Curating the Sacred, Enchanting the Ordinary:

Things, Practices and Local Museums in Northeast Thailand

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Preface

The specific focus of this thesis is the largely neglected topic of local museums in Northeast Thailand, with particular attention to 'the sacred'. It provides an unprecedented and in-depth study of this subject matter. Beyond this, however, the thesis proposes an original theoretical framework and careful concept-definition to make a significant, even brilliant, contribution to museology and museum debate – especially to questions of colonialism, decolonisation and ontologies – more broadly. It deserves to be widely read.

It is remarkable how much is covered by the author, Siriporn Srisinurai – or Si, as I know her – within these pages of clear and economical writing. We delve into the fascinating world of these local museums, with particular attention given to selected objects – such as Buddha relics, palm-leaf manuscripts and sacred statues, but also dinosaur fossils and items of everyday life, such as razors. Through an approach that Si has developed, which she calls 'multi-sited museography', she shows us how certain things come to be deemed sacred and what happens when they are. At the same time, the writing ranges well beyond Northeast Thailand to show how these museums should not simply be seen as somehow 'indigenous' or entirely different from more metropolitan and established museums. Rather, they are entangled with other kinds of museums in Thailand and elsewhere (such as the British Museum and the Ethnological Museum in Berlin), and they do not necessarily reject science and professional museum practice but adopt and adapt these in specific ways. There are big messages to be learned from this careful and detailed attention. These include unsettling of some of museology's (and other disciplines') characteristic oppositions, including between the national and the local, the indigenous and the modern, science and magic, and the colonizer and colonized. Notions of animism, perspectivism and alternative ontologies, among others, are also explored and nuanced in new ways through these examples and through a heady mix of theorizing that is brought to bear. This includes, among others, Barad, Deleuze and Guattari, Latour and Lovelock. I don't want to say too much here because I want to persuade you to read the thesis. But in case you need a little more temptation, let me mention the novel deployment of Bakhtin's 'chronotope',

the thrilling development of notions of Gaia and the network of differences, and the fresh take on questions of decolonization and return.

Supervising a PhD is always a journey of learning. As Si first came to work with me at the University of York, where she completed an MA by dissertation, the journey has been longer than usual as well as especially enlightening. In York, she looked at local museums in North Yorkshire, having been surprised at just how many such museums there were. From her prior reading of museum studies before arriving in Europe, she had learned much about national and metropolitan museums but, as she observed, these kinds of museums were rarely mentioned. In some ways it became her mission not just to give them attention but to consider how museum theory might be different if it were based more on these kinds of museums than on national ones – or what she calls 'institutional museums'. This didn't mean, however, that she began from an assumption of them as wholly different or separate. Indeed, her use of postcolonial theory to analyse local North Yorkshire museums showed how mistaken this would be. This theorizing also opened up different – and important – ways of seeing them. Here, she briefly revisits that work as well as extending and expanding her project through the lens of local museums in Northeast Thailand.

Readers of this thesis will not be able to enjoy quite such a long and rich journey as I have had, with Si as my guide. But this condensed and carefully crafted version – in which every concept and every sentence has been selected with great deliberation – is a wonderful opportunity to read the fruits of her work. I thank her for my own journey and urge you to take one with her too.

Sharon Macdonald

Berlin, January 2022

Abstract

The thesis examines problematic relationships between colonialism, knowledge and curatorial practices as these relate to collections that are concerned, or linked, with 'the sacred' in local museums in Northeast Thailand. This qualitative research deploys a theoretical framework derived from post-colonial theory, actor-network theory and Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotopic and dialogical approach.

Two major arguments of the study are about seeing local museums as 'museum entanglements' and 'entangled museums'. Firstly, this thesis argues against seeing these local museums as either 'non-professional' or 'non-western' museums. Instead, it proposes to understand them as situated in the colonial contexts of Southeast Asia, and to see their practices as responses to, and interlocutors in dialogue with, prior museums that collect and curate the same material collections, and that have been influenced by colonialism and nationalism.

Secondly, instead of seeing these local museums exclusively as 'indigenous museums', this thesis proposes to see them as 'entangled museums' that are a result of co-existences and interactions of different kinds of knowledge, which diversely derive from religions, magic and science. In Northeast Thailand, curating sacred things – such as Buddha relics, religious statues and standing stones, involves dealing with epistemic differences that are based in Buddhism, Hinduism, animism, magic, and so on. These differences lead to diverse dialogic practices dedicated to the sacred e.g. merit-making, offering, worshipping, making wishes, and so on. These practices sometimes appear alongside scientific museum practices e.g. cataloguing, dating, preserving and exhibiting.

Local museums not only critique influences of nationalism and colonialism in institutional and professional museums, they also reflect alternatives from, and entanglements with, museum knowledge from various sources. As such, they shed light on the diversity and dynamics of museums in relation to colonialism and its legacies.

Keywords: Museum Entanglements, Entangled Museums, Dialogic Practices, Postcolonial Studies

Zusammenfassung

Die Dissertation untersucht problematische Beziehungen zwischen Kolonialismus, Wissen und kuratorischen Praktiken, da diese sich auf Sammlungen beziehen, die in lokalen Museen im Nordosten Thailands mit dem ‚Sakralen' zu tun haben oder damit verbunden sind. Diese qualitative Forschung verwendet einen theoretischen Rahmen, der sich aus der postkolonialen Theorie, der Akteur-Netzwerk-Theorie und Mikhail Bakhtins chronotopischem und dialogischem Ansatz ableitet.

Zwei Hauptargumente der Studie sind, lokale Museen als ‚Museumsverstrickungen' und ‚verstrickte Museen' zu sehen. Zunächst spricht diese Dissertation dagegen, diese lokalen Museen entweder als ‚nicht-professionelle' oder als, nicht-westliche' Museen zu betrachten. Stattdessen schlägt sie vor, sie als in den kolonialen Kontexten Südostasiens verortet zu verstehen und ihre Praktiken als Antworten auf, sowie Gesprächspartner im Dialog mit, vorherigen Museen zu sehen, die die gleichen Materialsammlungen sammeln und kuratieren und die vom Kolonialismus und Nationalismus beeinflusst wurden.

Überdies schlägt diese Dissertation vor, diese lokalen Museen nicht ausschließlich als ‚indigene Museen' zu betrachten, sondern sie als ‚verstrickte Museen' zu betrachten, die das Ergebnis von Koexistenzen und Interaktionen verschiedener Arten von Wissen sind, die sich auf unterschiedliche Weise aus Religionen, Magie und Wissenschaft ergeben. Im Nordosten Thailands beinhaltet das Kuratieren heiliger Dinge – wie Buddha-Reliquien, religiöse Statuen und stehende Steine - den Umgang mit erkenntnistheoretischen Unterschieden, die im Buddhismus, Hinduismus, Animismus, in der Magie und so weiter begründet sind. Diese Unterschiede führen zu vielfältigen dialogischen Praktiken, die sich dem Heiligen widmen, z.B. Verdienstabgabe, Opfergabe, Verehrung, Wünsche äußern und so weiter. Diese Praktiken erscheinen manchmal neben wissenschaftlichen Museumspraktiken, z.B. dem Katalogisieren, Datieren, Konservieren und Ausstellen.

Lokale Museen kritisieren nicht nur Einflüsse von Nationalismus und Kolonialismus in institutionellen und professionellen Museen, sie reflektieren auch Alternativen von, und Verstrickungen mit, Museumswissen aus verschiedenen Quellen. Als solche beleuchten sie die Vielfalt und Dynamik von Museen in Bezug auf den Kolonialismus und seine Hinterlassenschaften.

Stichwörter: Museumsverstrickungen, Verstrickte Museen, Dialogischen Praktiken, Postkoloniale Studien

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This thesis examines problematic relationships between museums, knowledge and colonialism in Northeast Thailand. To do so, it focuses on collections found in this area and highlights these issues especially through a focus on things that are concerned, or linked, with 'the sacred'. The research deploys a theoretical framework derived from post-colonial theory, actor-network theory and Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotopic and dialogical approach. It traces trajectories of things and differences of curatorial practices through multi-sited museography, which is integrated with documentary, visual and biographical research.

Museums and colonialism form one of the most significant debates in contemporary museum studies. This thesis aims to have a dialogue with this debate and examine influences of colonialism and colonial legacies in connection with museums from a marginal location of Thailand, the so-called 'Isan' or 'North-east' region. Instead of starting with large-scale and professional museums, such as national museums or institutional museums, this research starts with another group of small-scale museums broadly described as local museums and traces the relational dialogues and entanglements between them. This is because local museums in practice have been influenced by colonialism and scientific knowledge less than national museums and institutional museums. Moreover, in several cases, local museums play the role of local people's cultural practices responding to colonialism or nationalism.

As modern institutions, museums attract a variety of expectations from various social groups and actors. For instance, during the early modern period, a number of institutional museums emerged to play the role of civilising projects aimed at presenting human civilisation, gaining scientific knowledge and educating the public (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Bennett, 1995). However, more recently, some institutional museums have been criticised for their role in legitimising the colonial empires (Coombes, 1994; Lidchi, 1997; Barringer and Flynn, 1998; Bennett et al., 2017). This criticism has been aimed at the large museums in Europe as well as national and ethnographic museums elsewhere,

especially in areas that had been a part of a colonial empire or were influenced by nationalism and internal colonisation (Anderson, 1991; MacKenzie, 2009). This critique also entangles museums in a variety of concerns with power relations and politics of recognition (Smith, 2007, p. 159).

In comparison with Thai national museums or large-scale museums, which are publicly well-known, local museums in Thailand are often regarded as non-professional museums with limited knowledge of established curatorial practices. In academic literature on museum anthropology and museum studies, however, these local museums sometimes have been described as non-western museums or indigenous museums, recognised for their indigenous agency and curatorship (Simpson, 1996; Kreps, 2003). In brief, this thesis proposes two major arguments about local museums – the first argument is about seeing them as 'museum entanglements' with prior museums that collected and exhibited the same material things, and the second argument is about seeing local museums as 'entangled museums' with an epistemic co-existence of differences (e.g. religions, sciences and magic).

First, the thesis argues against seeing local museums in Northeast Thailand as either non-professional or non-western museums. Instead, it proposes to understand them as 'museum entanglements' that are situated in the colonial contexts of Southeast Asia, which was a long period stretching from the late 19th century until recently, after the end of the Cold War. This thesis basically sees those local museums as practices or responses to, and interlocutors in dialogue with, colonialism and nationalism as these relate to museums.

In particular, it investigates them in relation to institutional museums that collect and curate the same material collections, both in Thailand and abroad, which have been constructed within an atmosphere of colonialism and colonial politics since the arrival of the European empires into the land that nowadays is called Southeast Asia. The middle Mekong region on the right side of that river partly includes the Isan area or Northeast Thailand, which was a part of the conflict zone. The areas on the left side of the Mekong

River were once French colonies and are now Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Although the colonial empires in the Mekong region and Southeast Asia are definitely in the past, the effects and colonial legacies still influence knowledge in/of museums and curatorial practices in the museum field, especially in Thailand. This colonial legacy and the influence of colonialism are critical issues that this thesis aims to analyse and go beyond.

Second, instead of seeing these local museums exclusively as indigenous museums or non-western museums, this thesis proposes to see them as 'entangled museums' that are a result of the co-existence and interaction of different kinds of knowledge, which diversely derive from religion, magic and science. In Northeast Thailand, curating sacred things such as Buddha relics, religious statues and standing stones involves dealing with cosmological differences and diversity in the sacred, which is based in both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, Hinduism, and various alternatives (e.g. animism, spirits of ancestors and magic). In the case of local museums, it is possible to see ritual and dialogic practices dedicated to the sacred such as merit-making, worshipping, making a wish, asking for luck or protection, and so on. These practices sometimes appear alongside scientific museum practices (e.g. cataloguing, dating, conservation and exhibiting).

The key words of entanglement and entangled that I use in this thesis basically cover three specific meanings. First, they refer to the rhizome of complex relationships between things or actants that may be difficult to eliminate or separate individually (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Latour, 1999; Hodder, 2012). To some extent they can be seen as the creation of new things, combinations, compositions, and hybridity, which possibly contain diversity and differences within them. The second meaning relates to the reciprocal appropriation of differences or different things that have been contacted and exchanged such that some cultural elements are similar to case studies of Nicholas Thomas's entangled objects (Thomas, 1991); his idea about the entangled can appropriately be applied to museums. The third meaning concerns the kind of specific relation that derives from quantum physics. The original idea basically is concerned with relationships at a distance from unconnected things (Barad, 2007, pp. 174–175). The idea of entanglement provides a lens to see things that once were unconnected or connected to the external

thing in different ways. The external thing can be seen as the intra-action or the connected despite not apparently having tangible links or visible connections (Barad, ibid.). By adopting this idea, it is possible to see entanglements and complex relationships between local museums and museums, such as the national museums and institutional museums both in Thailand and abroad.

In Thailand, during the last 30 years at least, there has been an increasing number of local museums, particularly small-scale, vernacular, and community museums, emerging in many parts of the countryside and provincial areas in Thailand including the Northeast region (Koanantakool et al., 2004). These local museums are very diverse in terms of collections, stories, participants and backgrounds. According to an online database of museums in Thailand run by the SAC (Accessed in June 2015), there are 1,376 museums recorded overall in the country. There are 225 museums located in Northeast Thailand and around 100 museums that can be broadly identified as 'local museums', which are not run by the national government, but at least partially belong to their localities and the local community. The term 'local museums' in fact overlaps with the names of other museums and cultural institutions that carry out similar activities, such as community-based museums, monastery museums, folk museums, or the cultural and educational centres (Koanantakool, ibid.).

According to the Thai Governmental Office of National Museums (2008), the first museum in Thailand or Siam at that time, was initiated by King Rama IV around 1850, and initially located in a building in his palace designed for his private pleasure but occasionally opened to royal guests. During the reign of King Rama V, the royal museum developed continually until it first opened to the public in 1887 and then became the first National Museum in Bangkok in 1937.

However, this version of the history of museums in Thailand seems to be the history of Thai national museums rather than the social history of museums in Thailand, and less concerned about non-governmental museums and people's participation or entanglements between Thai national museums and local museums. As Srisakra Vallibhotama (1996)

states, local museums in Thailand actually began and developed alongside the national museums for a long, although unknown, period. In fact, there had been interest in and efforts at collecting and keeping material objects in collections found in local areas all over the country but not yet established and opened as public museums. Meanwhile, several private collectors donated their collections to national museums and some monastery museums were also established and recognised as a branch of national museums in provincial areas (Office of National Museums, Department of Fine Arts, 2014).

In his canonical book, Benedict Anderson (1991) pointed out the significant role of museums as a tool of political elites for constructing and maintaining national identity and nationality. In his view, national museums are a part of the civilising project and imagining the nation as well as other modern technologies like mapping, the census, and new scientific studies such as archaeology and history. In the case of Siam, museums had been appreciated by the kings, royal family and several Siamese elites. The Siamese government had granted some museum officers permission to visit and study several prominent museums in Europe and return to develop the royal museums in Siam (Thai Governmental Office of National Museums, 2008).

Nevertheless, the strong interest in museum affairs led to at least two unintended consequences. First, it cultivated the same kind of interest and enthusiasm among a wider range of public and social groups in related activities such as collecting, study trips and surveys. Second, in some people, conversely, it cultivated a sense of loss and attention to protecting their treasures or heritage and setting up their own museums.

In *Collecting Colonialism,* Gosden and Knowles (2001) discusses the relationships between the Western collectors and local people in the Pacific, when local people played various roles and had various relationships, especially commercial, with the collectors. However, indigenous or local people were not all of the same mind. Some local people may trade their indigenous objects and obtain more from others for commercial purposes, but some may start to collect in order to keep the objects in their community. Stories like this could

often be heard from various local museums in the Northeast and other regions of Thailand (Koanantakool, 2004; Srisinurai, 2008).

