BEYOND BORDERS: NAVIGATING CULTURAL SENSITIVITIES IN PRESENTING TULU RITUAL OBJECTS IN WESTERN MUSEUMS

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Abstract

The Tulu region of Karnataka has evolved various forms of performance-based rituals invoking the native guardian spirits, heroes, animals, etc. One such major seasonal festival of this region, Bhutakola, celebrates the several guardian spirits and tutelary deities (called daivas and bhutas) who protect the villages of Tulunadu. These deities are manifest during the festivals through ritual objects–in particular, masks, breastplates, and anklets–that are worn by a human performers. However, these objects have been displaced and displayed at American Art Museums through art collectors, enthusiasts, and the art market. I study the material dimensions of the Bhutakola ritual and its ritual efficacy, and its subsequent of these objects and their subsequent display in museums. I then ask: how might the identities of these objects change once they are displaced and displayed? To borrow from Richard Davis, what are the "disruptions and transformations" of these objects from their previous lives?

Keywords: Bhutakola, Tulunadu, Museum Objects, Masks, South Asia

Introduction

The Tulu region, or Tulunadu in the Southwestern region of India, comprising present-day Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts of Karnataka and the northern parts of the Kasaragod district of Kerala up to the Chandragiri River, has evolved various forms of performance-based rituals invoking the native guardian spirits. Located along the lines of the Konkan Coast, this tropical region is bounded by the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea. Bhūtakola, a major annual(2) festival of Tulunadu celebrates the several guardian spirits and tutelary deities (called daivas and Bhūtas (3) who protect their villages. This ritual involves a medium or performer who receives the invoked spirits and answers practical questions, solves quarrels, and thus acts as a judge whose words go unchallenged. These deities are manifest during the festivals through ritual objects–in particular, masks, breastplates, and anklets–that are worn by human performers. Thus, Bhūta kola also reflects the interaction between the participants and the dancer who receives the invoked spirit through these objects during the ritual.

In this paper, I investigate how the nature of such ritual objects evolves as they are removed from their original (4) ritual contexts and displayed in museums. To borrow from Richard Davis, what transformations or disruptions occur when these deities of the Tulu land are displaced and displayed in American Museums? While it is widely acknowledged

that religious objects accrue new meanings and significance when their contexts are shifted (5), this study seeks to investigate this process further. The three key points of this paper include: 1) The objectives pursued by curators while exhibiting a ritual object; 2) How curators and museum personnel, as well as the institution of the museum building itself, contribute to the creation of new interpretations and symbolic values associated with these objects; 3) Finally, understand the culturally sensitive ways in which indigenous, non-western, religious objects, along with narratives, are curated, shared, and experienced within a western museum space, thereby creating invisible networks that aim to perceive, value, handle, care for, interpret, and preserve heritage through culturally rooted efforts.

I specifically focus on the Bhūta Kola objects that are displayed in art museums in the United States and Europe. The museum collections I have surveyed so far include Los Angeles County Museum of Art (South and Southeast Asian Art), Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC (South Asian and Himalayan Art), Philadelphia Museum of Art (Asian Art), Brooklyn Museum (Asian Art), New Orleans Museum of Art (Indian Art Gallery), and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Asian Art), Rietberg Museum, Zurich, and the British Museum, London. I rely on their digital collections/archives as well as permanent displays.

The Ritual Context of Bhūta Kola

Firstly, to understand the objects itself, it is essential to discuss the ritual setting of the objects under study. The Bhūta Kola is a complex ritual held during an annual festival, where a human embodier (6) willingly allows themselves to be possessed by a deity. In this state, they execute dances that portray certain events from the myth surrounding the deity. These stories are derived from the rich tradition of Tulu oral epics known as the pāḍdanas. Heidrun Bruckner (1995, 2009) as well as Peter Claus (1989), emphasise that ritual performances and oral recitations are embedded in the real-world context of the Tulu region. These deities are intimately connected to places in particular villages, wherein the Tulu realm, the lived world, and the environmental context of the Tulu region, reflect the realm of the spirits. The lived realm of Tulu land, which comprises the cultivated lands is often disrupted by the wild animals that inhabit the forests. The disruptive wild animals have corresponding bhūtas in the spirit realm as Panjurli (the boar), Maisandaaya (the bull), Pilichamundi (tiger) etc. Other categories of the bhūtas also exist whose origins can be traced back to Hindu gods and goddesses as well as heroes who died protecting the land. Bhūta kola, then, reflects the interaction between the audience and the dancer who receives the invoked spirit through these objects during the ritual. Through the voice of this performer, the bhūta answers practical questions, solves quarrels and thus acts as a judge whose words go unchallenged. These narratives and discourses take its root from

the pāḍdanas. Even though mainly carried down orally by successive generations, they inform the ritual performances.

