SACRED COMMODITIES

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Abstract

This presentation will examine the circulation of sacred images as commodities. In urban areas in Southeast Asia, the trade in images of Buddhist, Brahmanist and Animist deities in the form of amulets is very popular, as is the trade in these sacred images in the tourist trade. The traditional manner of approaching this phenomenon is to impose traditional academic theories of capitalist exchange, commodity fetishism or spiritual decay. But this approach condemns the negative aspects of this phenomenon without appreciating its more authentic aspects. This paper wishes to show how the religious "eclecticism" found in Southeast Asia, is also present in the trade of sacred commodities. The paradoxes present in the commodification of sacred images also provide them with a renewed possibility to contribute to types of cultural redemption.

Amulets and Souvenirs

Along the streets of Bangkok, within the eddies of the flow of traffic and people, lying on tables or on mats on the sidewalks, examined carefully by traders and collectors with magnifying lenses, are a vast assortment of sacred amulets and images for sale. In Thai they are known as *khrueang rang khaung khlang* [Khmer, *ban towng*], literally, an object with magical powers. The most sacred would include the Buddha, and the images of famous *arahant* monks. Such sacred (*saksit*) Buddhist images would be called *phra khrueang rang*. Amulets also encompass the pantheon of Indian and Tantric Buddhist deities such as Phrapikanet [Ganesh], Phra Narai [Vishnu], Phra Isuan [Shiva], Phra Phirap [Bhairava Shiva], Phra Phrom [Brahma], and Hevajra. They include ceremonial knives or phallus icons (*palad khik*). Or they represent famous mythical characters and creatures from the Ramakien and the Jataka stories such as, Bharata [Phra Phrot Muni], Hanuman, Rahu, Chuchok, and Khrut [Garuda] Singh [lion], and Yak [a guardian form of Yaksa]. This trade is extremely popular and is subject of many magazines and videos which report stories documenting the miraculous powers of particular amulets to protect its wearers from danger, bring them great fortune, or influence others. New amulets are produced, sanctified by monks, marketed and sold to finance the construction of Wats, schools and universities. They are also produced to commemorate events concerning the royal family. They are portable sacred images traded and circulated within the profane landscape of the city.

This brings up some important questions. What happens to the sacred aspects of a culture when it becomes commodified and traded in the marketplace? How should one speak today about this trade in sacred images?

One of the precursors of this type of amulet, Votive tablets, were originally created to preserve the teachings of the Buddha. They can be traced back to the early Buddhism of India. But they became particularly common in South East Asia beginning with the Mon and Angkor period. They were designed for Buddhist pilgrims and were often inscribed on the back with a Buddhist verse in Pali or Sanskrit. The Thai scholar, ML Pattaratorn Chirapravati, explains the role of the following common inscription:

> *The conditions which arise from a cause,*
> *Of these the Tathagatha has stated the cause,*
> *Also the way of suppressing these same:*
> *This is the teaching of the Great Ascetic.*

> This concise statement of the essence of the Buddha's teaching was immensely popular. Early sacred writings such as the *Mahavagga* claim that it was the *Ye Dhamma* that secured the Buddha's disciples, Sariputta and Moggallana, later venerated among the *sangha* as second only to the Buddha. That this simple formula convinced the Buddha's two leading followers must have given it a modicum of magic, a quality that was also accorded to the tablets themselves and much later became the only virtue preserved in amulets. A role for the stanza in proselytizing the teachings of the Buddha is also hard to ignore on such conveniently portable objects. Coedes speculates that the producers of such vast numbers of votive tablets, hidden in stupa and caves, might also have been thinking of a future time when, as Sakyamuni is said to have predicted, Buddhism would have disappeared from the earth. Then the images on the tablets, along with this brief verse stating the quintessence of its doctrine, upon discovery, might lead to a rejuvenation of *dharma*. (Chirapravati, p. 17)

There is also a canonical basis (*Kalingabodhi Jataka*) for the use of sacred images (*ceitiya*) as reminders of the Buddha's teachings. Stanley Tambiah discusses the etymology which suggests the power of images to promote dhamma:

> The Pali word *ceitiya* (*cedi* in Thai) comes from the Sanskrit root *ci*, "to heap up," "to arrange in order," and in this sense is aptly applied to a *stupa* as a monument. But it also connotes *cit*, "to fix the mind upon something," "to remind," "to instruct," and in this sense is similar to the English word "monument" (from the Latin *monere*, "to advise," i.e., to remind). (Tambiah, p. 201)

These tablets brought back from a pilgrimage to a Buddhist shrine, would be the original souvenirs; they would be reminders of a sacred experience, which would be codified within them. They function not only as a reminder, but also as an icon of power. This power is related to the fiery energy which the statue of the Buddha possesses (in Pali – *teja*, in Thai – *rit det*). This would also be a *living power* as can be seen in the ceremonies for the "opening of the eyes" of a new Buddha statue (*boek phra net*), which curiously seem to be mirrored by ceremonies for the "opening of the eyes" of a newborn baby.