Stories of local museum establishment sometimes sound quite different from the official history of national museums and institutional museums in the centre of Bangkok. The trajectory of things, especially sacred things, across geographical and cultural landscapes into museums seems to me a critical issue. This crucial issue needs more concern and studies as well as a refocusing towards stories from local and marginal areas. These are the substantive reasons why this research maintains its focus on local museums rather than institutional or other kinds of museums. This thesis proposes to use multi-sited museography to explore relationships between museums, as these are significant factors in change and in museum activities.

Substantially, the major arguments of this thesis are involved with problematic relationships between power and knowledge, which have long been debated in post-colonial studies. As Foucault (1988) critically revealed, objective knowledge can legitimise and be involved with power rather than being value-free. Therefore, the complex relationship between museums and power should be investigated through the study of relations and interactions between museums and different epistemes which often co-existed in the same museum space.

In the case of local museums, one of the important areas of interest concerns sacred things and the sacred. In the beginning stage, my working definition of 'the sacred' was nearly equivalent to 'the religious' and I initially looked at religious objects or material things, which closely related to religions, particularly Buddhism and Hinduism. However, this initial working definition has been expanded during the research process to animism, spirit cults and magic based on case studies of Isan museums.

To handle sacred things and understand curatorial practices in local museums, museum practitioners and researchers may need more than scientific knowledge and modern practices. This is because the several academic disciplines primarily working with museums (e.g. museology, ethnology, history, art history, archaeology, and palaeontology)

are basically rooted in the sciences and deploy scientific methods as their curatorial practices.

This critical issue also links with the question of why sacred things matter and why this thesis should focus on them. In Thailand, sacred things and sacredness are highly respected and significant for local museums and museum practitioners including local people in general; as such, they seem to be regarded as a crucial part of rural life or daily practices. Some of them are things related to religion and religious life, which may or may not belong to people who are involved with the museums.

Through this focus, this thesis concentrates on epistemic co-existence (Pickstone, 2000, p. 25) – which is a direct critique of Foucault and concerns itself with marginal knowledge and dialogues between differences in knowledge. However, this dialogue may be impossible without a balance of power, or a redistribution and collaborative relationship between experts and vernacular curators. This issue certainly relates to post-colonial critiques of scientific knowledge and academic disciplines and their roles in supporting and legitimising the exercise of power and colonisation in the name of civilisation or modernisation.

To understand the complexity and dialogues among epistemic differences encountered at local museums in the collection of sacred things seems to be an appropriate point of departure. I therefore decided to focus on these kinds of collections and propose to critically investigate the following research questions:

1. What kinds of things have been regarded as sacred or linked with the sacred in local museums in Northeast Thailand and why?

2. How have those sacred things been collected, handled and exhibited in local museums in Northeast Thailand in comparison with other kinds of museums that curate the same kind of things? What are the differences, entanglements and dialogues among them?

3. How do colonialism and cultural differences influence or link with differences in curatorial practices, knowledge, interpretations and the classifications of things in museums?

Framing the study

This research is based on three complementary theoretical approaches: post-colonial theory, actor-network theory (ANT) and Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotopic and dialogical approach. These approaches can be understood as a variety of post-structuralism and share some of its concerns, especially with singularity, fixity, binary opposition and moving beyond centring. This section aims to explain why these theories are relevant to this study and how they worked to frame the major argument of this thesis. The main reason is possibly that the limitations of one theory can be compensated for by the strengths of another.

Post-colonial theory: *Orientalism* and beyond

Post-colonial theory became a set of significant references in the field of museum studies particularly after Edward Said published his influential book, *Orientalism* (1978), which criticised the mythical representation of the Orient produced by Europeans throughout academic works, especially oriental studies, and the popular media (e.g. literature, painting, film and also museums). His critical point is to understand the consequences of mythical representation in supporting and maintaining the West's higher status over the Orient, and the legitimacy of the European empires and colonisation.

Increasing interest in post-colonial theory involves the phenomena of decolonisation and post-colonisation since the decline of European empires after the end of the Second World War. In addition, a strong critical concern with post-colonialism is a focus probably because colonialism and colonial empires deeply influenced large numbers of people and their lives during the colonial period and those colonial legacies can be partially seen so far. Consequently, post-colonial criticism and post-colonial theory have come to play a major role in critical museum studies and have also led to several significant changes both in museum studies and in museum curatorial practices (Coombes, 1994; Simpson, 1996; Lidchi, 1997; Barringer and Flynn, 1998; Gosden and Knowles, 2001; Kreps, 2003; Sherman, 2008; Harrison et al., 2013).

However, there are some significant critiques of *Orientalism* (Said, 1978). McLeod (2000, pp. 46–49) summarises these in four major points: first, this work seems to lack concern with specific historical contexts; second, Said focused mainly on the construction of the representation and domination of the coloniser but was scarcely concerned with the agency and resistance of the colonised; third, Said saw the West as homogeneous and probably also stereotyped the West in the same way that the West did with the Orient; last, this book demonstrated little concern with gender differences. The last critique certainly refers to another major work in the field of post-colonial theory, *Can the subaltern speak?* by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988). Significantly, her critiques inspired this study to concern itself with the agency and voices of the subaltern, and also led to its central concern with the dialogues of the colonised and the subaltern, or perhaps 'the exhibited' in the case of museums. Spivak (1988) critically points out that both colonial agents and post-colonial theorists in fact did the same in conserving 'the subject of the West' or 'the West of the subject' (Spivak, 1988, p.66). The result seems to be the same: the voices and agency of the subaltern or the colonised mainly disappeared in a lack of concern both in the colonial representations by the West and in the critical works by post-colonial theorists.

Another crucial critique of Orientalism and some post-colonial studies is the limitation caused by binary oppositions and dichotomising concepts of the 'Orient' and the 'West' or the 'colonising subject' and the 'colonised subject' (Bhabha, 1994). Bhabha criticises this issue and addresses the circumstance of ambiguous and ambivalent relationships between the coloniser and colonised. He proposes the influential concepts of 'hybridity' and 'mimicry' and points out the significance of negotiating between the contradictory and antagonistic elements rather than merely negating one or the other (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). Bhabha is also strongly concerned with 'cultural difference' as he points out that 'the enunciation of cultural difference problematises the binary division of past and present, tradition and modernity, at the level of cultural representation and its authoritative address' (ibid. p. 51). Moreover, the concept of cultural difference is said to be useful for deconstructing the idea of the 'unity and totality of cultures' as he wrote that 'cultures

are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in the relation of Self and Other' (ibid. p. 52).

Another critique of Said's *Orientalism* is of its ahistorical nature, as his work pays little attention to specific historical contexts and changes over the large areas of the colonial space and during long periods of the colonial time. Young (2001) is one of the post-colonial theorists who makes this critique and proposes a historical analysis for post-colonial studies. Another relevant and useful concept for considering the different historical aspects is 'connected histories' especially when dealing with the complexities of modernity and globalisation. Bhambra (2009, p. 30) suggests that 'the perceived "gap" between general categories and particular experiences can be overcome by addressing difference in the context of "connected histories" – a concept originally coined by the historian Sanjay Surahmanyan (1997)'. Furthermore, connected histories actually are histories that 'do not derive from [a] singular standpoint', whether the universal standpoint that tends to link with colonialism or the standpoint of the generalised subaltern. The connected histories approach, therefore, is an approach for reconsidering 'current circumstances and trajectories of change associated with them from multiple perspectives rather than a dominant European one' (Bhamba, 2007, p. 153).

Although post-colonial theories are worthwhile for critics of power and colonial relations related to the museum, they focus primarily on linguistic and literary studies, and draw restrictively on literature and text. Conversely, they show little concern with materiality and with the complexity of social structure. This is the main reason that this study also draws on the further approach of ANT which can, in other words, be called 'a semiotics of materiality' (Law, 1999, p. 4).

Actor-network theory, agency and practice

Actor-network theory in this research means to analyse materiality and the social associations that, through the lens of ANT, become more complex, flexible, and dynamic, and cannot be separated from its actors. Law and Hassard (1999, p. 3) state that ANT argues against fixity, centring, singularity and essential dualism or dichotomised divisions –

for instance, truth and falsehood, large and small, agency and structure, before and after, human and non-human, context and content, materiality and sociality, and activity and passivity. Moreover, ANT also concentrates on displacement, movement, dissolution and fractionality and has been recognised as a branch of post-structuralism (ibid.).

According to Law (1999, p. 4), ANT can be understood as an application of post-structuralism, a semiotics of materiality or relational materiality in particular. Through the lens of ANT, semiotics therefore would not be restricted only to linguistic features or language alone. Furthermore, ANT focuses on 'performativity' whereby speech and action are not given in the order of things but, as they are performed, they transform themselves into relations within their place (ibid.). Therefore, interactions and relations between those dichotomised divisions indeed would be analysed inclusively through the frame of ANT. However, the name 'actor-network' sometimes leads to confusion and embodies a tension between the 'centred actor' and the 'decentred network' or between the 'struggle to centre' and 'order from a centre' (Law, 1999, p. 5). Additionally, there is another metaphorical term, 'actant-rhizome', which Latour (1999, p. 15) mentioned, which may be more precise and imaginative in comparison with 'actor-network'. This is because the term 'actant' potentially refers to either humans or non-humans, and so it can unlock the fixed meaning of the actor as human, and free it to include non-humans. Likewise, another keyword, 'rhizome', suggested by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), can lead to new insights into associations and social structure, and provide different ways to make sense of the social in the contemporary world, which is becoming more and more complex, fluid and dynamic.

Furthermore, Latour (2009, p. 22) addresses five uncertainties in the social world that sometimes give rise to controversies over the nature of groups, actions, objects and type of study. He also points out major arguments about the sources of those uncertainties as critical conditions of complexities and distinctive changes in the contemporary world. First, the 'no group, only group formation' argues for rethinking social associations away from essential being and fixed structure to the becoming and formation of social groups or associations. Second, 'action is overtaken' points to the idea that the actor has never

been 'an actor' but rather an 'actor-network' and is made to act by other actors; action therefore is not done under the absolute control of individual consciousness. ANT proposes seeing 'action' as 'a node, a knot and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled' (Latour, 2009, p. 44).

Third, the argument 'objects too have agency' is a critical and expansive definition of 'actor' that previously focused mainly on the human and now is reconceptualised as applying to the non-human and material object. In this sense, material objects certainly can play roles, perform actions, and be involved in power relations as can human beings. This point, indeed, is crucial to this study in which I intensively investigate sacred objects and their relationships with other things, especially the social.

Fourth, Latour (2009, p.106) also states that ANT or, in more accurate words, the 'sociology of translation' deals with differences or perhaps contradictions between matters of fact and matters of concern, which could be a source of uncertainty and questioning about the existence and effective roles of 'social theory' in today's changing world. Last, the fifth source of uncertainty is controversies about academically 'risky' accounts and explanations (particularly in the social sciences) in the face of complexity and unusual difficulty.

Consequently, examining and understanding complexities, and the impacts of uncertainties, may require different acts of imagination and research–assemblage, assembling and reassembling 'the social', which become networks of either social or material things (Latour, ibid.). In museum studies, insights and research practices drawing on ANT currently seem to be relevant and worthwhile for unpacking and reassembling the collections in several kinds of museum, and especially ethnographic museums that have been critiqued by post-colonial criticism (Byrne et al., 2011; Harrison et al., 2013).

Although ANT may not concern itself intensively with colonial relationships, this approach is notably relevant and effective for tracing connections, networks, trajectories and for analysing the uncertainty, complexity, and relationships between binary opposites – for instance, relationships between cultural agency and social structure, power and

knowledge, and the coloniser and the colonised, which certainly can be seen as kinds of social relations and complexity.

In addition, ANT's key ideas, such as localising the global, and redistributing the local and connecting sites can be useful conceptual tools for analysing complex networks among local museums, sacred objects and the social based on case studies of connected histories and trajectories of the sacred things in Northeast Thailand.

However, it seems to me that ANT works well in practice with social relationships, networks and object agency, but possibly less so with aspects of dialogue, multiple voices (especially those of the subaltern or marginalised), processes of negotiation and the dialogic imagination. These would add further complexities that are relevant and should be included in the ANT conceptual framework. This significant issue, therefore, orients my research to the third area of theorising with a dialogical approach.

Bakhtin's chronotope and dialogical approach

This theoretical approach is based mainly on major works by Mikhail Bakhtin, which are diverse and cover a wide range of topics in the human and social sciences. The present study is concerned with his major ideas on dialogue and dialogic imagination that closely relate to some basic concepts, particularly chronotope and polyphony. 'Chronotope' literally means 'time-space' and Bakhtin explains that 'the chronotope is a fictional setting where historically specific relation[s] of power become visible and certain stories can take place' (Bakhtin, 1937 cited in Clifford, 1988, p. 236).

Bakhtin used this concept to make a distinction between the epic and the novel. The significance and meaning of this theoretical concept for narratives has to do with its potential as an 'organising centre for fundamental narrative events of the novel'. Moreover, the chronotope became the place where 'the knots of narrative are tied and untied' (Folch-Serra, 1990, p. 263). Folch-Serra explains the significance of Bakhtin's concept of chronotope and its connection with place and voice as follows:

> What is the significance of all these chronotopes? Bakhtin found them to
> be places where the 'knots' of narrative are tied and untied. The

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representational importance of the chronotope makes time become palpable and visible. The time of human life and historical time occur within well-delineated spatial areas. It is this fact that makes it possible to structure a representation of events in the chronotope, and around the chronotope. It serves as the primary point from which events unfold, whereas at the same time other 'binding' events, located far from the chronotope, merely appear as dry information and communicated facts. In this way, the chronotope, functioning as the primary means for materialising time in space, emerges as a centre of concretizing representation, as a force giving body to an entire narrative–whether a novel, an ethnography, or the analysis of a region. (Folch-Serra, 1990, p. 263)

The chronotopes, therefore, are the gateways to narratives and polyphony or the multiple voices (Bakhtin, 1986). This is a special characteristic of the 'novel' in contrast with the 'epic' which primarily refers to the single-voiced, fixed meaning and narrative unity (Lawson, 2011) as Bakhtin states:

whatever these meanings turn out to be, in order to enter our experience (which is social experience) they must be take on the *form of a sign* that is audible and visible for us (a hieroglyph, a mathematical formula, a verbal or linguistic expression, a sketch, etc.). Without such temporal-spatial expression, even abstract thought is impossible. Consequently, every entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 258)

For Bakhtin, the communicative sphere seems to be a battlefield for the 'forces of stasis and fixity' and 'movements, change and diversification'. This struggle is responsible for the 'continual emergence of new meaning and significances in the verbal-ideological world' (Gardiner, 1992, p. 34). The dialogue and its various processes are Bakhtin's major ideas as shown in his essays compiled in the volume *The dialogic imagination* (1981). In dialogue as a verbal process, the actors' forces may be most accurately sensed. On the

one hand, dialogue can occur between two people as external dialogue and, on the other hand, it can be internal dialogue between 'an earlier and later self' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 427).

The strength of the dialogical approach and dialogic imagination for museography and museum studies is its analytic capacity and strong focus on agency, multiple voices, and dialogues of differences; this may lead to the cultivation of open-ended conversations and solutions for contemporary debates, especially in museum arenas.

In this thesis, the idea of chronotope or time-space will be applied to data analysis as the chronotopic frame of things or 'thing-time-space'. This analytic tool basically includes another frame of 'thing' into analysis of chronotope or time-space. Referring to Bakhtin's notion about the significance of chronotopes as places where the 'knots' of narrative are tied and untied, 'thing-time-space' also shares this major idea, which becomes applicable to analysing things in museums that currently deal with more complexity and uncertainty based on ontological debates. In research findings, these issues will be discussed in more detail about connections or links between uncertain beings and relational things and also between the sacred and the non-sacred as ontological entanglements.