Apart from these oral narratives and the human performers, the ritual objects such as masks, breastplates, anklets, etc. plays a central role in this ceremony. These objects are highly significant to the local community — their appearance, materials, and design all carry symbolic meaning that reflects the community's culture, history, and beliefs. So, to understand the relevance of these objects, an elaborate description of the ritual functions of these objects, their appearance in the ritual context, and the methods of reverence used by participants are essential. Since I have not yet conducted direct ethnographic research in South Canara, I rely on secondary ethnographical materials (Bruckner 1995) as well as media sources of several Bhūta kola rituals that are available online for public viewing.

Sanctification and darśan of Bhūta Objects

The objects are integral to the ritual performance in the festival. They sometimes act as conductors of spirit possession, elevators of the ritual to its next stage, or representations of the deity and their weapons or other material attributes. Traditionally, objects meant for the rituals, especially the masks, undergo a final ritual at the end of the manufacturing process during which the spirit of the deity is infused into the mask, also known as prāṅa pratiṣṭha among Hindu temple rituals (7). This process, as Heather Elgood states, is the ritual through which the image is recognised as god and "a particle of the divine whole, the divide perceived not in man's image as a separate entity but as a formless, indescribable omnipresent whole" (Elgood 2000). The divine is manifest not through eruption, but through spontaneous adhesion (Eck 1998). We see similar infusions during the Pujo rituals in pandals in Kolkata and even in the Kalamezhuthu Pāttu to call forth Bhagavatī in North Kerala, which takes place in ephemeral festival spaces where the Goddess is asked to take up residence in the images and vivid drawings especially made for each year's festival, and at the end of the festival she is invited to depart, whereupon the images and drawings are disposed of ceremonially. Similarly, during the Bhūtakola the deity is momentarily requested to be present in the objects, who then possesses the dancer, and acts as a divine judge. Here, in case of such non-permanently consecrated objects, the bidding and dismissal constitute the temporal boundaries of the life of the object. Devotees actively participate in Hindu festivals, immersing themselves in the festival space to obtain a visual encounter with the divine image or sacred object. Such an encounter, known as "auspicious sight" or darśan, holds immense significance within the Hindu ritual complex, as it highlights the notion that Hindu worship transcends prayers, offerings, and devotional dispositions of the heart (Eck 1981). According to Hindu beliefs, the deity

resides within the sacred image, imbuing it with divine power and presence. Therefore, the act of visually perceiving the image holds great religious significance. This visual apprehension of the image is considered a form of worship, through which the viewer is believed to gain blessings from the divine. The exchange of sight between the viewer and the image is seen as a transformative act, with the viewer being bestowed with divine blessings in return. The Bhūta Kola ritual, with its meticulously crafted setting and the objects associated with it, exemplifies these characteristics well. The visual engagement with these objects serves to emphasise the importance of such encounters in the pursuit of spiritual fulfilment within the Hindu tradition.

The human performer, who is transformed into an embodiment of the bhūta, comes to be animated by the deity through these objects. Before these objects are donned by the human medium who serves as a receptacle or channel for the divine presence of the deity, they are worshiped in a ceremonial manner, either at the domestic level or at the shrine. At the domestic level, they are placed in either the landlord's homes, where the masks and other regalia are placed on raised platforms or wooden swings. They are also placed in guttumanes (guttu homes), which used to be the administrative unit of Tulunadu in pre-colonial times. They do not hold any administrative powers now but continue to house the ritual objects which are taken out once a year for the festivals. They are ceremonially brought into the bhūtastāna (the bhūta shrine) for the festival days.

Phases of Ritual Possession

The objects in the Bhutakola performance are thus sanctified and are manifested by the deity, including masks, breastplates, anklets, torches, swords, belts, bells, and the semi-circular arch (ani) tied to the performer's shoulder. They play an integral part to the ritual process and a vital role in animating the human performer and embodying the deity. The ritual process through which the human performer comes to be animated by the deity (possession) is marked by three distinct phases punctuated by the incorporation of particular objects and adornments, such as the anklets, masks and the ani. The concept of possession here is also a mediated one, where there will be attendants who intervene and assist the performer in his every step. This is described by Bruckner (1995) as "movement", which includes sudden jumping, walking, rhythmic dancing, etc. There is no set repertoire. These movements are maintained over a long period of time by the embodied figures of the deities within the framework of a largely fixed choreography, which involves a sequential adornment of ritual objects.

