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Chasing the Antelopes: A Personal Reflection

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“... the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where
we started and know the place for the first time.”

- T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*

Introduction

On a recent trip to India, I visited the Ajanta cave complex in the western state of Maharashtra, which resonated strongly with me on both a personal and a scholarly level, and caused me to reflect on the discussion around documents and antelopes that continues to thrive, thanks to the Document Academy. Discussions around the fixity of documents, the portability of documents, and whether, for instance, antelopes and cave paintings can be considered documents are all part of the literature in this field, and my visit made me reconsider my understanding of much of this literature. This paper details this process in the form of a reflection.

Background

The Ajanta caves are a group of thirty large rock-cut two-storey-tall man-made structures hollowed out of granite cliffs on the inner side of a 70-foot (20-metre) ravine in the shape of a horseshoe (Figure 1) around a bend in the river. The caves have walls and ceilings with paintings, along with stone sculptures and sophisticated architectural features that provide evidence of a very advanced civilization dating back from 1st Century BCE to 7th Century CE. Set in a densely forested area in the world's largest basaltic plateau between the southern Silk Route and the Spice Route, they are also the oldest extant example of Indian paintings apart from rock paintings. Although India has no dearth of much older monuments and ancient art, older than these caves, they are either architectural or sculptural, and none contain extant paintings.

The Ajanta caves are adorned with paintings and sculptures, and many are under a waterfall during some parts of the year. The site served as a monsoon refuge for wandering monks, and as a monastery, a studio, and a school for hundreds of years; each cave can be classified into a room for worship (*vihara*) or a place of dwelling (*chaitya graha*), but all were also rooms for teaching and learning. Although the various patrons of the project were not all Buddhists, they actively encouraged the pursuit of art and architecture here, believing that all beauty was one; just as all religions were one.



Figure 1: View of the Ajanta Caves

As for the paintings themselves, the technique employed by the painters is still in use in the walls of many a humble dwelling in rural India; the foundations of the murals were first inlaid in a plaster of clay, cow dung and rice husk, and this layer was then coated with fine lime-wash on which designs were outlined with brush and the color filled in with pigments (Pant 1998). The pigments used were the yellow earth, red ochre, lapis lazuli, greensand (glaucomite), lamp black and copper oxide (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Inside of Cave 17

The central theme of the wall paintings fall into two main categories: narrative scenes from the Buddha's life and illustrations of the *Jataka Tales*, or variations of tales from the original Sanskrit animistic tales called the *Panchatantra* that were narrated in the Pali language by the Buddha to his disciples during the course of his life – these tales were the inspiration for the later *Arabian Nights*, a labyrinthine matrix of stories that all tied together at the end. Many of *Aesop's Fables* were derived from them too.

In these dark “shadowless caves” (Rukeseyer 1944), with no natural light to speak of, an entire pageant of life unfolds in vivid colors once one gets used to the dark. Enlightened otherworldly beings are caught in a “gale of stillness” (Kramrisch 1937) alongside everyday life scenes depicting men and women from different races, countries and various walks of life – a very middle-class, mercantile

and multicultural world – with foreigners and traders expressing a variety of emotions.

The paintings also depict birds, plants, celestial beings, and animals both mythical and real, specifically elephants, monkeys, dogs, horses, deer, and yes, antelopes (Figures 3, 6 & 7). You see, one of the Bodhisattvas, or the previous incarnations of the Buddha, was an antelope, and this is described in a Jataka tale often referred to as the story of the Golden Antelope – a creature that can strike gold with its hoof steps, and analogous to the Goose that lays golden eggs; the story demonstrates the value of compassion and friendship. In fact, antelopes are at the feet of many Buddha sculptures at Ajanta (Figure 5) and the Bodhisattva himself is depicted as wearing antelope skin to denote that he himself had taken the form of a Golden Antelope (Figure 4).