Research methodology

This research was carried out with a qualitative methodology that primarily involves multi-sited museography, visual analysis, documentary and biographical research. These research methods were variously used according to the research questions and characteristics of the data and its sources. This section will present my research design, why these methods were selected and how they have been used.

Multi-sited museography

This research method is derived from the anthropological research methodology of 'multi-sited ethnography' (Marcus, 1995) and was applied in my MA research (Srisinurai, 2014). Marcus (1995, pp. 105–110), briefly explains that 'multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations'; the researcher then defines the focus of their study, traces and collects data by following, for example, the people, the thing, the metaphor, the plot-story or allegory, the life or biography, or the

conflict. The strength of this methodology is about its capacity to trace trajectories and connected stories of things across times and spaces. With this methodology, similarities, differences, entanglements and dialogues between museums and related things can be seen and captured precisely.

In practice, multi-sited museographic research was undertaken in two stages. The first stage entailed museum visits or surveys and exploring background of a large number of local museums in a particular area including other kinds of museums located nearby. The second stage is a more in-depth multi-sited museography, which engages in museum observation of visual displays, exhibitions, and photographic collections in the museums.

Additionally, it should be noted that the multi-sited museography is not limited to one site or one museum but is concerned with the interaction and linkage between two or more museums. In this research, it was used across a wider range than for a comparative study of both museums. Multi-sited museographic research is also concerned with relationships among case study museums and other museums or museum contexts, such as national museums, museum alliances or museums previously established, that are famous or located nearby.

In the case of museums in Northeast Thailand, I have benefited from the SAC database of museums in Thailand where I can explore secondary data such as documentary and visual archives including records of interviews. In the initial stage of data collection, I used various documentary archives, especially museum documents and publication such as brochures, guidebooks, booklets, and books, as well as websites and online documentary sources. For most of the case studies, I have been to these museums, taken photographs, and collected local documents and related research several years ago. I have also interviewed some curators and museum practitioners during the five years from 2003 to 20008 of conducting museum surveys with around 300 local museums across the country. These materials, especially selective case studies, were verified, compared and updated during the process of data collection for this thesis in 2014-2015; see more details about case studies of local museums in Northeast Thailand below.

Visual analysis

Visual data and visual analysis are very important and useful for this research, particularly for understanding the similarities and differences among museums, and comparing them to other related museums. According to Ball and Smith (1992, pp. 19–20), there are at least two paradigms for analysing visual data, especially photographs: visual realism and visual representation. With visual realism, the major concerns in the analysis of visual data are [1] its content – what is given in the photograph; [2] its referent – whatever the photograph belongs to; and [3] its context – which context it appears in or has been made in. On the other hand, analysis of visual representation focuses on alternative aspects, which depend on the different theoretical bases underlying the analysis, such as the symbolic meanings, and hidden or deep structures of the empirical data (ibid. p. 41). Here, it is also worth being concerned with the 'multivocality of the photograph images' and the problematic relation between pictures and their captions (Banks, 2001, p. 15).

However, analysing visual data currently covers a wider range of visual material than photographs or pictures, restricted as they are to two dimensions. Emmison and Smith (2000) precisely summarise a variety of visual data based on its multiple dimensions: two-dimensional, three-dimensional, and lived visual data. Three-dimensional visual data that include objects and visual settings are crucial and a major component of a museum that is intimately engaged with the everyday experiences and practical activities of ordinary people (Emmison and Smith, 2000, p.111). Furthermore, the museum also includes 'as-lived' visual data: the house, garden, park or other kinds of places or public spaces that people 'interact in' rather than 'interact with' as three-dimensional objects (ibid. p.152). These aspects are worth analysing and interpreting how visual data relate to the museums and people's experiences.

Biographical research

Another major part of data collection that was carried out in this research is biographical research with a practical relation to various qualitative research methods such as biography, autobiography, life history, oral history, narrative analysis of lives, memory

studies, ethnography and in-depth interviews (Roberts, 2002). This part of data collection concentrates on personal and human documents (Allport, 1942; Blumer, 1969 cited in Roberts, 2002; Plummer, 2001; Merrill and West, 2009). Using this method, this study attempts to gather qualitative data related to the experiences, inspiration, perceptions and interpretations of curators and museum practitioners in regard to their museums, collections and curatorial practices.

As I have explored stories of museum-making in several cases in both Thailand and the UK, it seems to me that museum work is most likely a lifelong project both for a number of museum workers and for the museum itself. The process of constructing and establishing a museum takes a long time to complete and then run. Some have worked with the museums for several years or decades, and some are lifelong volunteers and museum amateurs. The stories of local museums are evidently involved with those of their workers and owners in the social sense, especially in the case of community-based museums. The life of the museum and its stories therefore cannot be considered separately from its workers, especially the museum founders, curators, practitioners and certainly the volunteers. This is why I decided to use biographical methods in this research.

Furthermore, it may not be only people who can tell stories and give meaning to objects in the museum. Conversely, objects perhaps can do the same as Hoskins (1998) proposes with the idea of biographical objects. In this view, the objects actually lead to various stories and the memories of people and their lives; this occurs through the object's biography, its trajectories through space and time, and the people with whom the object interacted. Biographical research in this direction is therefore relevant and suitable for this study as well. In addition, another method that partly relates to the biographical research used in this study is interviews. This method is also used independently to obtain more information and to verify data from other sources. The key informants interviewed are owners, curators and museum practitioners who work, or used to work for these museums.

To sum up, there are three data sources about biographies of local museums' founders and key practitioners. The first source is sound archives of interviews that had been collected during the museum surveys for SAC database in which I was a member of the survey team. This includes sound archives of meetings, talks, seminars and workshops with local museums organised by SAC since 2003. The second source is about documentary archives such as autobiography, memoirs, interviews and biographies published as books, booklets, articles in newsletters and other media. The last source of data is my recent interviews during PhD fieldwork with some museum practitioners and key informants who have experience with those local museums and the museum founders or were involved in the process of museum-making.

Case studies of local museums in Northeast Thailand

This research focuses on case studies of sacred things in local museums in Northeast Thailand and multi-sited museography and dialogical study of those local museums and other museums that curate the same kind of collections. Initially, I chose to explore case studies in Northeast Thailand at Wat Mahachai Museum, Ku Santarat Local Museum and Muang Champasri Museum, Mahasarakham province; Wat Prathatphanom Museum, Nakornphanom Province; and Memorial Museums for the Venerable Master Mann Phuritattathera, Sakhonnakhon province and the Venerable Master Sao Kantaselo, Ubon Ratchathani Province.

The main reasons for choosing to do case studies in Isan (as Northeast Thailand is known) are that this area has a stimulating historical background and is located by the Mekong River, which European empires and Siam sought to colonise (Winichakul, 1994). Moreover, this area is the location of various local museums where there are displays relating to the cultural diversity of ethnic groups. This is also a part of mainland Southeast Asia where Theravada Buddhism has been settled for a long time (Keyes, 1967). Furthermore, Stanley J. Tambiah has done several significant anthropological studies of Buddhism and spirit cults in this area (Tambiah, 1967; 1976; 1984). In modern times, this area has seen rapid and

massive changes with the coming of modernisation and industrialisation. This has built up the spirit of Isan as a form of regionalism in Northeast Thailand (Keyes, 1967).

According to my field surveys of local museums in this area, there are several local museums that could have been case studies for this research. However, the case studies that I chose to carry out focus on five groups of sacred objects related to religion, including Buddhism and Hinduism, spirit cults, and magic: palm-leaf manuscripts, religious statues, standing stones, Buddha relics and burial potteries. It should be mentioned here that a number of local museums are located on the premises of Buddhist monasteries. Such museums have various names, such as monastery museum, community museum, folk museum, or local museum. These museums keep and display collections that seem to be mixed, overlapped and ambiguous. It seems difficult to clearly classify this kind of museum and collection into any systematic category.

From October 2014 to May 2015, my data collection proceeded with case studies of local museums located in Northeast Thailand. In accordance with the multi-sited museographies, this part of the data collection was conducted through museum observations and mainly focused on museum displays and exhibitions, both permanent and temporary, including museum storage and working spaces. I carried out a visual record mainly by taking photographs where permitted. From documentary, audio and visual archives, I also collected secondary data, particularly from the museum archives in documentary, audio and visual forms. These resources had been mainly collected by the museum for their own works and several museums that also developed and opened their library and information centre to researchers and the public.

I conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews with museum staff, both practitioners and volunteers. The main topics were the history and development of the museum, their curatorial practices and the process of making exhibitions related to the sacred. In Thailand, I talked with some of them while conducting field surveys and working with the SAC Research and Development Project on Local Museums in Thailand during 2003–2008. In addition, I also interviewed some key informants who support or collaborate with local

museum case studies (e.g. museum experts from government, non-government agencies and universities).

Thesis structure

This thesis consists of eight chapters. This first chapter is the introduction and framing of the study, which includes theoretical frameworks and research methodology. The second chapter is the literature review on museums and the sacred, and relevant debates in museum studies. Major debates and concerns about curatorial practices and the sacred are about ownership, authority and cultural rights; representation, authorship and politics of displays; secularisation of sacred things; sacralisation of ordinary things; and also, epistemic co-existence and dialogue of differences.

The third chapter introduces local museums as a new museum movement in Thailand and traces museum entanglements between local museums and institutional museums in the country, especially national museums and university museums. It addresses the voices of local museums and museum amateurs and the significance of the new museology, ethnography and anthropology-engaged museums in contemporary Thailand. The fourth chapter introduces the Isan area or Northeast Thailand, and illustrates the diversity, dynamics and entanglements of museums in the region.

Three following chapters present the main research findings and arguments about seeing local museums as 'museum entanglements' and 'entangled museums'. The fifth chapter traces time-spaces and connected histories of sacred things found in Northeast Thailand and analyses how those sacred things have been exhibited in different chronotopic frames in local museums and other kinds of museums outside the local area. By comparing multi-sited museography, this chapter explains how such chronotopic frames and related knowledge are influenced by colonialism and colonial politics in mainland Southeast Asia.

Several cases of sacred things from Isan areas have been curated in different chronotopic frames in various museums and are involved with multiple identities such as Thai history, Prehistoric Thailand and Southeast Asia, Oriental and Asian Art or Culture, and also World Cultures. However, in terms of the ontology of things, they may have become the

scientific evidence or artistic objects rather than the sacred things that they were. Moreover, several striking collections or masterpieces also have been commercialised, much sought-after and even looted as they have become prestigious collections for collectors worldwide such as Ban Chiang's prehistoric collections, Dvaravati standing stones, Buddha images and Khmer statues.

The sixth chapter focuses on museum Gaia and dialogical practices with the sacred things and the sacredness that links with those things such as Buddha relics, religious statues and palm-leaf manuscripts. This is because local and vernacular museums are very aware of sacredness and, in this situation, the museum space can be seen as the Gaia of epistemic co-existences and the dialogic zone of cultural differences. In this museum Gaia, dialogic practices with the sacred are a crucial part of curatorial practices, as well as rituals and religious practices (e.g. worshipping, offering, merit-making).

The seventh chapter looks at the ordinary things which, in Isan contexts, possibly can be sacralised or enchanted to become sacred things. In the Isan context, the sacredness, therefore, is not an intrinsic and permanent quality but can be produced in specific conditions or practices that make things sacred or effective. Case studies of diary objects that belonged to the forest monks' masters, amulets and palaeontological fossils may lead to questions about ontologies, the uncertain and relational beings of things and of the sacredness. The ontological debate is also linked deeply to colonialism in fundamental knowledge and the epistemic infrastructure used in modern museums, especially the system of identification and classification.

Moreover, awareness of sacred power, and even fear of it in some local museums, often affects their museum practices. In some cases, religious practices will be required and become a part of museum practices (e.g. worshipping, offering and merit-making). This possibly includes some methods and rituals to protect or control sacred power and danger. These issues can be precisely explained in terms of magic and its co-existence with diverse sciences and different religions (e.g. Buddhism, Hinduism, and animism). This chapter

concludes with a discussion and awareness about the trilemma of science, magic and religion relating to the process of sacralisation and enchantment.

Lastly, the eighth chapter includes a conclusion and reflections from case studies of Isan museums, and their dialogues and entanglements with other museums that curate the same material things in different ways. Three main topics of major arguments and reflections are about museum entanglements and entangled museums; relational museography: a methodological reflection from Isan museums; and a conclusion with possibilities for further research in museum studies especially relating to the debate about returns.

Chapter 2

Museums and the sacred

Sacred objects, even being defined as 'the sacred' in the present or only the past, seem to be a crucial part of all museum collections. From time to time, this kind of object has been collected and exhibited in different ways, such as a part of the rare, religious, historic, artistic, and also ethnographic collection (Paine, 2012). Because the museum is increasingly referred to as a contact zone (Clifford, 1997), it seems difficult to see any museum restricting itself to any one culture or being open to the public without some relationship to diverse cultures and various groups of visitors. More frequently the museums seem involved with the cross-cultural interaction of various differences that come with the social actors who participated in the museums; museum collections and also with the cultural meanings embodied in those objects.

Through the lens of time-space or chronotope (Bakhtin, 1981), cultural differences that appear with material objects vary in spatial terms as they may have been collected from one place to exhibit in another place and then transferred and re-exhibited in other places. In addition, there are temporal variations as the objects had been created or functioned in some periods and from time to time they had been collected, interpreted and used in different ways in other periods. Similar to other kinds of objects in the museum collection, this situation also has occurred with the sacred objects, but in several cases, it seems more sensitive and controversial because of some specific matters related to those sacred objects such as religious beliefs, rites, rules and prohibitions.

This part aims to review definitions of the sacred both in general and in museum contexts and explore relevant debates on the relationships between museums and the sacred. Overall, the content divides into four sections. The first section illustrates diverse definitions of the sacred and related concepts such as the profane and the secular. The second section focuses on sacred objects in museum spaces and possible ways to identify what the sacred object is. The third section discusses major debates and concerns about curatorial practices related to sacred objects and sacredness in museums. The last section

concludes with discussion of the implication and relevance of these debates and concerns for understanding relationships between curatorial practices and the sacred in local museums.

Defining and imagining 'the sacred'

As an English word, 'sacred' generally means 'connected with God or a god or dedicated to a religious purpose and so deserving veneration' (The Oxford Dictionary of English, 2010). Additionally, in other languages, this word 'is now nearly synonymous with the Latin *sacer*' (Online OED, 2014). In more detail it also means 'made holy by association with a god or other object of worship; consecrated, hallowed' and 'things consecrated or offered in sacrifice to the gods' (ibid.). These meanings reflect closely the relationships of this word with the religious and the evident connection with some sort of god and holiness.