Gaggaradechidu: Phase one is marked by the adornment of the anklet (gaggara), also known as gaggaradechidu, when the deity enters the performer's body through the anklet. In this phase, the anklets are the focus. It is traditionally made of silver and has hollow

tubes with metal balls inside that produce a clunking sound as the performer moves. This phase is marked by a lot of rapid movements, gestures and dance. We often see the dancer rocking and swinging the anklet by hand to produce different rhythms. The deity does not speak in this phase, but motions through the object. These movements last for about 1-2 hours. Sometimes, we also see the performer jump and flip around the festival area, while the participants are seated around in a circle. There is no preset manual or rule for what sort of music accompanies these movements. Instrumental music of random songs from films or popular devotional songs from anywhere can be played. There are percussion instruments and local pipes that play the melody.

Pic 1: A Pair Of Gaggaras Currently In Rietberg Museum Storage (Photo By The Author)

Manidecchidu: It is when the performer is bestowed with objects such as silver belts, bells and/or swords. Amongst these, the bell (ghante or mani) is often kept in the shrines and used for day-to-day offerings as well as for special occasions such as the annual festivals. The other two objects, rather large than the bell, are the sword and the silver belt. They are only meant to be used during festivals by the performer or the priest and are kept in the landlord's house or guttumanes for safekeeping. They are held in the same respect as an image of a deity and are ceremonially worshipped during the annual festivals. According to the Special Study Report on Bhūta Cult in South Kanara District under the Census of India, 1971, these locations are administered by the temple management or the landlord himself (Padmanabha 1976). These administrative powers and duties of the landlord are also translated to his own authority as the festival supervisor. These festivals are, in a way, justifications for the social power he holds. The festival reinforces these social relationships and the hierarchy.

Nemadecchidu: The third and final phase is when the performer is bestowed with the ani (a half-halo-like structure made of metals, as well as areca, cloth, or tender leaves of coconut palm hooked to the back of his head), and the mask (muga), marking the complete possession deity. The display of the ani and muga, marks the final stage in the manifestation of the deity. Now the deity is present in the adorned performer and ready to speak to the devotees assembled at the festival. In short, it is the object that initiates the manifestation of deities.

Object and Agency

The emerging discipline of material culture studies represents a paradigm shift in the investigation of the human construction of artefacts by considering the reciprocal impact of material objects on individuals and society (8). This approach encompasses an analysis of how material culture serves as a medium for social interaction, and importantly, recognises the potential for inanimate objects to possess subjectivity and agency, thereby influencing human behaviour and social dynamics. This is in part also borrowed from Alfred Gell; we may consider these objects as having agency, and not just in terms of their formal or aesthetic value or appreciation within the culture that produced them, nor as signs, visual codes to be deciphered or symbolic communications. Gell begins his book by arguing against the existing anthropological studies of art, wherein they focus more on the issues such as aesthetic values or the way artworks encode culturally significant meanings. However, he argues that this approach lacks anthropological study. He stresses on focusing on the "social relationships" in which the art mediates social agency (Gell 1998). Within the context of Bhūtakola, a ritual performance that recounts the legends of protective guardian spirits safeguarding the village against disruptive forces, the objects employed in the ritual materialise these intentions by facilitating possession, allowing the human medium to become a receptacle or channel for the divine presence of the deity.

As Nicholas Thomas pointed out in his Foreword to Gell's Art and Agency (1998), "For many scholars, and indeed in much common-sense thinking about art, it is axiomatic that art is a matter of meaning and communication. This book suggests that it is instead about doing." Therefore, we may define these objects in performative terms as having an 'affective agency' in their capacity to provoke emotional and embodied responses in recipients. Artworks were not symbols, but social agents, or the equivalent of persons (Gell 1998). Gell introduces the concept of "distributed persons" to elucidate the manner in which these entities facilitate social agency. These "distributed persons" encapsulate a portion of the represented entity, particularly its image or simulacrum, and effectively "bind" that aspect of its identity to the artwork. Similarly, in the context of Bhūtakola, the objects themselves can be perceived as "distributed persons." They assume a pivotal role in the ritual performance by embodying and manifesting the intentions of the deity.

Through this process, the objects become conduits for the divine presence and facilitate the interaction between the spiritual and human realms. The objects are thus not mere theatrical props or decorations, but are active participants in the ritual performance, enabling the performer to embody the deity and become a conduit for their power.