The amulet is also an icon or idol. Jean-Pierre Vernant describes the function of primitive idols:

> The function of this kind of *sacra* consists in certifying and transmitting the powers the divinity accords as a privilege to its elect rather than in making a divine "form" known to the public. The symbol does not represent the god, abstractly conceived in and for itself. It does not attempt to instruct anyone about its nature. It expresses divine power insofar as it is handled and used by certain individuals as an instrument of social prestige, a means of getting a hold on and of acting on others. (V, p. 156)

There are various early magical idols in Thailand and Cambodia such as the mummified still-born child or *luk grauk* [Khmer – *kon krok*]. Such an idol and its power is adopted, just as one would adopt a living baby, and has to care for just like a human baby. It is always protected by a *yuan* diagram with a figure of *nang kwak*. Another example would be the small wooden idol called a *kwai danu* [Khmer – *krok bai khleak*]. This is the image of a buffalo made of materials collected in a graveyard during a full moon. Living energy is breathed into this idol, which then possesses a protective power for hunters venturing out into the forest. These more primitive examples – which are still in use - point to the powers that modern amulets are considered to possess. And they point to how the amulet is treated as an object.

Most amulets are connected to a certain temple, and were blessed in a certain ceremony. The material can be metal or a kind of terra cotta which is often mixed with sacred substances such as the ash from a sacred book or the hair or bone of a powerful *arahant* monk. Such a sacred image would act as both an icon and an idol. It would possess both a sacred code and a living power.

Spiritual Decay

But while there is a healthy trade in amulets and a belief in their powers, these beliefs are increasingly cautioned against. The famous contemporary Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu warns in his book *Handbook for Mankind*:

> There are beliefs in spirit and celestial beings, in sacred trees and all manner of magical objects. This sort of thing is completely irrational … Many people professing to be Buddhists cling to these beliefs … and this even includes some who call themselves Bhikkhus, disciples of the Buddha… if we practice any aspect of Dhamma unaware of its original purpose, unconscious of the rationale of it, the result is bound to be the foolish, naïve assumption that it is something magical. (Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. *Handbook for Mankind*. Bangkok: Thammasapa, 1999, p. 61-62)

This condemnation of the *fixation* upon objects or symbols, present in rational, comparative and even mystical approaches to religious belief, certainly has an important role. Especially today, we want to create manners of religious thought which transcend religious divisions. Yet in this movement *beyond* the ritual, the concrete belief, and the icon, we often lose an appreciation of an important *living power*.

The trade in amulets is not only condemned by religious figures like Buddhadasa, but also by sociologists, anthropologists and philosophers. Stanley Tambiah has done very careful studies on the lives of the forest monks (*arahants*) and what he calls the "cult of amulets" which is connected to their powers. At the end of his work he attempts to understand this within a sociological framework.

> The possession and circulation of amulets in Thailand represents still another semiotic code. The ascetic saint of the forest distributes his charisma as a donation inspired by compassion and loving-kindness (metta). He himself does not expect a return from his gift to the worldlings at large. The amulet is indexically or metonymically related to the ascetic monk and represent a materialization of his virtue, achieved by means of a rite of transfer. Amulets are made in plenty and distributed to many, for the saint's *metta* is inexhaustible and does not diminish by sharing, provided he continues to cleave to his ascetic and meditative life and to experience the bliss of tranquil joy and detachment. But of course we know that, in the Thai instance, amulets are comparable on the basis of the differential charisma of the saints and ascetics; though donated to the public at large, they in practice become scarce and assume a commercial value. They become, at a second less obvious round of social relations, private and hidden possessions of laymen who expect to use the amulets' potency to manipulate, overpower, seduce, and control their fellow men and women in an ongoing drama of social transactions. This there is a two-level discourse – the charisma of the saint, who in transcending the world is able to shower upon it his virtue, and the gratification of desires on the part of the laymen, for whom prosperity and fortune approach the logic of a zero-sum game. (Tambiah, p. 342)

According to Tambiah, the circulation of amulets becomes a mark of status among the ruling elite. It also represents a kind of spiritual decay of the original function of the sacred image through capitalist exchange and commodity fetishism. This echoes the idea that the *sacred* always involves the separation of the sacred object from the normal system of exchange. As Giorgio Agamben writes:

> *Religio* is not what unites men and gods but what ensures they remain distinct. It is not disbelief and indifference toward the divine, therefore, that stand in opposition to religion, but "negligence," that is, a behavior that is free and "distracted" (that is to say, released form the *religio* of norms) before things and their use, before forms of separation and their meaning. To profane means to open the possibility of a special form of negligence, which ignores separation or, rather, puts it to a particular use. (Agamben, p. 75)

I do not wish to challenge this thesis, but if we can accept the operation of amulets as a kind of "two-level" discourse, perhaps we should recognize that the phenomenon of the circulation of amulets contains contradictions which provide resistances to traditional philosophical or sociological theories, as well as capitalist exchange itself. In fact, connected to the use and belief in amulets is a widespread ritualistic gift-giving, which goes beyond social reciprocity, and is ultimately connected to *kamma*.

We can now accept that the reduction of sacred images to commodities is an accepted *fact*. This is the *reality* of our global capitalist system, at least in this period of our human history. But while there is a process of *spiritual decay*, or a *fading of aura*, yet at the same time, there is stored up within these sacred commodities, a memory, or a power. If the flow of capital is a *reality*, then the hidden power of objects is equally a *competing reality*.

The philosophical approaches to our contemporary situation often rely upon the same singular planes of explanation they wish to challenge. Such approaches wish to break free of *system*, *identity*, *restricted economies*, *reification*, *commodification*, and *representation*. They wish to escape into pure alterity, difference, utopia or the *promise* of future redemption. Yet like Buddhadasa they lose sight of the very powers of the concrete object which may provide the redemption which they desperately crave.

We can perhaps begin again and show how sacred commodities have certain "powers", either to fall into the dangers of exploitation, or to transcend these traits and act as talismans of healing.

Imperfections

Caught within the flow of capital, reproduced and counterfeited, beautified into kitsch, the amulet or souvenir is also an *imperfect* sacred icon. In Ananda Coomeraswamy's development of the *rasa* theory of art, there is an emphasis on the surrender of subjectivity and upon the competence of the viewer of the work of art. Ultimately the work appears not as an *expression* of the artist, but a *passage* to the sacred. Not merely an object, but a symbol. Yet Coomeraswamy recognizes another process. That whereby we *reconstruct* the icon as something worthy of veneration.

> Tolerance of an imperfect work of art may arise in two ways: the one *uncritical*, powerfully swayed by the sympathetic, and too easily satisfied with a very inadequate correspondence between content and form, the other *creative*, very little swayed by considerations of charm, and able by force of true imagination to complete the correspondence of content and form which is not achieved or not preserved in the original. Uncritical tolerance is content with prettiness or edification, and recoils from beauty that is 'difficult': creative tolerance is indifferent to prettiness or edification, and is able from a mere suggestion, such as an awkward 'primitive' or a broken fragment, to create or recreate a perfect experience. (Coomeraswamy, p. 34)

Coomeraswamy is somewhat of a purist - we might ask if the two types of tolerance are that distant. The critique of reproduced art of amulets or the kitsch art of souvenirs would also be a criticism of *uncritical tolerance*. Yet there does seem to be a process whereby the circulations of these simple images can draw one to older, more incomplete, and more authentic types of images. One *develops* the eye of an archeologist. There must be something that threads its way back to the authentic artifact. The power of the ritualistic

use and trade in amulets and souvenirs maintains an invisible connection a wisdom which links culture with nature.

The traditional sociological critique of *magic* and *exchange*, often reduce these phenomena to mere social relationships, such as the prevalent discourse concerning "the gift". Yet this seems to involve a kind of Western tendency to recoil from the power of the object itself. The anthropologist Marshall Sahlins in his essay “The Sadness of Sweetness” speaks of the character of Western cosmology:

> Dare one claim that the determination of nature as pure materiality – absent gods, incarnate spirits, or any such nonhuman persons – is a unique Western invention? True, worldly things could represent or be signs of God, but they are not God. Nor is this differentiation of “natural” from “supernatural” the same as the nature-culture distinctions widely practiced around the world. It is the further argument that nature is only *res extensa*, made of nothing, lacking subjectivity. The idea, moreover, becomes the ontological counterpart of an equally singular epistemology, insofar as knowledge of nature cannot be achieved by communication and the other ways subjects understand subjects. (Sahlins, p. 564)

This would suggest that the situation of our increasingly globalizing world is the overlapping of *competing cosmologies*. The Western cosmologies of exchange become the latest layer added to the multi-layered eclecticism found in non-Western cultures.