As a sociological concept, 'the sacred' was clearly defined by Durkheim (1912) in his introduction to the study of elementary forms of religious life. Durkheim points out that the basis of religious phenomena is 'beliefs' which are involved with thoughts, opinions, representations and 'rites' which are the set of actions derived from the beliefs (Durkheim, 1912/2001, p. 36). In order to define the religious life, the focus of his study, Durkheim (1912) classified the ideal distinction between the sacred and the profane as follows:

> The division of the world into two comprehensive domains, one sacred, the other profane, is hallmark of religious thought. Beliefs, myths, genomic spirits, and legends are either representations or systems of representation that express the nature of sacred things, the virtues and powers attributed to them, their history, their relations with each other and the profane things. But sacred things should not be taken to mean simply those personal beings we call gods or spirits. A rock, a tree, a spring, a stone, a piece of wood, a house, in other words any things at all, can be sacred. A rite can have this sacred character as well; in fact, no rite exists that does not have it to some degree. There are words,

speeches, and formulas that can be spoken only by consecrated persons; there are gestures and movements that cannot be executed by everyone... The circle of sacred objects, then, cannot be fixed once and for all; its scope varies endlessly from one religion to another. (Durkheim, 1912/2001, pp. 36–37)

According to Durkheim, various kinds of things could be involved with the sacred. Furthermore, the sacred things could be not only different but also of higher status and superior in power and dignity than the profane things (ibid., p. 37). This made and kept radical distance between both kinds of thing. Thus, the sacred things will be protected and isolated by the prohibitions and the profane things will be excluded and kept away from what is the sacred through religious rites and rules of conduct based on religious beliefs (ibid., p. 40). Following this definition, Durkheim argued that the religion and magic cannot be entirely distinguished as had been explained by the mainstream science of religion at that time such as in the major work of Tylor (1871) on primitive culture. Both religion and magic, in fact, similarly consist of beliefs and rites. Durkheim pointed out his different perspective on primitive religion as the simplest religion and proposed a third account of 'totemism' to indicate a form of primitive religion that was different from the then current theory of 'animism' and 'naturism'. Based on the cases of totemic religion in Australia, his account focused on the social aspects of religion and its function for collective solidarity. In consequence, the sacred was no longer defined as being connected with gods or spirits, as was the case in the theory of animism, but, rather, in terms of social relationships with kin and clan. This meant that some sort of rites and prohibitions were socially constructed and made something sacred and distinguished from the profane.

For instance, Durkheim addressed three key elements that were recognised as sacred in totemic religion; the first is 'totemic emblem', the second is a plant or animal which is represented by the emblem, and the third is members of the clan. Members of each totem will not be allowed to eat plants or animals represented in their totemic emblem. This was not because those animals were connected with gods or spirits, but because that kind

of animal was related to them as their kin and clan. In this way, Durkheim clearly defined the sacred in terms of the social and argued the current mainstream account of the science of man and culture such as Tylor's work on primitive culture. Durkheim argued against evolutionists, who looked at totemism as ancestor cults and zoolatry, and who interpreted rites related to totems as worship of plants or animals as gods. Instead, he maintained that there was an equal relationship between a man and his totem, i.e. that both are clearly on the same level (Durkheim, 1912/2001, p. 107).

Mary Douglas (1966/2002, p. 26) also critiqued the idea of evolutionism that regarded magic, religion and science as three evolutionary stages of human civilisation (ibid., p. 28). For Douglas, defining religion as 'belief in spiritual being' was very limited and therefore a broader approach was necessary. Like Durkheim, she did not demarcate magic and religion and linked the sacred with taboo and prohibition but in a different way. Rather than focusing on the relationship between holiness and the social as Durkheim did, Douglas argued for linkages between sacredness and uncleanness because for 'the primitives' the two may not be opposite as in the religious rules in the modern countries like the UK as she wrote that:

> There is nothing in our rules of cleanness to suggest any connection between dirt and sacred. Therefore it is only mystifying to learn that primitives make little difference between sacredness and uncleanness. For us sacred things and places are to be protected from defilement. Holiness and impurity are at opposite poles. We would as soon confound hunger with fullness and sleeping with waking. Yet it is supposed to be a mark of primitive religion to make no clear distinction between sanctity and uncleanness. If this is true it reveals a great gulf between ourselves and our forefathers, between us and contemporary primitives. (Douglas, 1968/2002, p. 9)

This idea questioned defining the sacred as holiness, divinity, and purity and separating the sacred, which should be clearly pure, or clean from the unclean or dirt. This relates to

another crucial point about power and danger. And Douglas addressed in two ways one problematic issue about what would be protected and what are the purposes of prohibition. One way aims to protect the sacred from the profane, and another way aims to protect the profane from power of the sacred – the divine danger. Based on earlier definitions, the latter aspect seems to have disappeared. Significantly, both divinity and impurity can be dangerous, and some kinds of protection are needed whether in the forms of taboo, ritual or material objects. What Douglas brought back is not only another possibility to define the sacred as impurity; she also revived some links between the sacred and the profane, which once had been ignored, such as Durkheim's works in which the sacred and the profane seem to be entirely demarcated and probably also opposite. Douglas's ideas therefore can lead to more alternatives and possibilities in between the sacred and the profane such as some kinds of link, spectrum, blurring, ambiguity and hybridity.

Even though definitions of the sacred seem to involve religion, it seems difficult to define exactly what is meant by this. And what about the spiritual? Furthermore, differentiated definitions of the sacred may involve definitions of the religious and also the distinction and relation between religion, magic and science. This became a crucial debate and reflected the tension and problematic relationship among them (Tambiah, 1990). In one of his earlier works on Buddhism and the spirit cults in Northeast Thailand, Tambiah (1970) noted the complexity of the religious field where several religions, beliefs and cults interacted and lived together in the same place with the same group of people such as in a rural village in Northeast Thailand. Additionally, in the contemporary world, various forms of modernity have been globalised and have probably become part of indigenous ways of life worldwide even if in different degrees between the national centre and the periphery. Therefore, the religious field may be more complex than in the past. Significantly, science, religion and magic may be encountered, contested or mixed together in some extent in local contexts.

Substantially, these definitions can be theoretical guidelines for understanding how the sacred and sacred objects have been identified, collected and curated in museums,

especially in the ways that various meanings from different sources encountered, contested, dialogued and altered each other or synthesised something new. However, this research will not limit itself to one definition but attempt to observe and be open to all definitions as a departure point for exploring the varieties and dialogues among these definitions including being open to other definitions and interpretations which may be relevant to local museums and be used by their curators.

Sacred objects in museum spaces

As definitions of the sacred seem to be differentiated and problematic, there are several ways to identify sacred objects. If sacredness is defined as religious, various kinds of religious objects would be of interest. If magic is recognised as a kind of religion, objects of magic, witchcraft and cults could be considered sacred as well. Moreover, because magic and religion are also related to science, sometimes religious and magical objects acquired new interpretations as they were transferred into different contexts such as when they became part of scientific collections. This section attempts to explore diverse forms of sacred objects in museum spaces. These kinds of objects have been focused in museum studies in several terms such as religious objects, godly things, objects of witchcraft, amulets, and human remains.

Grimes (1992) critiques displays of religious objects in museum spaces, especially art galleries, where those objects have lost their religious meanings. He refers to the examples of a Tlingit mask, an image of a Hindu goddess, or statue of the Buddha. Grimes states the significance of the cultural process and space affected by an object. Rather than explore a sacred object as thing in itself, he proposes to consider a sacred object as 'a moment in a cultural and historical process' (Grimes, 1992, p. 419). For instance, sacred objects in synagogues, temples and churches take different forms while they are in art galleries even if their 'exegetical' meaning or what people say about them remains the same, but their 'positional' meaning or 'their spatial and/or conceptual relationship with other symbols' were definitely changed (Grimes, 1992, pp. 419–420).

As part of a display in a museum or art gallery, the statues of the god, goddess and Buddha are not existing as sacred art but might be museum art or artefacts. This may lead to misunderstanding by the audience, especially in a Western context, because of fundamental differences between the Western viewers' perceptions and values and the original traditions or source cultures that those sacred objects came from (ibid.). Besides, alteration of meaning is also involved with the process of commoditisation of sacred objects, which is widespread and essentially a key part of the secularisation of Western culture itself (Grimes, 1992, p. 420). This issue reflects complicated relationships between the museum and sacred objects and became a major debate about curatorial practices of sacred objects, which will be discussed further.

Like Grimes, Paine (2000) similarly defines and discusses religious objects which belonged to different religions e.g. Christianity, Judaism, Hindu, Buddhism, which are exhibited in several museums in the UK or elsewhere. In other words, Paine classifies these objects as 'godly things'. Another relevant case is about Christian architecture such as churches and chapels exhibited as a part of several open-air museums such as the Beamish Museum (Langley, 2000). In a British context, Paine (2000) observes exhibiting religious objects in several museums in London such as the National Gallery, the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Museum of London. He observes that religious objects in those museums were exhibited primarily based on the following disciplines: fine art; decorative art; archaeology; social history; anthropology and an organisational approach. Rather than accepting their being exhibited as part of those disciplines, Paine's major concern about religious objects seems to be 'the religious meaning' and the public duties of religious objects for gaining public understanding about those religions themselves (Paine, 2013).

Although Paine's expectation is relevant, it seems not quite easy to fulfil as in Chris Arthur's (2000) discussion of exhibiting the sacred and the difficulties for museums when they try to present the religion through the religious object. Moreover, frequently what they try to exhibit may be impossible to express directly or verbally and sometimes there are tensions between the exhibited items and what they try to exhibit (Arthur, 2000, p. 2). Additionally, Arthur (2000, pp. 11–12) summarises four main difficulties facing museums

exhibiting religious objects: (1) the ownership and display of sacred objects and funerary remains can lead to controversial issues; (2) when representatives of different religions see their faith displayed beside others, they may request some changes or special treatment; (3) 'religion' itself is a problematic term and category – the difficult questions are about what criteria should be used to determine what should be included in a museum of religion; (4) with regard to different worldviews and value systems that the museum is involved with – is it possible to make general statements which apply to all religions, without orientation to the vocabulary and assumptions of one's own culture?

With the use of the restricted definition as the godly thing, some material things such as objects of witchcraft seem to be demarcated from religious objects. In a broader definition, according to Durkheim and Douglas, objects of witchcraft can be understood as religious objects. In this sense, objects of witchcraft and magic can be seen as another group of sacred objects. In the UK, the Pitt Rivers Museum is one of the museums which has collected objects of witchcraft. This ethnographic museum not only collected and exhibited material objects from what were then regarded as 'primitive cultures' outside Britain, but also collected and received donations of a number of objects from places inside the country such as Somerset, some of which were related to witchcraft and magic.

Chris Wingfield (2009) analyses this kind of object as a part of the project 'England: The other within' which aims to analyse English objects in the Pitt Rivers Museum. Some of them had been collected and donated to the museum by Edward B. Tylor in the beginning stage of the museum in the late 19th century. Two case studies in his critical analysis are the so-called 'witch's ladder' and 'onion struck with pins'. Using a post-colonial framework, Wingfield examines both curious objects by linking them with personal life and biography of the collector and donor – Edward B. Tylor.

The statistics of his collections show that, Tylor had a strong interest in religious objects, but for him religion seemed to be a savage pursuit rather than the Christianity of his Quaker background (Wingfield, 2009, p. 28). His collecting preference and collections possibly reflected significant meanings not only about his idea of cultural evolution, but

also a problematic relationship between a Christian or Quaker's belief and other beliefs such as witchcraft or magic. Furthermore, such objects essentially did not belong to him as a part of his Somerset homeland but as the survival of the past or more specifically, the pre-stage of civilisation similar to his subject matters – the primitive culture and people in Africa, America or elsewhere (ibid., p. 35).

In addition, as a part of museum collections, especially ethnographic museums, in the UK, objects of witchcraft primarily are from indigenous cultures outside Britain rather than inside because of the nature of academic interest and religious orientation at that time. A few museums focus intensely on material objects and stories of witchcraft, rural or folk tradition relating to magic, superstition or spirit cults in Britain. One of them is the Museum of Witchcraft in Cornwall. In this museum, material objects and stories of witchcraft seem to be very different from the contents of Tylor's collections.

Helen Cornish (2005) studied witchcraft objects in the Museum of Witchcraft, Cornwall, and the related narratives exhibited as part of cunning histories and folk magic. Her research aims to examine impacts of the witchcraft museum through its collections and narratives on the contemporary movements of witchcraft and witches in the UK. In this museum, one of her focuses is a witch's cottage and its setting – known as 'Joan's cottage'. The museum explains this exhibition through the text in front of the cottage:

> Every village in the country had a 'Wise woman' or 'handy woman'.
> These women were healers, midwives, undertakers, magic makers and
> fortune tellers. The wise woman often lived in a small cottage on the
> outskirts of the village. She would have one or more familiars. Joan the
> Wise Woman is sitting with her familiars. She is surrounded by the tools
> of her crafts – herbs, wands, broomstick, charm bag, tarot card and much
> more. She is scrying [divining] with an old green fishing float. You will
> hear Joan reciting a traditional spell. (Quote in Cornish, 2005, p. 367)

According to Cornish (2005, p. 367), this image of the witch as 'the wise woman-witch as a professional' seems in contrast with the orthodox histories where 'witches follow a select

and secret hierarchical religious organisation that is exclusive outside community'. In this research, Cornish interviews several visitors about this cottage, some of them museum staff, who are the witches and finds that the objects and narratives of witchcraft in the past exhibited in this museum were currently becoming references and supports for the practice of witchcraft by contemporary witches (ibid., p. 368). However, there are several questions about these narratives as historical evidence of cunning histories as well, and this controversial issue essentially involves the 'conflicting interpretation' of the past (ibid., p. 372).

Fiona Candlin (2013) studies museum witchcraft too but focuses on the power of objects as a result of witchcraft and magic that may affect visitors who do not share the exhibitors' beliefs. For instance, some objects of witchcraft and magic exhibited in the witchcraft museum are thought to be still active and potent. Moreover, this belief is also shared by visitors in general. This caused Candlin to question why objects are normally considered dead when they are exhibited in the museum after being alive outside. She critiques the idea that museums neutralise their collection or the way that museums are seen as the killer of objects by removing them from their original setting, collecting fragments of them, classifying them, and also by composing them into a chronology (Candlin, 2013, p. 5).

In the case of the witchcraft museum, several objects of witchcraft were donated to the museum because their original owners considered that these objects were 'too dangerous to keep' and this museum seems to be an appropriate place to keep and control these powerful objects. This consideration may be related to the information that some of museum staff themselves are practising witches (Candlin, 2013, p. 13). Significantly, Candlin concludes that objects can be alive in museum spaces rather than dead, although this only occurs in small museums, such as in case of the Museum of Witchcraft, which seems very different from several mainstream museum collections.

Another group of sacred objects in museums is amulets and charms. Hill (2007) explores a collection of amulets and charms collected by Edward Lovett, a folklorist, from different

areas of Britain early in the 20th century. Later, this collection was brought by the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum and displayed as scientific specimens in order to trace the 'history of medicine and mankind' (Hill, 2007, p.65). Hill argues that this collection can be considered in a different way as 'magical objects' which have the potential to enchant the space of museum and disrupt the presented narratives of cultural evolution and progress as in its initial display. This article is concerned with links and tensions between magic and modernity and aims to consider the embodied materiality of magical objects in everyday lives and belief systems of their original owners, which are beyond the locus of museums. Rather than presenting as scientific narratives, these amulets and charms possibly were 'believed to hold powers, whether inducing luck, providing protection, warding off evil or disease' and used by ordinary people in Britain as an important thing in their lives (ibid., p. 66). Mainly, Hill's argument draws on ideas of museum magic and enchantment (Bouquet and Porto, 2005) and the debate about interlinks between magic and modernity – does magic haunt or belong to modernity? (Meyer and Pels, 2003) This currently seems to be a major debate related to objects and museum collections of folklore.

Another group of material things which seems ambiguous and difficult to identify as the sacred object is human remains. Essentially, human remains are involved with the sacredness and religious aspects in several ways, especially for their strong relationship with beliefs and rituals of death and afterlife. Similar to other kinds of sacred objects, human remains lead to controversial debates between museums and source communities and became main targets of demands for repatriation (Simpson, 1996). In order to understand the presence of human remains in museums, it may be useful to start with a simple question of what the concrete forms of human remains are in museum spaces. The shrunken heads, mummies, dead bodies, skulls, skeletons, bonds, or what else? In the UK context, according to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport's Guidance for the Care of Human Remains (2005), 'human remains' means:

The bodies, and parts of bodies, of one living people from the species Homo Sapiens (defined as individuals who fall within the range of anatomical form known today and in the recent past). This includes osteological material (whole or part skeletons, individual bones or fragmented of bone and teeth), soft tissue including organs and skin, embryos and slide preparations of human tissue. (DCMS, 2005:9, cited in Jenkins, 2011, p. 109)

After this guidance was released, two museums attempted to extend this definition. The first was the Manchester University Museum, which extended it to include skin, blood and hair. The second was the Bolton Museum and Archive Services, which includes hair and nails in their working definition (Jenkins, 2011, p. 109). In spite of attempts to extend this formal definition, it still focuses on human remains as scientific specimens. This kind of definition apparently reflects the strong influence of medical science and scientific materiality on human remains in museums. In essence, its assumption can lead to controversial issues and serious debates with the source communities who might be concerned with these remains in various ways. However, what I have mentioned here is not a comprehensive list but, rather, some areas already discussed in the literature.