Pars Pro Toto – Representing the whole by a part

Contemporary museum curators face numerous challenges in effectively conveying the essence of a culture within the constraints of limited collections and exhibits, particularly when dealing with non-Western cultures in Western museums. Darielle Mason (2022) studies the complexities involved in communicating complex narratives through museum collections, using the example of the sixteenth-century South Indian temple hall installation at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Mason highlights the deliberate choices made by curators to present specific cultures through carefully selected displays.

Some of those choices raise these key questions: Whose voices do museums prioritise? How much consideration should be given to contentious perspectives? Additionally, who advises curators on these matters, and how much of the narrative is inevitably omitted or edited? Despite the inherent challenges, museums fulfil a vital role as institutions dedicated to promoting cultural literacy and expanding public understanding through their exhibits. Consequently, it is fascinating to explore the various methods that curators have employed to convey the "living context" in which these objects originated, as noted by Kurin (1991). By doing so, he says, the museum is publicly conferring legitimacy—of knowledge, of an aesthetic, of a sense of the history of cultural value (Kurin, 1991). This section aims to evaluate how Bhūta Kola objects are presented in Western museum exhibits and to what extent such displays enhance or alter our understanding of Tulu culture.

The inclusion of Bhūta Kola objects in museum displays necessitates an exploration of the underlying motivations and considerations that drive curators to showcase them. Museums, as institutions, are deeply rooted in Euro-American cultural and intellectual history. Scholars such as Findlen (1989) and Taylor (1995) have extensively examined this history to glean insights into the evolving Euro-American perceptions of "exotic" peoples. Contemporary museum displays serve multiple purposes, often encompassing intricate and multifaceted objectives. However, in the case of Bhūta Kola objects, their exhibition in museums typically occurs within a broader context, rather than as part of a specialised exhibition. They are often presented alongside collections of bronze objects or artefacts from India. This juxtaposition highlights the fact that Bhūta Kola objects are not accorded dedicated or specialised displays but rather form part of a larger narrative encompassing the broader cultural heritage of the region. Unfortunately, this lack of focus on the context

surrounding these objects means that their cultural significance may be overlooked in favour of examining their "intrinsic features" alone (Ambrose and Paine, 2012). Intrinsic information includes the object's shape, its colour, its material and its condition. All of this may tell us a great deal about the physicality of the object. However, it's crucial to understand these objects as part of a larger cultural context and consider what "extrinsic information" may be derived from outside the object: where it came from, who owned it, how it was used, etc. Paine also highlights another important category of understanding the object: significance. He describes this as the meaning ascribed to the object, rather than explicit and implicit meanings. Significance relates to its value or meaning to a person or community.

> "Significance means the historic, aesthetic, scientific and social values that an object or collection has for past, present and future generations. [It] incorporates all the elements that contribute to an object's meaning, including its context, history, uses and social and spiritual values. When you consider this information you can draw informed conclusions about why an object is significant. Significance is not fixed—it may increase or diminish over time." (Russell and Winkworth 2009)

This understanding of significance is often enveloped and replaced by a newly formed museum value when the object is placed on display in a museum. It modifies the significance it has to its users in a ritual ground to an object that derives its value from the visual aesthetic of a museum object. More specifically, the masks and breastplates, objects that attract ritualistic response from the participants, now metamorphoses themselves as an object that waits for the visitors' "secular" response. They hardly convey any significance, and convey the intrinsic information that can easily be extracted from their material, colour, shape, etc. For instance, at the MET (Fig. 1), the Jumadi mask is displayed among the South Asian Hindu-Buddhist and Jain Sculptures along with other bronze objects So by placing the objects in the section on South Asian artefacts, the visitors infer a simplistic meaning and hardly any further.