So we need to begin again. We need to respect a certain power inherent in objects without being tempted at first to reduce it to any single philosophical, psychological or sociological plane of explanation.

7-Eleven, Jatukarm Ramathep

Recently Thailand experienced a phenomenal popularity of an amulet called the Jatukarm Ramathep. This amulet has its origin in the southern Thai city of Nakorn Si Thammarat. It relates back to the story of King Jantarapanu who ruled in this city in the Buddhist year 18. The spirit of this king instructed a police captain named Khun Pan - known for his magical powers - to install a new city pillar. A city pillar [*sow mueang*] is established for the purpose of marking the spiritual center of the city. It is established at a special auspicious time and place. This information is often encoded in the form of an astrological chart at the top of the pillar. Around the pillar are stationed guardian deities. Usually there are four, but in this case, two of the deities Jatukarm and Ramathep (and possibly King Jantarapanu himself) become synthesized into the deity of the pillar, and the guardian deities are replaced by images of the demon Rahu.

The story is quite complex. And it would seem that the complexity of the story feeds into its mystery and popularity. Its popularity, which lasted for about two years, is also considered to have been enhanced by the anxieties connected to the violence in Southern Thailand.

But regardless of the details, what seems most significant is the form of the amulet. It is a circular amulet that represents the cross-section of the city pillar itself. It contains the deity in the center, around which is the astrological chart, and bordered by the guardian Rahus. Hence - in a more dramatic way than most amulets - it shows itself as a sacred object, connected to a specific place, a specific time, and a specific ritual. In a sense, it is a portable sacred place, carried by the wearers as they navigate the profane chaos of the modern city.

And yet at the same time it is a commodity. At every 7-Eleven convenience store in Bangkok (of which there are an alarming number) one could buy a version of the amulet. There were also brochures explaining the amulet and how to order them through Visa or Mastercard. This would involve the movement of sacred objects through the digitized calculations of financial transactions and systems of supply chain management.

In this case, we are now dealing with two city pillars. A sacred and traditional pillar, and a pillar which represents the financial center of the city which coordinates the flow of capital. So we can speak of a dance of objects, passing from hand to hand, guided by invisible forces of the sacred, by the invisible forces of commerce. A dance between two poles, each a center of gravity, around which these objects will be attracted into a kind of complex orbit. Objects whose motion is propelled by human hands and abstract capital, by fortune and by calculation, and by a motion that involves random collisions and confrontations.

And this external circulation between these poles is also an internal circulation of objects within the imagination. Again, two (or more) poles, competing centers of gravity, around which our ideas and representations circulate. This also shows how the mythologies which inhabit our imaginations communicate with the landscape.

And the object itself would be ambivalent. It would be enervated by the exchange principle and the sacred which places it beyond exchange. It would not be a simple fetish, but a complex locus of competing forces.

Here we should be careful to distinguish the sacred commodity from the branded object which has had its ‘sacredness’ fabricated through marketing. This is not to say that the amulet itself is not fabricated, or that there are many amulets made to capitalize on the desire for sacred objects. But the process used in sacrilizing an amulet is always connected to traditions, rites, and practices which are organic, that is, rooted in the culture and its natural environment. The desire is for connection and not for the *appearance* of connection.

Eclecticism

In Southeast Asia, not only are there layers of Animism, Brahmanism, Mahayana and Therawada Buddhism, Islam and Christianity, but today there are additional layers of Western capitalist, secular and scientific cosmologies.

To appreciate the mythical topology of the landscape and the imagination is to appreciate a kind of *Eclecticism*, which would embrace traditional rituals, myths and symbols, and yet, tolerate the lack of a common logic. As art historian Aby Warburg points out, people are essentially schizophrenics. They possess contradictions in their beliefs and practices, and even their cosmologies. This then should extend even to the scholar investigating these phenomena.

With the permeation of capitalist cosmologies into cultures, we encounter a curious mixture of traditional cosmologies. It is not a matter of simple displacement or change. Often it is a curious mixture of competing cosmologies and mythologies of space and time. These competing mythologies are anchored in the landscape in the form of poles: a city pillar, a temple, a bank, a television station. And simultaneously they are anchored within the imagination of each individual. All of these realities overlap within each individual. Yet while they overlap, they do not connect.

But these gaps and tensions prevent one logic from cannibalizing another. The belief in *powers* and *spirits*, still alive at street level, are irrational from most philosophical and sociological perspectives. Yet they represent a kind of pre-reflective intimacy with the earth not present within capitalism and the encroaching Western systems of thought. So perhaps the *imperfections* involved in the commodification and circulation of sacred images, also preserve a possibility of a kind of *redemption*.