Although this research starts with sacred objects as material forms of the sacred, the study also concerns tangible aspects and non-material forms of the sacred. Substantially, it would be concerned that religious objects might not be exactly equivalent with sacred objects. In fact, there are several problematic issues related to the definition of the sacred and other connected concepts such as the profane and the religious illustrated above. The term 'the sacred' is used in this research in order to cover not only material aspects of the sacred but also its non-material or intangible aspects, which are currently a crucial concern in both areas of museum and heritage studies focusing on intangible heritages (Smith and Akagawa, 2008; Harrison, 2013a). In museums, although there are various kinds of objects related to the sacred and sacredness, in practice not all of them had been collected and exhibited as sacred objects. This circumstance probably depended

on the characters, missions and curatorial practices of those museums , which will be discussed in the next section.

Curatorial practices and the sacred: debates and concerns

Museums and curatorial practices related to the sacred and sacred objects are a dynamic and controversial area. There are various cases of tension and conflict between museums and source communities involved with human remains and sacred objects. Some are related to the sacred place which became the archaeological site. Several cases generated major debates about cultural rights and repatriation, especially since the post-colonial period. This part aims to explore major debates and concerns about curatorial practices related to the sacredness and particularly the sacred objects in museums. In fact, these debates are partly connected and overlapping. This illustration acts as a departure point for further investigation and discussion.

Ownership, authority and cultural rights

The trajectory of things, especially sacred objects, across geographical and cultural landscapes into museums sometimes can lead to debate and conflict between museums and communities from which those objects came. In the cases of museums which collected large collections from other cultures especially during the colonial period, this issue has become controversial and is continually debated. Various ethnic minority and indigenous movements have arisen with critiques and debates related to repatriation, collecting and exhibiting sacred objects including human remains in museums since the post-colonial period (Cove, 1995; Simpson, 1996; McLoughlin, 1999; Jenkins, 2011).

During the 19th and 20th centuries, large numbers of human remains were collected across the world and placed in institutional museums particularly as scientific collections (Simpson 1996; Jenkins, 2011). It is therefore not surprising that so many requests for the return of human remains come from native and ethnic communities in America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand as the source communities. The related debate involves the contradiction of one account of the benefits to science and humankind with the other account of cultural rights and benefits to communities and indigenous people (Simpson

1996; Jenkins, 2011). In fact, the beginnings of this controversy can be traced back to several decades ago, as Layton (1989) researched the conflict with living tradition evidenced in several cases of reburial debate and repatriation in Europe, North America and Australia. This circumstance apparently emerged simultaneously with the continuing rise of first nations and indigenous rights in those parts of the world since the mid-20th century and has been addressed in several academic conferences especially organised by the World Archaeology Congress (Fforde et al., 2002).

Increasing cases of repatriation have become critical issues that institutional museums cannot ignore after decades of debate and negotiation. There are several significant changes in that some museums have returned some remains to their original sources and several have removed or changed their displays of human remains. The law and museum codes of conduct and policy, including in the UK, have changed (Jenkins, 2011, pp. 2–5). In the UK, there were not only requests from outside the country but also from inside such as the British pagans asking for reburial of their ancestors' bones (Jenkins, 2011, pp. 79–81). This also relates to other cases such as the request to use national heritage sites for pagan rituals. One of the most important cases and long-term debates is about Stonehenge (Blain and Wallis, 2007). A provocative case regarding curatorial practice with human remains in the UK is about covering mummies at Manchester Museum (Jenkins, 2011, pp. 127–129; Wieczorkiewicz, 2006, pp. 66–68).

Likewise, there have been requests for the return of not only human remains but also various kinds of sacred object. The main reasons that the indigenous people making the request and their agencies give is that the sacred objects have spiritual power and need special practices for handling them e.g. it is a secret way or has to be done by a special person such as in the case of the Zuni's war god – *ahayu:da* (Simpson, 1996, p. 197). Some sacred objects were made for limited access by privileged persons and for private rather than public use (Simpson, ibid.). This seems to contrast with the idea of the modern museum, which was established to exhibit for public access, as Paine (2013) states regarding the public duties of religious objects for more understanding about religions. However, currently, this crucial debate is still ongoing and connects to other issues

especially cultural rights and what Jenkins (2011) called the crisis of cultural authority for the museum over who legally owns the object: the museum or the source community from which the object came.

Representation, authorship and politics of display

There are critical issues and continuing debates about the possession and display of material objects exhibited in museum spaces. Recently, several ethnographic museums in Europe and North America have been seriously criticised for their representation of indigenous cultures especially in the colonial contexts (Simpson, 1996). In a wider context, a crisis of representation is a critical issue coming with critical waves of post-modernism (Foucault, 1969, 1980; Lyotard, 1984) and post-colonial criticism (Said, 1978; Spivak; 1988; Hall, 1992; Bhabha, 1994) in various academic fields, including the human sciences (Fisher and Marcus, 1999). This problematic issue is not only about accuracy of representation, but also questions the possibility of representing others accurately and legitimately. Moreover, doing so – making the representation of others frequently became the way to legitimise the exercise of power and colonisation by the superiors (Said, 1978; Hall; 1992; Lidchi, 1997).

Said (1978) effectively criticised colonial representation of the Orient in several kinds of media, including the museum. In particular, the image of the Orient produced by the West frequently concentrated on and unduly emphasised the religious aspect more than other aspects so that, as Said (1978) stated, the religious seems to be the typical image or character of the Orient in contrast with the West. So far, post-colonial criticism has flourished and, specifically, there are several critical and deconstructive works that focus on colonialism and cultural representation in the museum (Mitchell, 1988; Coombes, 1994; Barringer and Flynn; 1998).

The debate about representation and the politics of museum display is a common debate that not only relates to sacred objects but also to various aspects of exhibiting culture (Karp and Lavine, 1991). Sharon Macdonald discusses the politics of display in museum contexts, particularly focusing on science museums (Macdonald, 1998). In fact, it seems

difficult to ignore the impacts of science and scientific methodology on curating and exhibiting human remains in museums. Cove (1995) criticises the domination of science in the collection of human remains from Tasmanian aborigines and states that 'aboriginality' is actually socially constructed and related to European–Aboriginal political relations (Cove, 1995, p. 9).

Michael Ames (1992) addressed this controversial issue clearly in the context of North America where archaeology and anthropology had been criticised for their academic roles and problematic relationships with the indigenous people and cultures they studied. He also addressed tensions facing developments in Western museums and how contemporary museums are situated between professionalisation and democratisation (Ames, 1992, p. 15), or between professional interests and public service (Ames, 1992, p. 25). The authorship and agency of indigenous people and communities are together one of the important issues of concern. Ames (1992, p. 68) noted an interesting trend in North America where some North-west coastal Indian communities set up their own museums, and some also hired their own anthropologists or experts to help them in their museum work. This certainly reflects people's agency and intention to voice and perhaps to control the stories of their cultures by themselves.

Secularisation of the sacred thing

This issue basically is a major concern and crucial debate about sacred objects. However, the process of secularisation is not homogenous and can happen in different contexts in, several ways such as by commoditisation, disciplines either scientific or artistic, and translocation or re-contextualisation, as in the cases of churches and chapels relocated to open-air museums. This issue is partly related to a politics of representation and museum display in which sacred objects have been interpreted as scientific evidence and objects of knowledge (Cove 1995; Simpson 1996). The artistic domination of religious objects has been discussed in several cases of art museums and galleries where the religious objects became artistic figures or objects of pleasure rather than being understood as sacred objects (Grimes, 1992; Paine, 2013).

Another process of secularisation that has been intensively discussed is the commoditisation of things and the impacts of commercial value and trade on sacred objects and museums. Ideas of commoditisation and the politics of value can be traced back to the major work by Appadurai *The social life of things* (1986). Following Appadurai's idea, Grimes (1992, p. 420) points to the process of the commoditisation of sacred objects as a part of secularisation. This may lead to complicated relationships between the museum and sacred objects. When a museum purchases a religious object, they momentarily commoditise them, but after that they turn them into a singular, unique, item abstracted from its original context and protected from the market.

Grimes gives the example of the biography of a Tlingit mask or a Hindu goddess's image. After coming into the museum environment as 'the public foster home for material culture' (Mayo, 1984; Miller, 1987 op. cit., p. 421) or 'the temple for the booty of civilizations' (Grant, 1966 op. cit., ibid.), the mask or image will be catalogued, displayed, labelled, singled out and, if fortunate, studied and admired. His critical questions are about the status and feeling of the sacred object – should it feel grateful and fortunate or should it not? Or is this merely what all foster homes think their wards should feel like? (ibid. p. 421); this reflected tension and complexity related to cultural differences is encountered and contested through sacred objects.

Sacralisation of the ordinary thing

In the opposite direction to being concerned only with the secularisation of the sacred thing, the process of sacralisation is also relevant and cannot be ignored. Carol Duncan (1995) points out the crucial idea of 'civilising ritual' and proposes to look at art gallery as a ritual site and ritual process. Based on Duncan's groundbreaking idea, Bouquet and Porto (2005) are interested in museum magic and apply the idea of looking at the art museum as a ritual site to other kinds of museums such as ethnographic museums, science museums, and war museums. In further theorising, Sharon Macdonald (2005, p. 209) suggests that museums and religious sites overlap and share some aesthetic senses such as dimmed lighting, hushed tones and also the feeling of being connected with or close to the sacred. In order to understand the museum as a ritual site, Macdonald (2005) critiques the

conventional idea of secularisation because nowadays the religious and religious practices may not be certainly secularised and disappeared. Rather, several forms of religious and religious practices continue to appear and new religious movements arise.

Rather than demarcate between museum and religion or science and magic, Macdonald proposes to explore the museum–religion analogy and concern with the museum as a site of interplay between authoritative knowledge (science) and enchantment (magic). This analytic frame effectively reflects both sides of this process – the capacity of museum to enchant and its dilemmas such as making things haunted or enchanting without concern for politics. As ritual sites, museums possibly contain the capacity to 'sacralise' spaces and objects such as when the objects have been encased and 'enchanted looking' is encouraged in the exhibition space (Macdonald, 2005, p. 224). However, sometimes the way to enchant can lead to unexpected results or controversial issues such as in case of Hitler's Gaze – using a large photograph of Hitler at the Nazi buildings in Nuremberg. The project designers feared that Hitler's Gaze might lead to unexpected results or unintended experiences such as feeling haunted or sympathetic to Nazism. In practice, the dilemmas of museum enchantment therefore became a crucial debate and need more concern especially about the unintended consequences of enchanting or sacralising, and also about the dangers of inviting the 'wrong kind of gaze' or inappropriate ways to enchant (Macdonald, 2005, p. 223).

Focusing on material objects, Tambiah (1986) studied amulet cults in Northeast Thailand and examined the process of sacralising the amulets that transformed the ordinary object to the sacred object. Tambiah adopted Weber's idea of charisma but applied it in different way – not only to the person but also to the material object as the objectification of charisma (Tambiah, 1984, pp. 335–336). Although his anthropological work is not directly connected to museums, his explanation of how the charismatic Buddhist monks enchant ordinary objects to become sacred objects is relevant and useful to this thesis. This is because this cultural phenomenon is situated in a context of Northeast Thailand, which is my study area. Moreover, currently there are several memorial museums being established for these charismatic monks. Similar to the amulets, this kind of museum and its

collections probably are being sacralised to some extent as Tambiah suggested. In addition, Tambiah also mentioned that the idea and practices of sacralising objects and human remains were in fact rooted in Christianity especially in the Catholic church as the material forms of relics which belonged to a great or significant person such as a saint.

Indigenous curatorship and community-based museums

As shown in the debates above, several controversial issues about sacred objects are related to indigenous people and cultural differences in various geographical areas worldwide. Kreps (2003) points out crucial concepts of indigenous curatorship and non-Western models of museums based on case studies of museums in Indonesia – the Provincial Museum of Central Kalimantan and Museum Balanga. More recently, Kreps (2008) proposes a new museum approach, the so-called 'appropriate museology', which is concerned with being people-centred and with the democratisation of museums and museum practices. For Kreps, appropriate museology fundamentally resonates with other advocates of the new museology movement who are attempting to gain and maintain collaborative works between museum professionals and community members (Kreps, 2008, p. 28).

However, this mission may not be achieved without obstacles, as can be seen when Kreps (2008) addresses major problems confronting the Museum Pusaka Nias in Indonesia particularly given the limited participation of the community's members. Moreover, this seems to be a common problem for a number of museums in Indonesia (ibid., p. 34). Kreps explains that the reason that the museums unsuccessfully engaged communities is that those museum models are not rooted in the communities, are not suitable for local contexts but come from outside and sometimes from above. Essentially, museum models cannot be a success without a sense of belonging and feeling of ownership by the local people, especially if people do not see how those museums are relevant to their lives. Owing to these concerns, appropriate museology therefore puts emphasis on bottom-up and participatory approaches to museum development and expects that this approach can generate increasing interest and engagement of local people and community members with museums (ibid., p. 35).

The term 'democratisation' of museums and museum practices that Kreps (2008) addressed seems to be a keyword in this debate after decades of tension, contestation and negotiation between museum experts and source communities about museum collections and cultural heritage. As Ames (1992) once stated, the development of museums, especially in the Western world, was confronted with fundamental tensions between 'professionalisation' and 'democratisation'. This situation may be true for museums in other areas of the world as well, and concrete solutions and alternatives for negotiation seem very diverse. Similarly, there is an increasing number of research projects focusing on two-way relationships and collaboration between professional museums – particularly ethnographic museums – and source communities in North America, the Pacific and the UK, (Peers and Brown, 2003). In fact, it sounds relevant and reasonable to encourage appropriate museology or other appropriate disciplines involved with museums, but it may not be necessary to limit efforts only to this direction – particularly in cases of community-based museums.

Recently, there has been increasing concern in museum studies and related fields with the relationship between museums and communities (Karp et al., 1992; Crooke, 2007; Watson, 2007; Waterton and Watson, 2011; Golding and Modest, 2013) and several museum approaches have been suggested – such as the 'dialogic museum' (Tchen, 1992), 'participatory museum' (Atkins, 2010), and 'collaborative museum' (Golding, 2013). These initiatives seem to be part of a new museology movement as Kreps suggested. It seems that not only museology and anthropology have worked with museums and communities, but archaeology has also been involved. For example, Smith and Waterton (2009) discuss the tension and relationship among heritage, archaeology, and communities in the UK, and they also address several cases of tension and collaboration between archaeologists and communities regarding museums, especially on issues of social inclusion and exclusion.

However, as a cultural phenomenon, increasing numbers of small-scale, indigenous, local, and community museums across the world, in various ways could be seen as a part of the movement of decolonisation – which comes not only from political power but also from cultural and intellectual power, especially from the episteme or authoritative disciplines

related to museums and cultures. Following the post-colonial idea of connected histories (Bhambha, 2007) and histories of some open-air museums, village and market towns museums, indigenous museums, and local museums in the UK, Europe and North America (Rentzhog, 2007; Yates, 2010; Macdonald, 2013; Ames, 1992), the emergence of these museums perhaps can be seen as a new museum movement or an alternative museology movement (which may be different from the new museology movement). In fact, this museum movement was probably rooted underground and growing up in local contexts (and the museum world) parallel to and interacting with institutional museums from time to time but mostly being overlooked. This research therefore attempts to investigate this cultural phenomenon further in different contexts through case studies of local museums in Northeast Thailand.