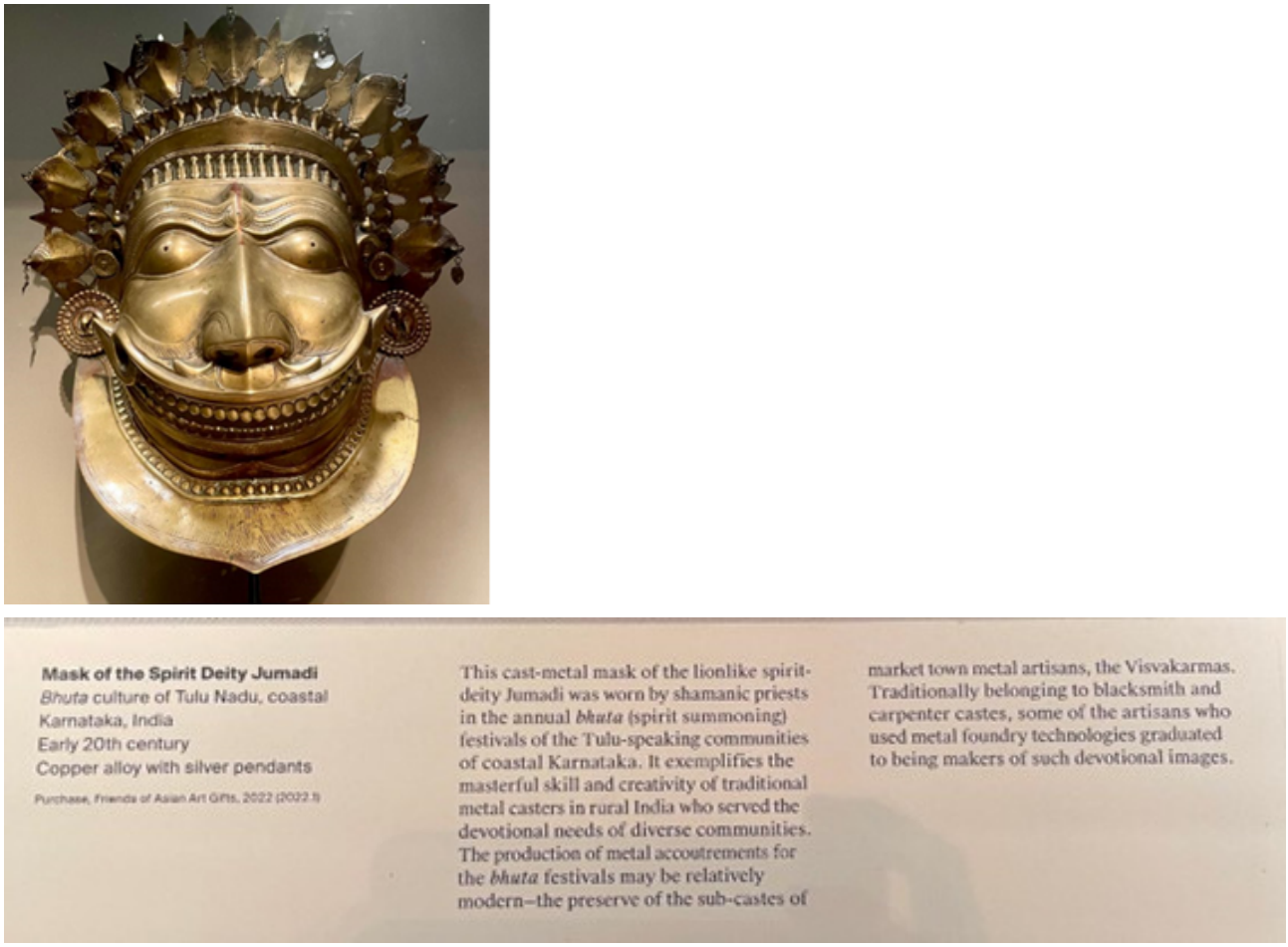

Figure 1: Jumadi Mask (Photo By The Author)

In Figure 1, we see the display at The MET of a Jumadi mask. Here, as soon as it moves from an ambience of worship and reverence to one of an art display, it acquires new meaning, a new value, and a new personality that more or less overlays the previous one. The mask becomes an art object that needs to be interpreted for its aesthetic value rather than its previous status as an object of ritualistic value. Tapati Guha-Thakurta goes a step further and asks in what ways do the western art museums function as complex site for the production of new orders of "religious" value around Indian images (Guha-Thakurta 2007). Because there is no clear cut transformation of these "religious" objects into "aesthetic" objects; these values are only extended, overlapped, and superimposed. The label still explains the festival context, however, the spotlight is on its artistic characteristics. The insufficiency of details on what constitutes a Bhūta Kola or the lack of any reference to how the mask is used as a medium of spirit possession decontextualises and isolates the objects, limiting the audience from fully comprehending the significance of this artefact. It is presented as an object with "every day-aesthetic value", rather than ritualistic value (Leddy 1995). The museums, thus, mask the meaning of the object

(significance), often closely tied to its use (functional) and to its place, both physical and conceptual (syntactical) (Grimes, 1992).

