself across different social fields (Burchardt, Wohlrab-Sahr & Middell 2015: 5). In post-socialist contexts in particular, museum professionals often carry deeply engrained "cultures of secularities" (*Idem*) that manifest themselves in a suspicion toward the legitimacy of spiritual knowledge or in the resistance to repatriation claims (Kormina 2021). However, rather than considering secularity and religion as opposed to each other, we would like to pay attention here to entanglements and "elective affinities" between the two that have already been explored in politics or education (Luehrmann 2011, 2015). Three complementary methodological approaches to the relations between secularism and religion in museums emerge from the contributions to this special issue.

First, these entanglements can be studied from a diachronic perspective. As Talal Asad has shown (2003), the boundaries between the secular and the religious are porous and unstable. They evolve over long periods of time but can also move much quicker if we consider the return of religions in public life and their growing legitimacy in post-socialist spaces. The relation between museums and religion has

been historically ambiguous: museums displayed and conserved religious heritage, but the presence of religion as lived practice and as a legitimate set of knowledge was considered awkward, or even inappropriate, in the museum space. The particularity of former socialist countries is that museums were not only secular, but also explicitly secularist. They promoted the evolutionist idea of religion as a "survival of the past" and as an impediment to modernisation and progress, serving the state endeavour to eradicate or marginalise religion (Hirsch 2005). In Soviet Russia, a specific category of "museums of atheism" was created to serve this purpose, with museums ironically enough often established in the premises of former churches that they were intended to preserve (Deschepper 2018). This difference between "secular" and "secularist" can be illustrated by the treatment of visitors' prayers in front of icons and statues displayed in the museums: in Europe these practices progressively disappeared by themselves as secularisation progressed (Bennett 2015), but in Soviet Russia the museum settings were changed to dissuade and even forbid prayers (Teryukova 2014).

The history of museums can indeed teach us much about entanglements and disentanglements between religion and secularity as social and political processes. In Julien Bondaz' article, for instance, we see how ritual practices became an important part of the life of the Niger museum for more than three decades, before being rapidly abandoned under a different political context. Boundaries between the secular and the religious can therefore be quickly re-established. Anna Seiderer's contribution, on the other hand, shows how the colonial and secular project of the museumification of the Abomey palace did not manage to supplant spiritual relations to the sacred royal power. "A complex historical stratification" occurred, making the museum-palace both a political symbol of Fon royalty and a sacred site where communication with ancestors can take place.

The second approach consists of analysing the relations between the secular and the religious from a micro-ethnographical and object-oriented perspective. Artefacts or buildings come with their cultural biographies (Kopytoff 1986). They circulate between the religious and the secular spheres, and between different regimes of value (Appadurai 1986) that can replace each other over time, or yet coexist simultaneously. In their recent collective book, reviewed in this volume, Cyril Isnart and Nathalie Cerezales coined the term "religious heritage complex", meaning a "theoretical tool to capture the coexistence of two different layers of values attributed to religious practices and materiality" (Isnart & Cerezales 2020: 6). The cases analysed in this special issue suggest that the number of layers can be even more important. For the museum artefacts, former ritual use, ownership, purchase and sell, spoliation, museumification, scientific study, physical circulation between museums, as well as former and current political investments of heritage, contribute to an overlapping of many different values. An artefact or a building can have an aesthetic, historical, political, and spiritual dimension at the same time, as we clearly see in Seiderer's analyses of the rituals at the Abomey palace-museum.

Not all these values, however, will necessarily be put forward in the museum settings, and not all of them will be perceived to the same extent by the museumgoers. The values attributed to artefacts and spaces are rearranged by museum professionals to stress certain meanings over others. This brings our attention to the operations

of contextualisation: in other words, the activities of social agents involved in the exhibition-making projects and the processes "by which categories of evaluation and comprehension were brought into use, stabilized, or contested" (Myers 2001: 55). The contributions to the special issue add many ethnographic elements to the processes and the outcomes of contextualisation. In Tocheva's article, curators intentionally added to the settings the icons of two saints during the restoration of the Gatchina chapel. These saints were initially absent from the chapel in imperial times but are central to present-day North-Western Russian spiritual life. Rather than being a blatant anachronism, their introduction significantly contributes to the perception of the chapel as a ritual place. Pimenova's article explores further ethnographic elements related to the concept of contextualisation, showing how the national museum of Tuva integrates Buddhist relics, recently discovered in a statue, into other Buddhist events. The museum also provides a discursive, material, and sensory context for visitors' perceptions, for instance by adding into the settings non-heritage objects that visitors can touch, as they do in the temples.