Figure 3: Scene from Mahakapi Jataka in Cave 17



Figure 4: Detail of Padmapani Avalokiteswara in Cave 1



Figure 5: Detail of Antelopes at the feet of a sculpture of Dharmachakra Buddha in Cave 4



Figure 6: Detail from Cave 1



Figure 7: Detail of a painting in Cave 1

Reflection

In a personal sense, these document – and I do believe that each one of these paintings is a document, and I will explain my reasons presently – mean much more to me than being a world heritage site as UNESCO deemed it in 1983. Each one of these paintings has a visual presence that evokes my childhood memories of those long and lazy summer evenings spent with my grandmother on her porch-swing back in Madras, laying my head on her lap, listening to her narrate stories from the world’s myths, legends, and fables, including the Buddhist *Jataka Tales*, *Arabian Nights*, *Aesop’s Fables*, the Hindu *Ocean of Stories*, the Sanskrit *Panchatantra* and *Hitopadesa*, epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and several tales from Tamil folklore. These stories were creatively manipulated to make them more interesting to me; I was always one of the characters in these stories, and once, the antelope even had my name. I was homeschooled until I was ten years old, and hence I learned everything about the world through these stories. This love for storytelling that I acquired as a child has made me passionate about literature for life. Visiting the labyrinth of these horseshoe shaped Ajanta caves, it felt like a homecoming for me, back into wondrous world of my childhood.

Brown and Duguid (2002) agree with Bruno Latour’s (1986) notion of documents as “immutable mobiles,” – a stable, consistent, reproducible and transportable object – with the “ability to circulate, unlike, for example, cave walls, on which humanity made its mark long before paper was around. The other is their immutability. We expect this book to travel unchanged, so that what reaches you is the same as what left the publisher.” (Brown & Duguid 2002). Hence they reject the notion of cave paintings as documents. Despite this tension between fixity and fluidity, I do consider these immobile cave paintings visual documents that provide evidence of my cultural heritage and also a source of information about how my ancestors lived and about their worldview. Ajanta was a center of learning, housing several teachers and students, and these paintings were conceptualized as pedagogical tools by the Buddhist monks, same as a teacher might use overheads in our world. This is not unlike the origins of the word document from *documentum*, which meant “model, lecture, teaching, and demonstration.” (Lund 2009). As an educator myself, I can now appreciate this definition a lot more than I did before.

The paintings on the walls of these caves are indeed a representation of the *Jataka Tales* that were both orally passed down through generations and were also written down by the Buddha’s disciples in Pali and in Tibetan, and some of these survive as texts written on birch bark. These are the same documents (both oral and text) around which many Indian and Buddhist societies are built, with compassion for animals and the belief in an afterlife as their main foci. This is not unlike Levy’s (2001) discussion of religious societies built around sacred textual

‘documents’ such as the Bible, the Torah, or the Koran, and he even ascribes capitalism to the replication of the immutable documents that form its foundation.

My grandmother’s stories had Varuna, the Hindu/Zoroastrian God of wind, riding Makara, a creature that is a cross between a fish and an antelope in a story that closely resembles the theory of evolution. Vayu, the God of wind, rides an antelope that runs like, well, the wind. There were also Jataka tales about the Antelope Birth, the Golden Antelope, and The Antelope, the Woodpecker and the Turtle. Nevertheless, without having listened to these ancient stories passed down from generation to generation, I may not have made any sense of the seemingly chaotic collection of humans and animals on the walls of the Ajanta, for the paintings are not ‘framed’ in any way, and are not narrated in a linear manner; they jut against each other for attention. Without a Buddhist monk or a grandmother to keep these stories alive, these paintings may mean entirely different things to different people. Perhaps then, it is the oral stories I heard that are my documents that give me my meaning to the documented pictures on these walls?

Levy, in an attempt to answer the question: *What are Documents?* describes documents as “talking things”. They are “things” we have given our voice to and sent out into the world to serve some sort of purpose for us. They are the signifiers to the signified meaning of these stories *a la* Saussure. Although written forms of documents are considered only pale shadows of human evidence that is incapable of dialogue, it is their fixity that makes them so useful and important. This “fixity,” this repetitiveness, the document’s ability to tell the same thing over and over again in different points of time and space, gives us a sense of stability and security, much as my grandmother’s telling and retelling of the same stories over and over again gave me security as a child, and just as seeing the ever-beautiful paintings in the Ajanta caves gives me a sense of stability as an adult. After all, isn’t a sense of permanence via documenting ourselves through art, literature or otherwise, something we humans always aspired towards? I will pass on these stories to the next generation, in my own voice, but the purpose has a fixity that cannot be represented by a “document as thing” approach alone.

