

Kathmandu Valley and the Management of Living Heritage Sites a Shifting Approach

An earlier [blog](#) discussed recent developments regarding heritage restitution in Nepal, where returned objects are increasingly finding their way back to the communities, where they can be worshipped. This does not mean that Nepal is not facing the challenges of possible new theft, or that (some) conservators are not torn between their own faith and their professional knowledge that worshipping may deteriorate the stone idols. This blog takes a broader perspective on the issue and looks at how challenges to the management of the Kathmandu Valley World Heritage Site related to this difficult balance between Western-inspired conservation and the preservation of living heritage.

When in the early 2000s, both authors of this blog worked on a management plan for the Kathmandu Valley's historic towns and sites (7 zones listed as UNESCO World Heritage), the return of stolen objects was never part of the discussion. Yet, as a World Heritage site, the Kathmandu Valley was, amongst others, recognized as a "testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living" ([criterion iii](#)) and because of its "direct or tangible association with events or living traditions" ([criterion vi](#)). The sculptures that are being returned from abroad used to be part of the built environment (and not necessarily moveable objects) and have thus always been an integral part of the value of Kathmandu Valley as a living heritage site. However, at the time, the return of objects was only at the start (e.g., the first returns from foreign collections took place in 1999 and 2000) and returned objects almost automatically ended up in the collection of the National Museum, or one of its subsidiaries. Discussions on reinstalling these in their original locations and thus contributing to the living nature of the heritage site, were not held. Various reports by expert delegations sent to the Kathmandu Valley by UNESCO and decisions by the World Heritage Committee (for an overview see [here](#)) show also that the focus was entirely on the preservation of built heritage, with little attention given to the extensive looting and the potential that moveable heritage could have for sustaining the living heritage nature of the site.

At the same time, much of the focus - instigated by repeated reprimands by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee - was on the debate between preserving only the monuments or also preserving the historic urban fabric. Heritage experts and the UNESCO Committee alike pushed for a combination of monuments and historic fabric, repeatedly stressing that "the outstanding universal value of the property resides not only in the monuments but also in the traditional architecture surrounding the monuments" ([ICOMOS 2006](#)). Yet, there was little to no discussion on how the moveable heritage that is spread all over the sites, and the related living traditions are part and parcel of preserving the historic fabric.

Today, things have changed, offering challenges, but perhaps even more opportunities to the sustainable management of Kathmandu Valley's heritage sites. The Government of Nepal has recently adopted the *Pashupati Area Conservation and Management Master Plan 2021*. It was only after various attempts, and community protests - e.g., against the removal of their historic settlement -, that a mutually agreed plan was finalised. The plan sets out to respect the culture of all communities in the Pashupati area, focusing on the living heritage of the site. It provides procedures for the protection of the site and landscape, the built heritage, the cultural objects, and intangible heritage, the first time that all these types of heritage have been addressed in a single document, at least in respect to the Kathmandu Valley. It also addresses the displacement of moveable heritage, and the possible reasons. Procedures are then defined, including on how to protect cultural artefacts in situ, how to protect displaced cultural artefacts, but also how to handle the removal and replacement of cultural artefacts. According to the guidelines, the removal of objects needs to be justified, whether due to the object being obsolete or due to the lack of protection. Then, the requirement for the replacement needs to be justified: the functional reason and the type of replacement. Finally, the storage, protection and display of the removed cultural object needs to be justified. While certain rules still apply, it is important that the guidelines do allow for removing objects, for instance if worshipping would require for this to be done.

The Pashupati case demonstrates that there is a growing understanding of the importance of the movable property and the related living heritage closely associated to the respective communities. However, there are several questions that arise. For instance: where does the significance of the cultural object lie? From a conservation perspective, the material value of objects matters, and replacements are easily seen as 'fakes' or copies. However, in the Kathmandu Valley, objects may lose their religious function, for

instance when they are damaged. Worshipping a damaged idol is considered a bad omen. Traditions in the Kathmandu Valley provide procedures for the destruction of objects that are removed and replaced: stone objects are thrown into the river, wooden objects are burned, earthen objects are buried, and metal objects are melted down. Here there is a clash of viewpoints between the conservation mindset based on largely western principles (i.e., that the oldest material object is more valuable than the copy), and the traditional norms and beliefs (i.e., where the object that was brought to life through a religious ceremony is the most valuable).

To further illustrate this: after the destruction caused by the 2015 Gorkha Earthquake, it became clear that the built heritage was particularly vulnerable to such disasters. The original elements of the collapsed structures and damaged sculptures were salvaged, to whatever degree possible, to be reused in the reconstruction of the monuments. Yet, that was not always possible. For example, in the case of the *Kasthamandap* (i.e., a large public shelter, including a shrine to Gorakshanath, in the centre of Kathmandu) the broken stone image of Gorakhnath, which was located in the central shrine of the *Kasthamandap*, was restored and placed in the nearby Hanuman Dhoka Palace Museum, and was replaced with a new stone image in the shrine, upon request of the priests. Yet, a legal case was registered against this decision, calling for the damaged original to be reinstalled in situ. In January 2022, Nepal's Supreme Court even ordered to halt the installation of the new idol (see [here](#)).

The case raises the particular challenge of who 'the community' is, and who can speak on behalf of a community, just as much as that it demonstrates that the Nepalese law ([Ancient Monuments Preservation Act](#)) reflects more the conservation mindset than it is supportive of protecting the living nature of the site, since continued worshipping according to the priests required a new idol to be installed. The verdict in the case is still pending. Yet, this example shows that since traditional craftspeople remain active, it is possible to rebuild monuments or replace damaged images as the religious practice demands, using traditional materials and skills, ensuring that the traditional technology survives. Here, the value lies with the intangible, with the traditional craftspeople being the bearers of the knowledge and skills, and thus with the living nature of the heritage.

The case of Nepal demonstrates that it is essential to understand that if the Kathmandu Valley is to be preserved as a living heritage site, more importance is to be attached to what it requires to sustain that 'living' aspect. This means that where Western-inspired conservation principles are at odds with the needs and demands of the community (provided this is to safeguard a living tradition), those demands should be taken seriously. The Pashupati case could be a leading example.

Second, in the present-day context, there may be a need to move beyond traditional community structures like the *guthis*. Of course, in certain cases these continue to have a strong voice, but society has become much more diverse, especially in the Kathmandu Valley and this means that for the management of the sites, but also for the return of moveable objects to the communities, more inclusive forms of consultation may need to be found.

Finally, Nepal's current approach as shown in the above examples, as well as through its decision to increasingly return stolen objects to the communities of origin (see [here](#)), demonstrates an increasing awareness of the importance of the living nature of its heritage, which may ultimately also need to be reflected in its [Ancient Monuments Preservation Act](#).

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