The third approach to the secular-religious entanglements in museums focuses on the dynamics of power, legitimacy, and sources of epistemic authority. One could ask, for example, whether at any given moment, the museum curators hold more authority on the conservation, study, and display of the religious heritage than the members of the source communities. What is the direction in which knowledge flows between religious sphere and museums? On the one hand, practices of shared curation, exchange of knowledge between museums and the source communities, and projects of digital or physical repatriation suggest that museums are willing to recognise the inequities in the distribution of epistemic authority. Indigenous rituals and voices enrich the museum practices and, ultimately, the visitors' knowledge of the cultural diversities (Poirier 2011; Jérôme & Kaine 2014). On the other hand, there can also be an opposite movement. Museums can share their archives with the representatives of indigenous and confessional communities and give them extended access to their collections. Museums then "re-inject" this preserved knowledge into the spiritual life of the communities, helping to reinforce, or to restore, their traditions (De Largy Healy 2011; Johansen 2001). Secular museums can therefore provide vital resources to "compensate" for losses due to colonial appropriation of heritage, physical destruction of heritage in socialist times, or the breaks in transmission of knowledge due to anti-religious repressions of clerics. The body of knowledge accumulated in the secular sphere of the museums can therefore be "recycled", to use Luehrmann's concept (2011), into the memories of ethnic and confessional communities, as well as in their ritual practice.

From this perspective, museum professionals and other actors close to the museum world can be approached as knowledge brokers between the secular and religious spheres. An interesting question here is how does this role relate to these actors' biographic trajectories, subjectivities, and motivations? As illustrated by Tocheva and Charleux, some curators engage in such practices because they consider themselves as heirs of a family or as guardians of a regional tradition, and/or because they are believers and regular practitioners. In the contexts presented in both contributions, curators participated in the restoration and conservation of religious artefacts both as professionals and as members of their confessional groups. There is an example

here of converging habituses in heritage conservation that exist in the religious and the secular spheres (Isnart & Cerezales 2020). Other curators, whether they are practicing or not, rather consider religion as a reservoir of emotional resources and moral norms, which should be conveyed through the museum medium, as in the contribution by Sofia Tchouïkina. Still, some curators do not consider themselves to be believers but see religion as an integral part of their broader cultural, national, or ethnic identity that they feel responsible for representing in the museum, as seen in the contribution by Ksenia Pimenova. From this perspective, when they want to offer an accurate representation of national or ethnic culture, or of a particular historical event, curators consider that this representation would be incomplete without a religious dimension. Finally, when anthropologists become curators, they seize the opportunity to give space to indigenous voices and the spiritual practices of the communities they study. Both the articles by Jessica De Largy Healy and Julien Bondaz suggest that the anthropological motivation stems from long-lasting working relations and from the moral responsibility toward the anthropologists' research partners in the field.

Religious heritage in museums, a threat to secular values?

Religious heritage in museums generates a constant movement of actors, ideas, and practices across the religious-secular boundaries. As with any other social phenomenon, these dynamics are ambivalent. In Western, post-colonial, and post-socialist countries, museums now play an important role in questioning the controversial pasts of colonial violence and state repressions against particular religious or ethnic groups. While finding new ways of dealing with religious heritage, museums are also transforming audiences' relations with the source communities or confessional groups. However, going against the grain of the somehow comforting image of the museum as a "contact zone" (Clifford 1997, for critical discussion see Boast 2011), beyond the projects of cooperation and co-curation, the agendas of museums and the ethnic or confessional communities can also diverge, creating misunderstandings and tensions.

There are complex ethical and political issues at stake, too, of which we must be aware. First, since any religion is a vehicle for moral standards and gendered norms, the reinforcement of religion through its heritagisation carries the risk of turning "conservation into conservatism" (Berliner 2013: 401). Spiritual conceptions of secrecy and gendered prohibitions, if respected, limit the public access to heritage, leading to tensions with secular values of gender equality (Alderton 2014). Second, as other scholars have argued, the recognition of spiritual rights of source communities cannot realistically concern *all* the cultures represented in museums (Derlon & Jeudy-Ballini 2015). In the French context for instance, giving *de facto* a privileged position to a certain source communities over others is a potential threat to the equality of religions, and thus, a violation of *laïcité*.

As Tony Bennett suggested (2015), the changing relations between museums and religions are inscribed into broader transformations of particular regimes of power and authority. The above-mentioned dangers are therefore relevant in both post-colonial and post-socialist contexts where state-supported hierarchies can emerge between a religion of majority, and more local cults or minority religions.

In such cases, politico-religious alliances and moral norms are created outside museums, which the museum professionals may be unable (or unwilling) to resist. As deeply political institutions, museums thus directly or indirectly participate in the negotiation of the place of given confessions in national regimes of secularity, because they tend to prioritise the dominant religion's moral, epistemic and political perspectives. The museum medium is therefore a double-edged sword: it can repair historical injustice toward source communities or religious groups. But it can also consolidate existing confessional hierarchies and reinforce the inequalities between dominant confessions, and ethnic or confessional minorities.

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