The sacred, museum practices and dialogues of differences

The debates and concerns covered in the literature review above certainly shed light on various possibilities for museum practice and study in several ways. More specifically, these literatures also contribute crucial questions and fundamental ideas about curatorial practices and interpretations of sacredness and sacred objects in various kinds of museums. This applies particularly to local museums in the countryside, which have been historically involved with rural life and traditions in which sacredness and sacred objects were based on various beliefs and religious references. However, these debates also reflect some limitations of theoretical concepts and theorising about museums in several aspects and certainly connect directly to my major argument about museums, knowledge and colonialism – or in other words, power.

For instance, a definition of the sacred based on religious meaning, e.g. the godly, the divine, the holy, seems to be more recognised and reproduced than other definitions such as Durkheim's sociological definition concerning the social, or Douglas's idea of a link between sacredness , uncleanness and the divine danger. However, both directions are still relevant to this research and are useful guidelines to understand the relationships of museums and the sacredness in different contexts.

For the study of sacred objects in museum spaces, this also relates to the previous issue of definitions of the sacred. Because its material forms and sacred objects are still limited with ideas of spirit, several kinds of objects seem to be overlooked or interpreted in restricted ways such as objects of witchcraft. However, debates and different interpretations related to this kind of object are actually very striking. For Tylor, these were interpreted as 'a scientific collection of a pre-stage of civilisation' based on his theory of cultural evolution. For Wingfield, drawing on a post-colonial framework, these collections and displays substantially reflect a colonial relationship between the collector/ exhibitor and the collected/exhibited of the others both out there and within. On the other hand, in the Museum of Witchcraft at Cornwall, these similar objects have been interpreted by contemporary witches and magic practitioners as references of their practices.

The first debate of ownership and cultural rights is deeply linked with the second debate over the politics of representation and interpretation in the contemporary world where people are actively and increasingly concerned with their heritage. In particular, local people and communities have realised and become concerned with their heritage and also with the various kinds of benefit that can be derived from their cultural heritages, histories and stories of the past.

Furthermore, the two-way transformation of the sacred and the profane or the ordinary is another critical point discussed in several major works in museum studies. These aspects will be considered and investigated in my research through various kinds of sacred objects in museum collections. Furthermore, there is another point of the transition stage or path of the object transformation such as the stage of hybridity, ambiguity and multiplicity that should be increasingly discussed in any analysis of sacred objects and the sacredness in museum spaces. In another debate about indigenous curatorship and appropriate museology, this is also involved with power relations between museums and their actors both inside and outside the museum. These actors actually came from different backgrounds and positions, whether museum professionals, museum amateurs or

vernacular curators who have no museological training. Instead of political power, this issue may link directly to 'knowledge' as another kind of power – cultural or soft power.

The thesis argument about museums, knowledge and colonialism is also reflected in relationships between museums and communities. This issue partially draws on the new museology idea that proposes to give more attention to museum functions rather than museum methods (Vergo, 1989) and to ask questions about the authority and limitation of museology, what Foucault (1966) called 'episteme' – the authoritative discipline/study of museums and curatorial practices, especially while cultural differences or different knowledge are encountered in the museums such as various cases of sacred objects. The social contribution of museums located in local contexts seems effective and noticeable as a result of their own and collaborative resources based on various kinds of knowledge, both academic disciplines and popular knowledge. Ironically, several local museums have frequently been criticised for their museum methods and lack of museological knowledge. In local contexts, academic and professional practices sometimes extended the distance rather than making the museum closer to communities and people. In search of more understanding about social and cultural complexity and various forms of relationship between museums and communities, these issues will be investigated and analysed based on Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogical approach and the key idea of dialogic imagination, which is basically concerned with multiple voices, multiple narratives and dialogues of differences.

Chapter 3

A new museum movement in Thailand

Siam or Thailand is a country that has cultivated a long-term interest and enthusiasm in museums, especially with respect to museum-making. It is recorded that the first museum in the country was formally established in 1850. This is a royal museum set up in a palace of King Rama IV. In 2019, according to the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre's Database of Museums in Thailand[1], there were more than 1,500 museums located not only in the big cities but also in the countryside and provincial areas all around the country. This number includes diverse foci, collections, stories, practices, agency, and so on. Significantly, several hundred located throughout the country are small-scale museums that were established and run by non-governmental agencies and museum amateurs.

This chapter presents an overview of local museums in Thailand. Referring to an evidently increasing number of small-scale museums run by non-governmental agencies known as local museums, they have been addressed as a new museum movement in Thailand's museum landscape (Koanantakool et al., 2004). This chapter aims to explore the emergence of local museums, their voices, and the interactions between them and institutional museums, especially national and university museums. It also explores collaborations and engagements between local museums and anthropology, particularly those based at the SAC. For two decades, the centre has played a significant role and cultivated long-term relationships with local museums and museum amateurs through a variety of academic and curatorial activities.

Voices of local museums and museum amateurs

For Thai national museums and the governmental agencies working with museums, local museums certainly have been recognised as private museums or non-governmental museums. These museums are mostly initiated and run by museum amateurs or vernacular curators who have not been formally trained in museology or museum studies. They sometimes have been casually recognised as 'museum people' or 'ชาวพิพิธภัณฑ์' (Chao

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[1] See more details at https://db.sac.or.th/museum/

Phiphitthaphan) in Thai. This title covers a wide range of actors who work with museums e.g. museum founders, curators, practitioners, managers, workers, volunteers, and so on.

Literally, 'museum amateurs' would be another keyword, which entails a relevant meaning; this thesis would prefer to use this term alongside 'museum people'. Museum people as a term also embraces a sense of belonging to a community of museum practices and sharing empathetic understanding along with both positive and negative feelings such as happiness, proudness, frustration, anxiety, sadness, suffering, and so on.

According to the biography of several museum amateurs, they are from diverse backgrounds and careers. In this section, I would like to address some major groups of museum amateurs or museum people not only in the northeastern region but throughout the country. The *first* group is Buddhist monks who frequently have played an active role as museum founders and practitioners, especially for local museums located in the monastery's area. The *second* group are local leaders, such as elderly persons, teachers, or masters who are highly respected in the community. This includes community leaders and spiritual leaders of ethnic communities whose concern and effort has focused on setting up museums to preserve and present their ethnic identities and culture. The *third* group is the museum amateur who is a skillful person who set up a museum involved with their everyday working life and skilled job e.g. craftsman, fisherman, farmer, weaver, puppeteer, puppet maker, and so on. The *fourth* group are local collectors – some of whom are indigenous. Someone may have interacted with or supplied objects to external collectors and later become a collector in their own right and set up the museum to display their private collection.

In fact, these groups of museum amateurs are not mutually exclusive but overlap and connect as can be seen through their voices and biographies. The following quotations are mainly gathered from the museum survey and network meetings of local museums in five regions of Thailand: the Central and the West, the East, the North, the Northeast, and the South during 2003–2004 organised by the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (SAC). Most of these voices were presented in an exhibition 'Voices of Museums' curated by the SAC in

2004. This topic's title is also inspired by this exhibition's title. Additional quotations were derived from related documents such as biographies, published interviews, and recorded seminars.

Several Buddhist monks have become interested and played a major role in local museums alongside the formation of the national museums. Some monastery museums or collections assembled by the abbot were donated to the government and established as a regional branch of the national museums. In southern Thailand, the case of Chaiya National Museum is one example that has presented interactions and entanglements between the museum practitioners from national museums and local museum amateurs. In his autobiography 'เล่าไว้เมื่อวัยสนธยา' (*Telling in the Twilight Years*), Buddhadasa Bhikkhu described his interest and the study group of local people at Chaiya who interested and worked on archaeology around the Bandon Bay, and interactions with the government officers from the national museums and related academic fields.

> In 1950, when I was Dharma teacher at Wat Phrathat Chaiya, there were the government officers who working on archaeology, particularly Luang Bariban Buriphan came to set up the national museum. He discussed with Phrakru Sophon Chetsikaram (Auim) – my master and the abbot, the history of this area and his collections, which included a large number of old things. The master then donated those collections to set up a branch of the National Museums at the monastery.
>
> As I have heard what they discussed about the interesting local history that was possibly connected with the great kingdom of Srivichai; it sounded wonderful and had tremendous dignity. This is certainly very interesting and meaningful to me because this is local history and related to our homeland. So, I was involved and joined them to comment and discuss and became an active member because I was very serious and dedicated to this work as I was with every work. This project became a

fascinating and dedicated work until I finally published a book on the Archaeology of Bandon Bay.

In 1935, the monastery collections initially were integrated and promoted by the National Museum, Chaiya, a branch of the National Museum located at Wat Prathat Chaiya. In 1950, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu was promoted to be the director of the National Museum, Chaiya. This is an example of new branches of Thailand's National Museums being established in the regional areas. Further examples of the National Museum's branches developed from the monastery collections are the National Museum in Buri opened in 1938, which became a branch of the National Museum in 1953; Machimawat National Museum opened in 1940, which became a branch of the National Museum in 1961; and Maha Wirawong National Museum, which opened in 1954 and became a branch of the National Museum in 1961 (Department of Fine Arts, 2008).

Several decades later, in the district of Chaiya, there was another monastery museum dedicated to folk culture in the local area, namely, Muang Chaiya Folk Museum, which was opened to the public in 2000. This museum was initiated and run by Phra Sri Pariyat Chayaporn, the abbot of Wat Viang. He also addresses his inspiration and intention to initiate a new museum that would be different from the prior museum at the Wat Mahathat Chaiya.

Chaiya is an ancient town and we aim to preserve the old things because we saw people come to buy a lot of them for trading to foreigners and exporting abroad. There is a National Museum at Chaiya focusing on archaeological objects. We need a folk museum because it can be a learning centre for folk culture and local wisdom.

Phra Sri Pariyat Chayaporn, 2004

The abbot of Wat Viang, Suratthani province

Like several museum amateurs, Buddhist monks are persons who have crossed cultural boundaries and differences. Several of them are countrymen who come to study in Bangkok or other big cities. Some had travelled abroad for learning and teaching Dhamma as Dhammaduta Bhikkhu or were overseas monks. Phra Arjan Bunyarat Panyawuttho, the abbot of Wat Phra Yuen, Lamphun province is one example.

> We thought of setting up a museum because it is common for every town, every village to have one. I remembered staying in Germany during one Buddhist Lent and saw museums in every city like Frankfurt, Stuttgart, and so on. When I returned and looked at the situation at home, things were left drifting. That was no action work, just guarding old things. The young generation has no chance to learn how their ancestors managed to lead the country. I want them to study, to learn, to see, and to appreciate such facts.
>
> Phra Arjan Bunyarat Panyawuttho, 2003
>
> Wat Phra Yuen Museum, Lamphun province

Some Buddhist monks who are indigenous and belonged to an ethnic community were highly concerned with vanishing ethnic identities and traditions. They, therefore, set up local museums to preserve and pass on their indigenous culture to the next generations. One example is the Tai-Puan Folk Museum initiated and run by Phrakru Viriyanuyok, the abbot of Wat Fang Klong, Lampun province. The museum is located in the area of the monastery surrounding by Tai-Puan villages.

> Nowadays all is changed. Our children cannot speak Puan language. School didn't teach them, and their parents didn't speak anymore. The culture and traditions of Puan have been assimilated and are vanishing.
>
> We – the monastery, schools, and villagers – work together and attempt to preserve Puan culture and present our identities. If we assemble

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equipment, tools, artefacts, we can trace histories and stories relating to those material things. This is why we set up this folk museum.

Phrakru Viriyanuyok, The abbot and museum founder, 2003

Tai-Puan Folk Museum, Wat Fang Klong, Lampun province

Similar to most countries in Southeast Asia, Thailand is a country that includes tremendous cultural diversity and ethnic groups; several of them are highly concerned with their vanishing traditional culture as shown in the quotations above. The following stories are about local museums dedicated to ethnic culture or ethnic communities in particular.

I set up the museum initially to strengthen the community. So, I looked for things that people cherish and have pride in. I selected the "Mon's way of life" and "Pottery" as the main themes. At the beginning, I collected all antiques and old objects. But then I asked myself "What is unique about us?" So, I let the temple keep the collections related to the monastery and the royalty, while my own house is home to the collections related to the ethnic Mon pottery, documents, and artefacts.

What worries us now is the abstract matter such as folk songs, and our literature that cannot be housed in a cabinet. It may be passed on, but not so thoroughly or profoundly, as language competency is not sufficiently profound.

Pisarn Boonphook, 2003

Mon Folk Museum, Koh Kred, Nonthaburi Province

Tai Dam or Black Tai is an ethnic group, which migrated from the area that nowadays is the North of Vietnam, to Siam more than a century ago. According to oral histories, there are at least three primary waves of migrants: during the reign of King Taksin, Kingdom of Thonburi; the reign of King Rama I; and the reign of King Rama III. Large groups of Black Tai people were forcibly migrated by the military troops from northern Laos and Vietnam

to Siam and then were settled at Kao Yoi, Pethchaburi, and nearby areas. Mrs. Thanom Kongyimlamai described her beginning ideas and the making of the Tai Dam Cultural Centre located at Kao Yoi School where she was a teacher:

> I even visited a cultural centre in Vietnam; they exhibit several ethnic groups. This is only one cultural centre for Tai Dam (Black Tai) in Thailand. I set up this museum at Kao Yoi School where I am a teacher. The majority of students here are Tai Dam but they don't want others to know they are Lao. I am an active Lao and the first Tai Dam who has a bachelor's graduation.

> My house is also a part of history. It is a wild museum namely Pan-Thanom Museum or พิพิธภัณฑ์ปาน-ถนอม (in Thai). I do without any governmental support. Some wealthy people donated money, and several local people donated material things to the museum. We would like to cherish our traditions of Thai-Dam wisdom. When the industry came into the local area, culture disappeared.

> Thanom Kongyimlamai, 2003
> The founder of the Tai Dam Cultural Centre
> Kao Yoi School, Petchaburi province

Similar to Mrs. Thanom Khongyimlamai, who was a teacher, Mr. Ruangchai Jamniyom is a retired teacher, who became deeply interested in the farmers' way of life in central Thailand, which is his homeland. The centre of Thailand is an important area of rice farming owing to a landscape that is flat and has several rivers running through it. This local museum is a private museum built in an area of his house. The museum exhibits farmers' material tools and explains their ways of life by handmade exhibitions and mixed media e.g. models, demonstrations, and mannequins.

> People didn't understand well the importance of the museum. They often were wondering why I have an interest and work with it. If we only tell

verbal stories, when we can't tell, all will be gone. But if we collect objects, these material things will exist although we are all gone. When we saw the material things, we recalled memories and kinship ties in those things. The museum is potentially a mediator connecting people together.

Ruangchai Jamniyom, 2003

Museum of Thai farmers' Way of Life, Ban Lan Leam

Nakhon Prathom province

Another group of museum amateurs, who are enthusiastic and deeply involved with local museums are the collectors, especially those who are interested in folk and bygone artefacts. One of the well-known collectors who run the Sgt.Maj. Tawee Folk Museum at Pitsanulok province museum is Sergeant Major (Sgt.Maj.) Tawee Buranakhet. In Thailand, this museum is a legend and the pioneering case of a folk museum that several museum amateurs mention as the inspiration to initiate a new museum, especially a folk museum. In a seminar entitled 'The Future of Local Museums: Lessons from Sgt.Maj. Tawee Folk Museum', which took place at the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre on 17th October 2002, Sgt.Maj. Tawee told about his museum which is his life work:

My museum life has two parts – the first is to learn, search, assemble, conserve, and outreach; the second has been to collect artefacts for 30 years. In 2526, I set up my museum and first opened to the public. In 2533, I developed the museum by myself as ordinary people could do without any government support. Several people said to me that you are crazy because at that time no one was concerned about this work. Thirty years later several were concerned with its value and have been inspired by this museum. There are a lot of students who come to study in this museum.