Contemporary Western philosophy follows a messianic theology. It tends to be oriented towards a future redemption or emancipation from what it considers to be an imprisonment by the commodifications and reifications of contemporary capitalist culture. This idea of redemption operates from the very models of linear history which it strives to escape. Yet, outside of the West, we can still see, deep within the object, shadowy instructions of a process of redemption not oriented towards a pure future, but one which repeats itself within the flow of life itself. A redemption within the flow of life. Less a spiritual *vision*, and more an *anchoring* occurring below the field of vision.

The twentieth century German philosopher Walter Benjamin also recognized the tension between the “now” of the object and its stored-up past. He calls this the “dialectical image.” The interpreter of the object, commodity or image places it within tensions which will crack open its outer shell to release its stored up histories.

> In the dialectical image, what has been within a particular epoch is always, simultaneously, "what has been from time immemorial." As such, however, it is manifest, on each occasion only to a quite specific epoch - namely, the one in which humanity, rubbing its eyes, recognizes just this particular dream image as such. It is at this moment that the historian takes up, with regard to that image, the task of dream interpretation. (Benjamin, p. 464)

We can follow Benjamin up to a point, particularly with regard to his recognition of the history stored in images. But we do not want to lose the richness and wisdom of these hidden narratives. We do not want to reduce them to mere *dreams* or *form*s of history. To break open these objects to release their powers, would in a way, be the

dissipation of their powers within the much larger landscape of historical explanation. Benjamin thought that this was a mechanism to promote messianic redemption; a redemption involving the entire trajectory of human history. Perhaps such a process is very attractive to academics like ourselves, who want to break open every vessel to see what is inside, or wish to consider history in its totality. Yet we need to recognize that the so-called fetishized shell of the object also protects what is inside; it is the shell of a seed which will blossom, at a particular time and place, when the conditions are favorable.

Immanuel Kant was prescient concerning our present plight. He claims that fine art gains its power insofar as it imitates the "creative power of nature," and not as a mere imitation of archetypes or models. Yet he envisages a coming crisis:

> It is not likely that peoples of any future age will make [artistic] models dispensable, for these peoples will be ever more remote from nature. Ultimately, since they will have no enduring examples of nature, they will hardly be able to form a concept of the happy combination of the law-governed constraint coming from highest culture with the force and rightness of a free nature that feels its own value. (Kant, p. 232)

So for us, the wisdom hidden in objects can be considered as *models* of a connection or orientation. We can see this demonstrated in the Khmer votive tablet depicting the Mahayana Buddhist trinity common to the Angkor period. Chirapravati provides a description:

> The Buddha is seated in *vajrasana* with his hands in *dhyanamudra*. The Buddha is sheltered by the Naga, generally depicted with five or seven hoods. The Naga head in the centre is shown in full frontal view while the others are shown in profile. The Buddha wears a crown. The standard Khmer representation of the seated Buddha sheltered by Naga hoods… Lokesvara has four arms but Prajnaparamita has two… Lokesvara is holding an attribute in each hand: a rosary in the top right, a book in the top left, a lotus in the lower right, and a vase in the lower left – each with a symbolic meaning. Prajnaparamita is holding a lotus and a book. The depiction of Lokesvara (Bodhisattva of Compassion) and Prajnaparamita (Goddess of Knowledge) exemplifies the notion of Buddhahood. While Avalokitesvara symbolizes the notions of compassion and fatherhood, Prajnaparamita represents knowledge and motherhood. This representation of the duality between compassion and knowledge is comparable to the Tantric concepts of *upaya* (the male principle, indicating skillful means) and *prajna* (the female principle, indicating knowledge). In Tantrism, the union of male and female counterparts is a symbol of transcendence. (ML Pattaratorn Chirapravati, p. 44)

Here we find a union of *upaya* and *prajna*. Skillful means (which in this interpretation, I would like to link to a pre-reflective ritualistic devotion to amulets) can be separated from wisdom within the current circulation of images within capitalist exchange. Yet each image is symbolically imprinted with the *prajna* which is often forgotten.

That is, the *upaya* or ritual can keep alive an open-ended connection with *prajna*.

This is reflected in the way the meaning of word symbol is sometimes illustrated by the image of a broken plate. The contours of the break - the contours of the imprinted forms - call us to a possibility of connection, balance, enlightenment – a "rejuvenation of *dhamma*".

Sacred commodities can act as pointers within the swirling exchange of commodities. They act not as radical agents of messianic redemption, but as minor placings and anchorings within the swirling confusion of commodification and the onward-moving process of life.

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