Levy focuses mainly on the conventional way we think of documents (written forms, photos, etc.) and not in the sense Buckland (1997) posits in “What is a Document?” where a lot of things could be a document, including an antelope. What about an antelope? Is an antelope informative? Is it evidence? Buckland cites Suzanne Briet’s 1951 manifesto on documentation and her antelope discussion as support for his argument that just about anything is informative. According to Buckland (1997), an antelope out in the wild is not informative, but a newly discovered species of antelope that was being studied and exhibited in a zoo would be considered informative, and therefore is information. Thus, something becomes information only when acted upon by the human mind and put in context with our previous knowledge, or placed in an organized, meaningful relationship with other

evidence—that gives an object its documentary status (Buckland, 1998). The antelope is just another antelope until someone does something with it – write about it, study it through science or art, or, as in the case of the *Jataka Tales*, or simply just make up stories about talking antelopes. These cave paintings serve as a form of evidence (and document of) and validation for those tales by carrying that information in a structured manner within its original context. In this way, they fulfill the social role of the document, “not simply to communicate but also to coordinate social practices” (Brown and Duguid 1996). Or as Foucault (2002) says:

...let us say that history, in its traditional form, undertook to ‘memorise’ the monuments of the past, transform them into documents, and lend speech to those traces which, in themselves, are often not verbal, or which say in silence something other than what they actually say; in our time, history is that which transforms documents into monuments (Foucault 2002).

Ajanta is indeed considered a universal monument (and hence a document) of human heritage, and, there have been some very laudable efforts by the IGNCA (The Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts) and the Archeological Survey of India to document these cave images and build a library of photographs taken with the help of sophisticated, non-damaging image-capturing devices, thus creating a set of digital documents and a digital library. Some of these are at ajantacaves.org. Levy discusses the fact that many people are talking about the death of the printed document, about the death of fixed and stable forms of documents in the face of the digital document. Digital documents are very much mobiles, but their immutability can be argued, for they can be easily altered. What Levy suggests is that digital documents are not opposites of “fixed” documents – they actually serve the same function. They are still our *talking things* that we send out to communicate for us. It's just that we are always looking for ways to “achieve fixity in the digital world, not that we are trying to abolish it, or, worse yet, that fixity is inherently absent from the new medium” (Levy 2001). Ranganathan (1963) defines documents as embodied micro thought on paper or other material, fit for physical handling, transport across space, and preservation through time. These paintings have certainly met all these attributes of documents, especially now with the digitization making it transportable across space, and time.

Richard Cox (2001), a scholar of archives, stresses the importance of the record and not the technology. It's not the technology that's important to Levy either, it's the document's communicative stability that is important. He believes the digital forms of text documents (or paintings in this case) already have this fixity, this communicative stability. Brown and Duguid (1996) discuss the need to see documents as more than just information carriers and as information in and of themselves. The digital photo images of these paintings, therefore, provide the same information as the paintings, but cannot convey the context of the originals. So, do

these digital replicas still have the same meaning and magic of the Ajanta Caves? Not for me.

Projects like the Yale Peabody Museum's project on Machu Picchu recreate this personal experience through virtual technologies, and there are efforts to do the same for Ajanta, but it is still important to preserve the original, immobile, mutable document. These fast-deteriorating paintings were once lost to humankind until the existence of these caves were discovered in 1819 by a hunting party tracking tigers. Ironically, these caves, with many stories of tigers (including one of the Bodhisattva sacrificing his life to save the a tiger's cubs), were a refuge to tigers and other animals during centuries of disuse, and now, these tigers themselves (also documents, if we accept antelopes as one) are sadly close to extinction. Many notable efforts have been made since then to preserve and document these paintings, both through conservation and through the making of copies, whether they are hand-drawn or through a lens, darkly. Many of these copies have since been destroyed in two separate fires at museums in India and the UK. The soot that almost totally covers many of the as yet uncovered paintings came from oil lamps and incense used by resident Buddhist monks during their prayer sessions centuries ago, that covered up the newly-finished paintings almost completely, but ironically, they have also helped preserve the paintings from other environmental factors over time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Ajanta is both a symbolic and an embodied document that is intricately connected to my and my family's memory practices and how we perpetuate our group memory and consciousness through oral, written, and pictorial evidence, and hence the cave paintings need the attention of documentalists as much as they need the attention of preservationists.

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