Sgt.Maj. Tawee Buranakhet, 2002

Sgt.Maj. Tawee Folk Museum, Pitsanulok province

Sgt.Maj. Tawee Folk Museum has raised awareness and inspired several local museums and museum amateurs, especially those who are interested in folk culture and various kinds of folk artefacts. The museum has collected and exhibited so many folk collections in humble and creative ways. Mr. Somsak Sriboonrueag the founder of Ban Kwain Muk — a folk museum located on the Mekong Riverside at Mukdaharn province, is a museum amateur who was inspired and learned from the Sgt.Maj. Tawee Folk Museum. Ban Kwian Muk was established with deep affection and bonding. My father was a Bangkokian who came to work in the Northeast region for the construction of roads and transportations. My mother was born here, and I was growing up with the grandfather who was a travelling cow-merchant (or Nai Hoi in Isan).

> I collect all kind of folk artefacts – whether buying or getting them free of charge. At the beginning I didn't think to make a museum because in my mind at that time, a museum is a great mission and too great for ordinary people like me.

> I travel around and visit several museums. Sgt.Maj. Tawee Folk Museum is one of my teachers as well as Opium House at the Golden Triangle, Chiang San. Until I had seen a Hmong Ethnic Museum at Lomsak, the museum was made in minimalist style with very strong intentions. This museum inspired me that I could make one as well. Then I started to set up a small museum at home. I use the name Ban Kwian Muk (บ้านเกวียนมุก in Thai) because the term "museum" is hard to understand and meaningless for local people.

<div style="text-align: right">

Somsak Sriboonrueag, 2004

Ban Kwian Muk, Isan Folkart Museum,

Mukdaharn province

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The last group of museum amateurs are craftsmen and persons with various skills. Some are also collectors, such as Nang[2] Suchat Subsin, who was a well-known shadow-puppeteer and also a shadow-puppet craftsman. He built a museum in his living area that included a small-scale theatre for his shadow-puppet performances. There is a workshop for crafting the shadow puppets and training someone who is interested.

> To talk about "museum" then, I did not know it. I had no ideas about what a museum was. I collected old things for my own use as a shadow-puppet carver. What I like most are iron tools and knives for slicing bamboo. I buy them wherever I visit and find them beautiful.
>
> Until I had the chance to have my audience with His Majesty the King. He said he appreciated my effort to keep old things. He also asked me not to hold on to my knowledge and skill but pass it on to the next generation. That's why I launched this museum.

<div align="right">

Suchart Subsin, 2004

Museum of Suchart Subsin's Shadow Puppets

Nakhon Sri Thammarat province

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These voices reflect the concerns and enthusiasm of local museums and museum amateurs. The quotes reflect that museums are the work of professionals and, as they have no skills, their museums are works of love and several have dedicated a lot or their time and budgets to museums. There are many burdens and difficulties in the museum field and even though they have limited resources and a lack of support, local museums and museum amateurs still look after and care about their museums; these later became what nowadays is known to the public as cultural heritage. In relation to Buddhism, some museum amateurs addressed the value of museum works not for money but 'Withyathan' or 'วิทยาทาน' in Thai, which means giving or sharing knowledge with the public.

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[2] Nang or Nai-Nang (in Thai) is the title generally used for the shadow puppeteer in southern Thailand.

Local museums were made with strong intentions and effort. If not, the museums could not have survived to date. We do so because we want to provide knowledge for everyone – to let them come and learn at the museum. This is a kind of support for the public as the giving or sharing of knowledge or Withyathan (วิทยาทาน in Thai) means a kind of merit-making by giving knowledge instead of money or material things. Students at the monastery can come to learn here every weekend.

We should not only look forward but should glimpse backward sometimes. We attempt to balance and be concerned with both looking forward and backward.

Someone mentioned the cost-benefit. Even museums did not acquire monetary profit; it was not a burden. The profit is people who come to study in the museum – even two or ten visitors would be profit in terms of thoughts, which cannot be compared to financial value or money.

<div align="right">Phrakru Thavorn Dharmakowit, 2003
Wat Phra-Thaen-Sila-At Museum, Utaradit province</div>

Although these museum amateurs have dedicated much effort, personal resources, and a lifetime to their museum works, they often felt uncomfortable calling their work a museum. They often mentioned that their museum was maybe under standard and unable to be a museum because it still looked like a storage room. However, they still persisted and carried on their museum work, although they have to work with limited resources and a lack of support from the government and public funders. When I met several of them for the first time in 2003–2004, they were elderly persons and some had already retired from their primary careers. Two decades later, they are getting much older; some of them have passed away, and some are unable to run museums because of illness or weakness.

However, their local museums are mostly still open to the public and work as learning spaces to preserve meaningful artefacts and cultural heritage for future generations.

Furthermore, a majority of museum amateurs are still in charge and carry on their museum work as ever. Some local museums have revised their names and missions in relation to changing contexts and state policies. There are new keywords and terms in the working life of local museums such as cultural heritage, intangible cultural heritage (ICH), cultural industry, cultural tourism, creative tourism and so on.

In fact, the term 'cultural heritage' whether tangible or intangible is relevant to local museums. It could be said that the first generation of local museums' founders were very visionary. They came before the age of museums and this may be the reason why they struggled, were lonely, and lacked concern and support from others. Relationships between local museums and cultural heritage are significant and have been a concern in Thailand including at the SAC. This issue will be discussed further in the last section about local museums and anthropology-engaged museums.

For the next topic I would like to contextualise these local museums within the condition of modernity and the politics of recognition to explore relationships between local museums and wider contexts. These issues are linked to the struggle of local museums with nationalism and colonialism, which several local museums and museum amateurs encountered and reacted to through their museum practices.

Local museums, modernity, and the politics of recognition

According to the voices of local museums and museum amateurs above in comparison with existing museums, local museums can be seen as a new museum movement that is different from prior museums, especially the institutional museums such as the national museums, university museums, science museums, art museums, and so on. However, these small-scale museums are growing underground and touching some of the institutional museums, especially the national museums, through activities and interactions with museum works.

As I have mentioned earlier, the emerging and dramatically increasing number of small-scale and non-governmental museums, which were later known as local museums throughout the country, have been identified since the 1970–1980s. In this section, I would

like to address two structural conditions that may lead to the emergence of local museums. The first condition necessary is massive changes in the countryside owing to state modernisation and modernity coming to local areas at that time. The second condition is the politics of recognition, which are related to political contexts of nationalism and colonialism more broadly and over the long term.

In my MA by research on local museums in North Yorkshire, I proposed that local museums can be seen as a consequence of modernity and change in the countryside (Srisinurai, 2014). These small-scale museums located particularly in the countryside reflect a sense of loss and massive changes in local areas, such as mechanical agriculture, industrialisation, and the development of infrastructure.[3] Local people therefore started to collect and keep bygone collections, traditions, and memories embodied in material things. This kind of museum exists under several names such as local museums, folk museums, tribal or ethnic museums, community museums, local history museums, and so on.

This kind of museum movement is also resonant with the case of local museums in rural Thailand as shown in the voices of local museums above. Likewise, the following quote is a voice from a local museum in North Yorkshire, UK. Bert Frank, the first curator of the Ryedale Folk Museum also stated the common message in his biography '*The Spell of Ryedale*' (Brannigan, 2011).

> Large and famous museums were good at preserving the big stories of
> history but who cared   about the little stories of ordinary people, their
> dogged will to survive on very little, their symbiotic relationship with the
> land around them, their customs and superstitions? (Bert Franks cited in
> Brannigan, 2011, p. 23)
> My aim is to form a permanent museum to display ancient objects of this
> area, for we need it very badly. Old implements are rapidly disappearing

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[3] See concrete details about the process of Thailand's modernisation and its effects on the countryside and the whole country in *A Siamese Tragedy: Development and Disintegration in Modern Thailand* (Bello et al., 1997).

through mechanisation and we are trying to preserve some of them. (Bert

Franks cited in Brannigan, 2011, p. 29)

<div align="right">

Bert Franks (1919-1996)

The first curator of Ryedale Folk Museum (opened 1963)

Hutton le Hole, North Yorkshire, UK

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Although each local museum is concerned and involved with a different culture or ethnic community, the sense of loss and intention to remember and preserve their culture, whether material or non-material, is shared in common. Furthermore, several museum amateurs and museum founders frequently included an educational purpose as most museums do and attempted to successfully realise this purpose. In the case of local museums, the educational function of topics such as local traditions, folklore, local history, and cultural diversity are a major concern.

In addition, globalisation is a component condition of modernity, which affects an increasing number of local museums. This includes the influence of UNESCO, which plays an active role in the international and national programme including the government projects concerned with cultural diversity and safeguarding of ICH. The government implementation of these programmes has promoted the significance and values of local culture that once had been overlooked by modern eyes and prior state modernisation. UNESCO and international concerns with cultural heritage and cultural diversity are a supportive condition for the emergence of local museums and community-based museums, especially those dedicated to folk and ethnic culture due to their function of safeguarding ICH (Alivizatou, 2012).[4]

The second condition that affects the emergence of local museums is the politics of recognition, which is also related to nationalism and colonialism. In his influential work

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[4] See more details and case-studies from Oceania, the Americas, and Europe in *Intangible Heritage and the Museum: New Perspectives on Cultural Preservation* (Alivizatou, 2012). This book has also been translated into Thai and published by the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (SAC). Another SAC project focusing on ICH is the SAC Museum Field School (2009-2013). See more details about ICH and Museums learning resources at https://www.sac.or.th/databases/ichlearningresources/

'Imagined Community', Benedict Anderson (2003) critiqued museums as a cultural tool used by the state and political elites for building the nation as a community, which shares collective memories and values. Likewise, Tony Bennett (1995) examines museums as a set of cultural practices to govern and 'civilise' their people. Post-colonial criticism of museums also shares the same perspective and direction. However, this thesis argues that in the case of local museums, the situation appears different and these small-scale museums play a significantly different role in resisting and negotiating with the institutional museums, especially national museums. Local museums present the marginal voices and minority identities and play active roles in the politics of recognition in contemporary society.

The interaction and dialogue between museum practitioners of institutional museums and museum amateurs also influence the establishment of local museums, especially the decision to set up a local museum. As ordinary people, they have an interest in museum works and participate in museum affairs run by the national museums such as field trips, surveys, and excavations of historical and archaeological sites; searching for and collecting material things from local areas as national treasure; establishing national museums in provincial areas, and so on.

Look backing to the much more distant past since the establishment of the royal museum in Thailand or Siam at around 150 years ago, the museum was a powerful sign of human civilisation. The museum played a significant role as a civilising project as Siam opened up and connected to the modern world, which at the same time can be seen as the colonial context. As well as constructing modern infrastructure such as railways, roads, modern education, and medical services were developed (Prapathong and Phosrithong, 1998, pp. 30–31).

To the civilising world, Siamese museums and related modern activities presented the potential for the country to modernise, catch up, and be able to stand side by side with other civilised countries, especially those in Europe. Interest in archiving the 'others' and setting up modern museums in the country is a part of the civilising project, which is the

goal to be achieved in civilised countries. Thus, the establishment of the first royal museum in Thailand was not isolated from the world. Moreover, the royal museum was inspired by the grand European museums such as the national museums, university museums, science museums, natural history museums and ethnological or ethnographic museums (Prapathong and Phosrithong, 1998, pp. 38–44).

During the same period that the royal museum in Siam was initiated, there were grand international exhibitions and the world's fair launched annually or occasionally in Europe and North America. In this phase, the ordinary people in Siam were involved with museum affairs in several ways. They had been asked to provide the special artefacts from their local areas to present at the royal museum and the world exhibitions (Prapathong and Phosrithong, 1998, pp. 34–35). Calling for material things in this case sounds like the process nowadays known as cloud-sourcing. It could be said that local people have participated in museum affairs and exhibitions since the late 19th century when official museums began to be established in Siam.

Local museums or small-scale museums with various names, therefore, did not come later or were not less developed in comparison with existing institutional museums, especially national museums as explained by progressive history or the theory of evolution. In fact, local museums had been constructed and involved with emerging national museums and related activities through surveys and excavations of historical and archaeological sites, collecting material things from local areas such as national treasures, establishments of national museums in provincial areas, and so on. On the one hand, archaeological discoveries, especially in Isan areas, fostered dignity and local people's concern about their cultural heritage and the long history of their land. On the other hand, local people felt a loss that those collections had been taken from local areas.

Several collections in local areas collected by respectful monks had been donated to national museums and later became the regional branches of national museums. This can be seen through their interactions and entanglements in the process of museum-making and working life. Some monastery museums had interacted and worked with the museum

practitioners who came to the local area to promote concerns about heritage and national treasures located in local areas.

Moreover, a significant meaning of local museums for local people had to do with cultural politics; local museums entail cultural practices to present their cultural identities and strengthen self-esteem and confidence in an indigenous background that is a minority or marginal and often overlooked or even looked down upon. This cultural bias certainly relates to influences and unpleasant legacies of colonialism and the influential idea of cultural evolution.

In the case of Thailand, colonialism and nationalism are entangled and share many characteristics. Colonialism whether internal or external, and nationalism link with local museums through the politics of recognition, especially in Thailand, where the national narrative centres around Thai-ness and central Thailand, especially Bangkok. The voices of local museums presented above and data gathered from museum surveys also support this argument.

Local museums and anthropology-engaged museums

In the field of museum knowledge, since Siam/Thailand has been modernised and adopted modern knowledge and technologies from Western countries, especially Europe around a century ago, archaeology, history, and art history have been the key players in the museum field. Particularly in the case of national museums, these disciplines have been developed alongside modern museums, which functioned as either a key element of modern academic institutions or as a disciplinary platform.

Although there has always been efforts to establish the national ethnological museum or ethnographic museum as established in Europe, this kind of museum has not yet been successfully created. However, there are sections of ethnographic collections and exhibitions about ethnology in several branches of national museums located in provincial areas. The exhibitions that mainly describe ethnic groups are found in these areas. The exhibition style still looks static and based on typologies.

In comparison with the other disciplines mentioned above, anthropology can be mentioned specifically, as social and cultural anthropology propose distinctive views and meanings with respect to local museums and material collections founded in local areas. Ethnographic approaches and fieldwork fulfil some aspects that had been overlooked by prior disciplines, especially concerns with ordinary people and local culture. Particularly in the case of monastery museums, they could be understood as a form of legacy of popular Buddhism and a new phenomenon recently developed in the Thai cultural landscape (Koanantakool, 2006, p.149). Dr. Paritta C. Koanantakool, a distinguished Thai anthropologist who carries out research on these monastery museums explains that:

> The recent phenomenon of monastery museums has created a new space within the Buddhist monasteries in Thailand. From the survey of diversity of museums, legacies of the monasteries have given contexts of meanings to different categories of objects collected and displayed in the museums. Like the monasteries which are established to commemorate the Buddha, monastery museums have strong commemorative and celebrative mandates. They are established to commemorate the monastic heritage. The tangible heritage is represented by the objects donated as gifts to the monasteries, which are transferred to exhibits in museums. The narratives about these exhibits explain the notion and practices of popular Buddhist tradition that regard monasteries as a field of merit for those who donate gifts, a space that neutralises potential danger associated with objects of curiosity and antiquity, as well as a field for competing social prestige. These notions are passed on and give contexts to objects in monastery museums. (Koanantakool, 2006, p. 164)[5]

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[5] For more details and case-studies, see Paritta Chalermpow Koanantakool (2006). 'Contextualising objects in monastery museums in Thailand' in François Lagirarde and Paritta Chalermpow Koanantakool (eds.) *Buddhist Legacies in Mainland Southeast Asia: Mentalities, Interpretations and Practices*. Paris & Bangkok: Ecole française d'Extrême Orient.