The Question of Art vs Cultural History Museums

Art museums present us with a peculiar case of displaying objects of ritualistic value. As previously noted, the institutional design of a museum replaces the "cult value" of an object with "exhibition value" once it enters a museum (Benjamin 1973). This replacement is informed by the museum's decision, which subsequently affects the visitor's conception of the object. When the objects feature in the collection of an Art Museum, like all our examples, they are clearly meant to be viewed for their aesthetic value. Art Museums are often praised for their role in being the flag-bearers of conserving and preserving objects that may be forgotten from human memory. However, when an object of religious value is displayed in these museums, especially of living traditions, what ends up happening is an act of amnesia. Once the object enters the Art Museums, the object is fossilised to preserve its artistic endeavours, having forgotten its lived realities. In the case of all Bhūta Masks and Breastplates, they become the bastions of Bronze casting from South Canara. This "Museum Effect" of turning all objects into works of art then also comes with the inevitable amnesia of the subsidiary experiences and skills derived from settings external to the singular experience of appreciating the object (Karp 1991).

In contrast to art museums, anthropology museums have always taken religion seriously, as it is practised, and as it reflects and inspires patterns of living (Paine 2012). Religious objects may also sometimes feature in "folk" and "cultural history" museums. However, this distinction needs a critical revaluation. Even though it is at the heart of the curator's job to unlearn and deconstruct this misguided dichotomy of earlier generations, it also appears that society as a whole is complicit in hiding the underlying assumptions that inform a museum's displays, thereby obscuring the activity of its objects. The museum is, more often than not, a reflection of the worldview of its society. This also includes other Museum interlocutors such as its board of trustees, museum learning staff, as well as the academic community of museum professionals. The discussions on the role of religion in museums and of museums in religion in the context of material culture have only been recent. Scholars such as Grimes (1992), Paine (2000), and publications such as Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief started in 2005 have all gradually contributed to this discourse. Therefore, more prosaically, the museum community has been reconsidering earlier perceptions of museum practices. If that is to be taken into account, then the Bhūta Kola objects in the above American art museums also await reassessment.

The Pāḍdanas

The ritual performance of Bhūta Kola is typically accompanied by the Tulu Pāḍdanas. The Pāḍdanas are oral epics that narrate the creation myths and the adventures of the deities that embody the objects during the festival. They are an example of "multi-story" traditions (Blackburn 1989) and they convey variations of details of each deity's life history depending on the specific physical locality of the epic. These pāḍdanas are the primary sources of the spirits that possess the performer through the object, such as Jarandaya, Panjurli, Pilichamundi, and the approximately four hundred deities of the Tulu land. Despite their importance, these textual corpora are often absent from museum labels.

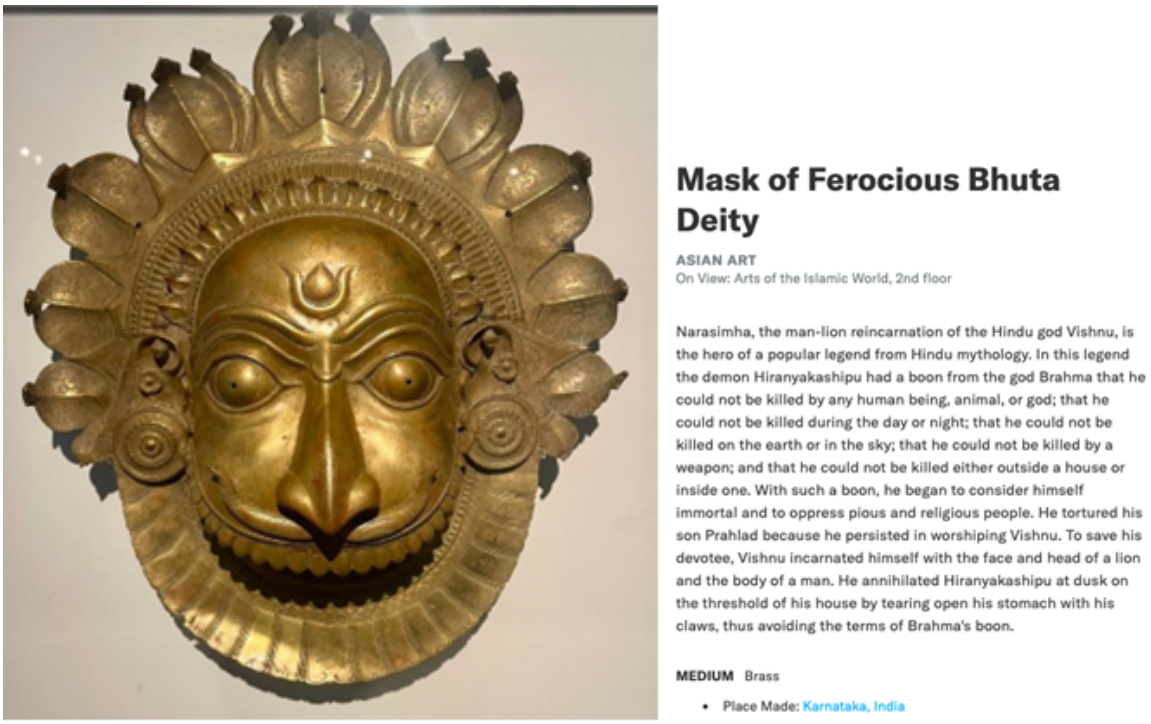

Figure 2: Bhuta Mask, Brooklyn Museum (Photo by the Author)

As an example, let us look at the "Mask of Ferocious Bhūta Deity" at the Brooklyn Museum (Fig.2), which is accompanied by a label that narrates the story of Narasiṃha and Hiranyakaśipu, does not provide information regarding the context of the ritual performance. It assigns a new meaning to the mask, despite its conventional designation as Viṣṇumūrtī among Bhūta kola practitioners. The label, however, fails to acknowledge this or the mask's ritual function and efficacy, opting instead for a narrative summary derived from canonical Sanskrit texts such as the Harivamśa and the Brahmā Purāṇa. This approach overlooks the specific vernacular narratives found in Tulu pāḍdanas, which convey divergent stories and hold critical significance for the communities in which they are performed. The disparity between museum labels and the cultural context of the objects they describe highlights the need for a more nuanced and culturally informed

approach to the interpretation of such artefacts. The objects do not speak of these cultural specificities and establish the link between such accounts and the objects.

Uncertain Provenance: How did it end up here?

In the above discussions, we have established the role of curation in carefully selecting, assembling and organising the museum collections. We might note at this point that there are also other museum personnel who affect how objects are understood. For instance, such understandings also depend on the collectors who donate or sometimes sell them to the museum in the first place. Museums in the past have not given adequate attention to this detail and are rarely explicit. Provenance is often given secondary or tertiary importance, this is in part evident from the many incidents in the past where museums had to return or repatriate objects that were looted and sold to them by art collectors (9). Very often a "decorative art" reflects not the research interests of the museum today or even in the past, but rather the enthusiasms, whims and preferences of its original collector (Paine 2012). The distortions caused by this can have a significant impact on the narratives conveyed by museum collections.

This leads us to the question of the provenance of the Bhūta kola objects at the American Museums. How did these objects come to be displayed as part of museum collections? Of the objects with a clear provenance cited, all the donors are private art collectors and enthusiasts. There is also no secondary provenance on where they acquired the object from, which begs the question of the life and afterlife of these objects away from their cultures. It is clear from earlier ethnographic records that once the masks are taken off by the performer after the festival season is over, they are kept safe for the next festival. But the evidence from the masks suggests that they were not entirely made for aesthetic pleasure—or that like other forms of divine images in Indian religions, their aesthetic qualities are linked to their status as divine images/objects. And the question remains as to what was the exact route by which these artefacts found their way from altars and festivals to collectors and later to museums.

Bhūta Objects in a non-local Western Museum and Indigenous Ontologies

The Bhūta Kola artefacts may not resume their former role as ritual objects, unlike certain other Indian images. Tapati Guha-Thakurta refers to the Chola bronzes as wonderful examples of those Indian images which seem to be able to move strategically in and out of different concurrent identities, negotiating the demands of both their artistic and religious (re)inscriptions in the present (Guha-Thakurta 2007). A rather new approach is to look at the categories of 'religious' and the 'artistic' as less fixed and stable values, and more as a shifting, transmuting ground for the positioning of these sculpted icons (Guha-

Thakurta 2007). Similarly, the Bhūta Kola objects may also negotiate their shifting values and serve as an example of the blurring lines between "art" and "religion".

Though not yet requested to be returned to the Tulu region, they now occupy a liminal space, navigating multiple identities as objects that once held religious significance while currently conveying aesthetic value. Despite this, these objects could prove to be valuable resources for future study. Bhūta Kola provides an ideal context for examining the interplay between religion and geography, as the performers transform the space into an intimate and sacred place. Religious expressions, as demonstrated in Bhūta Kola, offer a window into cosmological beliefs and their relationship to the natural world. The objects used in these rituals serve as vessels for the manifestation of deities and are integral to the performance. Therefore, while the Bhūta Kola artefacts may not return to their previous role as ritual objects, they still hold significant cultural and religious value. It may be fair to say that these objects raise questions not only about their own identities but also about the ways we understand the religious traditions in which these objects were created and which they represent in museums today.

Moreover, these objects also serve as one of the many examples of non-local, indigenous objects in Western museums that provide immense potential for incorporating the study of indigenous ontologies. Over the last two decades, scholarly advancements across various disciplines in the humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences have converged into what is commonly referred to as an "ontological turn" (Holbraad & Morten 2017). This term denotes a shift away from the epistemological critique of knowledge production, which was deeply rooted in the prior "linguistic" turn (10), emphasising texts, discourse formations, social constructivism, and cultural representation. Instead, there is a move towards a radical reconsideration of the ontological foundation of reality itself, along with the diverse forms of "life" (entities, relationships, and materialities) that both inhabit and constitute reality (11).

A shared foundational critique of the Western Enlightenment unifies these movements, specifically targeting the centrality accorded to the individual, intentional "subject", and various dualisms such as culture-nature, subject-object, spirit-matter, animate-inanimate, mind-body, and human-nonhuman (Harman 2002, Coole & Frost 2010, Sahlins 2013, Tallbear 2017, Harraway 2016). The overarching goal of these studies is to reassess the conventional model for historical inquiry by challenging the notion of the singular, physically bound autonomous human as the primary form of life and agent of history. Instead, these movements seek to reorient the study of history by re-examining the human within emergent, distributed, and relational networks that encompass a diverse array of human and other-than-human entities, agencies, and materialities. This re-

evaluation aims to transcend traditional boundaries and embed the human within a more holistic understanding of interconnected and dynamic relationships. Therefore, in this exploration of material culture, how can we grasp the ontological significance of the objects in question within the community? This interrogation underscores the need for a more culturally embedded and contextually informed approach, encouraging a re-evaluation of scholarly frameworks and paradigms to better align with the perspectives and insights emerging from the communities and practices being studied. This paper is a preliminary study that traces the presence of Tulu ritual objects in the museums, while upcoming work will focus on the materiality, craft, and iconography, and how these aspects will impact their presence in the museums.

Notes

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[2] It is typically conducted annually between the months of December and February right after the harvest season. However, there are also instances where it is conducted once every two, ten, fifteen or twenty years by families.

[3] Bhūta is a past passive participle from the root bhū 'to have been or existed'. The term is used also to refer to the spirits of deceased people or ancestors.

[4] The word "original" here does not stand for any inherent or essential characteristics but as the location of origin, where the object was used in a ritual setting.

[5] David Carrier explores the concept of 'metamorphosis' in his book Museum Skepticism (2006), highlighting how a museum artifact undergoes a transformative process to become a 'work of art'. He emphasizes the collaborative efforts between art writers and museum curators in shaping the 'envelopes' that define and enhance the presentation of art. This is also further emphasised in Paine 2012, Buggeln et al 2017.

[6] The word embodier, performer, god-dancer, are all used interchangeably here.

[7] Eck (1981) calls it "Sanctification by adhesion", wherein "breathlife," is infused into the image during this rite, "establishing the breathlife." This was in the context of temple images of the Hindu pantheon, however, a comparison may be made to showcase the similarity of concepts.

[8] Kopytoff 1986, Tilley 2006, Hoskins 2006; Latour (2003) also emphasises the non-human agency in his Actor-Network Theory (ANT).

[9] For example, one golden coffin of Nedjemankh, purchased by New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2017 was repatriated in September 2019, after the district attorney's office discovered it had been looted from Minya during the 2011 revolution. From there, smugglers trafficked it, allegedly restored it and furnished fake export papers. It then went to France, where antiquities dealers arranged its sale to the Met for $4 million.

[10] The linguistic turn originated with Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1921). In the 1920s and early 1930s, the logical positivists deepened the turn through their outright rejection of metaphysics; in line with their scientific outlook, they also sought to merge it with 'ideal language philosophy'.

[1] This shift towards ontological considerations is also situated within a broader and more expansive framework known as the "material turn," encompassing diverse interdisciplinary movements collectively termed "new materialisms." These movements, including "object-oriented ontologies" (Harman 1999), "speculative realism" (Bessier 2006), "actor-network-theory" (Latour 2005), "new vitalism" (Bennett 2010), and "thing theory" (Brown 2004), are informed by a synthesis of poststructuralism, post-Marxism, posthumanism, feminism, and queer theory.

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