In the case of Thailand, local museums and anthropology have been engaged and worked collaboratively for more than a couple of decades. Around the 1990s, a pioneering collaboration with local museums was initiated and run collaboratively by Silpakhorn University, the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (SAC), and Lek-Prapai Viriyaphan Foundation, which are active agencies in the field of local museums and local histories. Two important anthropologists who played major roles and looked after the process of museum curation were Associate Prof. Srisaka Vallibhotama and Associate Prof. Pranee Wongted who taught anthropology at Silpakhon University. The SAC's Director at that time was Prof. Khunying Kaisri Sriarun, the former chancellor of Silapakhon University.

Local museums were established based on this collaboration including the Wat Muang Folk Museum, Ban Kao Yee San Museum, Chan Sen museum, and so on. Shared in common, were these museums' concern with local histories, archaeology, and folk culture with a large-scale framework and analysis of the cultural landscape, the river basin, locality, and interconnectivity between neighbouring communities. In particular, each museum also reflects cultural diversity and the uniqueness of its locale.

Wat Muang Folk Museum is located in the monastery's area and surrounded by Mon communities. The museum exhibition focuses on various aspects of Mon culture and local histories relating to the cultural landscape of the Mae Klong Riverside.[6] Ban Kao Yee San Museum presents the ways of life of the Yee San community, which is located near the sea on the route from the mainland to the sea.[7] Chan Sen Museum is located at the monastery area of Wat Chan Sen in the area of Chan Sen's ancient town. This area is a large archaeological site where many archaeological materials were found and some were exhibited in the museum.[8] Chan Sen Museum is a good example of a local museum progressing well in the local community with its people in collaboration with the

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[6] See Pranee Wongted (ed.) (1993). The Mae Klong Basin: Socio-Cultural Development [ลุ่มน้ำแม่กลอง: พัฒนาการทางสังคมและวัฒนธรรม]. Bangkok: Silpakorn University.

[7] See Valailuck Songsiri (et al.) (eds.) (2002). *Society and Culture of Yeesan Community* [สังคมและวัฒนธรรมชุมชนคนยี่สาร]. Bangkok: Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre.

[8] See Lek-Prapai Viriyaphan Foundation (1967). Chansen Ancient Town [จันเสนเมืองโบราณ]. Bangkok: Lek-Prapai Viriyaphan Foundation.

monastery and the abbot. This museum can foresee its sustainability, which has often been a major problem for local museums.

Since 2003, the SAC initiated a Research and Development Project on Local Museums directed by Dr. Paritta C. Koanantakool, the SAC director at that time. The project has carried out museum ethnography and worked collaboratively with three local museums in Central, Eastern and Northern Thailand: Wat Thapud Museum, Nakhon Prathom Province; Wat Ban Don Museum, Rayong; and Wat Laihin Luang Museum, Lampang.[9] This project implements museum anthropology and an ethnographic approach in the museum process by looking particularly closely at personal experiences, memories, and biographies of local people and objects. Moreover, the project's researchers have also carried out ethnographies of local museums and observed how the museums function and play various roles in local communities.

Anthropological practices and practitioners in this project are not only limited to anthropologists, who have been trained in the university, but include museum practitioners or researchers from various disciplines, who are concerned with ethnographic approaches, folklore and anthropological perspectives and implement this knowledge in their research or curatorial practices. The project's activities include the museum meetings and workshops in regional areas in order to network with local museums and museum practitioners. The results of these meetings have also led to further collaborative works such as museum festivals at the centre in Bangkok, publications, and newsletters.

Museum networking is important and meaningful for local museums and museum people that once felt lonely because they mainly had to work on their own with limited support, collaboration, or friends in the museum field. So far, the SAC still retains long-term and constructive relationships with local museums across the country and engages in academic and social support and running collaborative work with them occasionally e.g. local museum festivals in the regional areas, meetings, workshops, publications and digital

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[9] See more details about the SAC's Local Museum Research and Development Project at https://db.sac.or.th/museum/magazine/book

archives. Some museum people address the significance of the museum networks as follows:

> We need friends. If we are alone, we are weak. We have to hold on together, build a network and empower. At present, the networking of the northern region is quite successful, especially in Chiang Rai province. We meet together almost every month. Go to visit, to see and encourage each other. I think building the Museum Network is a way to survive (Cited in Sarawasee, 2014, p. 64).

<div align="right">

Phra Kru Palad Suwat Jariyakhun

The Head of Northern Local Museum Network

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> We share experiences. We believe that every community can do so. The study group comes to see our work and brings it back to apply. This is to find social capital in their community. We believe that this is an opportunity to develop a network. The Museum Network can make our work much easier and less hard (Cited in Sarawasee, 2014, p. 65).

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Weerawat Kangwannawakul

Toy Museum, Chiang Rai Province

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In a wider context, the Local Museums Research and Development Project is also concerned and has engaged in debates and academic movements concerned with the new museology, alternative museologies, and critical museum studies. The implementation of these academic debates and theoretical frameworks has dialogued and contributed not only with local museums and academics in Thailand but also with international museums' academics and cultural heritage studies. Several international conferences and public lectures on museums and cultural heritage have been organised and taken place at the SAC. Meanwhile, there are two academic events that shaped my research imagination on local museums and relevant debates in international museum studies.

The first event was the public lecture on the 6th September 2004 'Learning from the Smithsonian: Lessons (Good and Bad) from the United States National Museum' by Dr. Frank Proschan, Centre for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution of the United States. The second event was the international conference on 'Museums and Communities: Cross-cultural Comparative Perspectives' held on the 28th–29th September 2005. In this conference, post-colonial criticism on museums, post-colonial museum practices, indigenous curatorships, and alternative museologies were the critical issues that were discussed.

Since 2003, the Local Museums R&D project has run alongside several anthropological and cultural projects initiated and run by the SAC. Those projects are very diverse and involved with various areas.[10] Some projects were related to museums and cultural heritage, such as the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, Museum Field School on ICH, and local museum festivals, including exhibitions, conferences, workshops, publications and digital databases.

Moreover, the development and strength of the local museums networks and the SAC concern with cultural archives and database have developed several works relating to museums and heritage in local areas such as the co-curation of local museum festivals and the development of community archives.[11] Furthermore, the museum database, ethnographic archives, and accumulative knowledge about local museums and cultural diversity in Thailand became a relevant infrastructure for research and a wider range of museum practices. This is especially so for comparative study, cross-cultural study, and relational analysis.

Engagements between anthropology and local museums are also related to cultural heritage, especially the intangible cultural heritage (ICH). In Thailand, there were a number

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[10] See more details at the SAC website: https://sac.or.th

[11] See more details and a reflection by Dr. Paritta Chalermpow Koanantakool, the SAC Director regarding her anthropological work at the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre and elsewhere in 'Crafting Anthropology in Many Sites of Fieldwork' – an article published in *Decentring and Diversifying Southeast Asian Studies: Perspectives from the regions*. Goh Beng-Lan (ed.), 2011, pp. 149–167.

of visionary persons concerned with something currently known as cultural heritage and several museum people or museum amateurs were included. As I have mentioned earlier, the first generation of local museums' founders are visionaries. They struggled to collect, preserve, and set up the museums despite few persons being concerned and worked without any governmental or public support. Relationships between local museums and cultural heritage are also an important issue with which the SAC had been concerned.

The situation of anthropology-engaged museums in Thailand sounds quite different from the debate about the post-ethnological or post-ethnographic (Deliss, 2013). In the case of ethnographic museums, especially in Europe, major debates based on post-colonial critics have led to critical questions about the roles of anthropology and in particular the ethnology in museums (Barringer and Flynn, 1998; Zimmerman, 2001; Henare, 2005; Conklin, 2013). More recently, art and aesthetics, especially contemporary arts, have been identified and are expected to provide more creative and relevant interpretations for ethnographic collections and ethnological museums.

This critical issue raises two significant questions about relationships between anthropology and the ethnographic and ethnological museums, including the institutional museums that collected and exhibited ethnographic collections. The first question is about the distance and relationships between anthropology and museums. The second is about the relevance of anthropological knowledge to museums and curatorial practices. Moreover, there is a concern that anthropology has also changed, diversified and has been decolonised, especially in the non-Western countries where anthropology is rooted and plays a significant role in several areas.

To sum up, this topic aims to illustrate that the cultural moment of local museums is not demarcated from the academic and cultural movements either inside or outside the country. Thailand is a county that is connected with the world. Not only the elites but also the ordinary people are interested and enthusiastic about museum affairs – whether as museum visitors or museum makers. However, the academic area of museum anthropology and museum studies is still at the beginning phase and requires more research and a new

generation of researchers. This requirement is not only one pertaining to critical museum studies but also to curatorial practices. In the case of ethnographic collections, which are linked closely to both local museums and the institutional museums, the major interest of this thesis is especially in ethnographic museums.

Conclusion – local museums as a new museum movement

This chapter introduces local museums as a new museum movement in Thailand since the emergence and increasing number of small-scale non-governmental museums known as local or vernacular museums. It focuses on the voices of local museums and museum amateurs and the structural conditions involved with the emergence and increasing number of local museums. Furthermore, this chapter also explores anthropology-engaged museums and the relationships of local museums and anthropology in Thailand that have worked together for more than two decades.

The two structural conditions or contexts that affected the emergence of local museums are modernity and the politics of recognition, which are also related to nationalism and colonialism; in the case of Thailand we would be unable to analyse or understand these separately. The first condition involved in increasing the number of local museums is modernity, which refers to the massive and rapid changes that happened in the countryside owing to the state policies promoting modernisation. The concrete forms of modernity are the construction of infrastructure, urbanisation and industrialisation, the mechanisation of agriculture, and changes in ways of life and working life. Several local museums responded to and are concerned with these massive changes; they have attempted to preserve a bygone culture to educate future generations.

In relation to the politics of recognition, this chapter illustrates interactions and connected histories between national museums, local museums, and the colonial context according to a broader range of meanings. In fact, colonialism and nationalism are not separate but also entangled. Even as local museums were established after national museums, both have interacted and become entangled in the making of local museums. Several collections in local areas were initially collected by respectful monks or the monastery

abbots. Some of those collections were then donated to national museums. Some monastery museums were promoted to be the regional branches of the National Museum.

Another point that I would like to address in this chapter is about anthropology-engaged museums and the relationships between local museums and anthropology in Thailand, especially the significance of ethnographic approaches in museum work. In the formative period of the National Museums in Thailand, the academic disciplines that were key players in the museum field were archaeology, national history, and art history. These disciplines have been practically developed by using museums as key elements and as platforms. Otherwise, anthropology is another discipline concerned with museums, especially local museums, ethnographic collections and folk life. Anthropology has played significant roles in the museum field, especially with local museums, by seeing local museums differently and being concerned with indigenous curatorships and marginal voices.

In the case of Thailand, the SAC has cultivated long-term relationships with local museums throughout the country and supported them to build museum networks in each region and across regions. As a new museum movement, local museums are not demarcated from related actors and the wider movement for democratic society, which may not be identical or have automatically arrived with modern society. Some familiar terms such as social history, the people's history, the history from below, and grassroots movements have also been heard from alongside local history.

In further chapters, this thesis aims to look more closely into the museums in Northeast Thailand and to examine colonial legacies and the limitations of museum knowledge and curatorial practices on some collections of sacred things or material things that were involved with the sacred to some extent. This chapter is an overview of museum contexts and dynamics of local museums in Thailand, which will partially be shared and interconnected with the situations of museums in Northeast Thailand. The next chapter will examine the dynamics and diversity of museums and introduce case studies of sacred things in Northeast Thailand.

Chapter 4

Locating museums in Northeast Thailand

This chapter is an introduction to the area of Northeast Thailand and the case studies of local museums and sacred things found there. This regional area is currently known as 'Isan' – literally meaning 'the Northeast'. In fact, Isan has not been recognised as a geographical and governmental landscape but as a cultural landscape that involves some kinds of cultural identity, particularly related to the emergence of regionalism and localism (Keyes, 1967; Kittiasa, 2014).

However, Isan has not been a homogenous landscape but home to various kinds of cultural differences and ethnic diversity. As a distinctive area, Isan has been altered from time to time by significant moments and has acted as a juncture of powers from both the nearby kingdoms and overseas empires (Keyes, 1967; Winichakul, 1994). This complexity certainly also relates to the emergence and appearance of various museums there.

This chapter contains three main topics: [1] Isan – Northeast Thailand: background and context; [2] Museums in Northeast Thailand: dynamics and diversity; and [3] Sacred things in local museums: selective case studies.
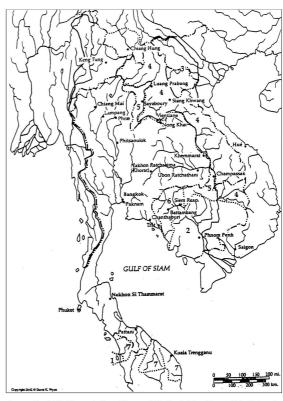
Isan – Northeast Thailand: background and contexts

Isan is a dynamic and contested area and may be difficult to briefly introduce. In part, this is because several textual narratives and histories of Isan had been initially cultivated and interpreted under the political atmosphere of the European colonisation of Southeast Asia and these overlapped with the emergence of Siam as a modern nation-state. During that period, Siam and France negotiated to claim this area, and especially the Mekong riverside, as their land.

The colonial context therefore led to the official and mainstream history of Isan, which had been narrated through the eyes of Siamese elites and strongly influenced by Thai royal-nationalism centred in Bangkok. Since the France-Siamese Treaty of 1893, although this area politically was a part of the Kingdom of Siam, Isan seems culturally different

from central Thailand and more closed to Laos and Cambodia, which are the neighbouring countries.

Source: David K. Wyatt, A Short History of Thailand (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 193.

Thai territorial losses, 1785-1909
1. Cessions to Britain by the Sultan of Kedah, 1785-1800.
2. Cambodian territory placed under French protection by Franco-Siamese Treaty, 1867.
3. Black Tai mūang taken by France, 1888.
4. East bank of Mekong ceded to France by Franco-Siamese Treaty, 1893.
5. West bank territories ceded to France by Franco-Siamese Treaty, 1904.
6. Western Cambodian provinces ceded to France by Franco-Siamese Treaty, 1907.
7. Malay states ceded to Britain by Anglo-Siamese Treaty, 1909.

Figure 4.1 Map of Thailand and the mainland Southeast Asia *(Source: Maphill.com, 2015)*

Figure 4.2 Map of colonial politics in the mainland Southeast Asia

(Source: David K. Wyatt, A Short History of Thailand, 2003, p.193)

Before the colonial period around a century ago, Isan was extremely isolated from central Thailand and was separated by wild areas – mountains, jungles, long distances without effective transportation – and no railways and roads. These only arrived later with the centralisation and modernisation by the Siamese government. Major transportation used to be provided by the Mekong River and its steam branches, which connected rather than divided Isan to the neighbouring areas on the opposite side of the river. More details about

the construction of the modern nation-states in Southeast Asia including Siam and its power mechanism to centralise and nationalise the others within can be seen in *Imagined Communities* (Anderson, 1991) and *Siam Mapped* (Winichakul, 1994). Additionally, one source of narratives about Isan from around 100 years ago is memoirs and reports written by both Thai and foreigner government officers who worked and travelled in that area.

According to modern historical studies, the area of Northeast Thailand that is currently the so-called 'Isan' has a controversial historical background and, in modern times, this area has encountered several massive changes alongside the process of top-down modernisation. Concrete changes are connecting the area with central Thailand by modern infrastructure like railways and roads. However, until a half century ago – the area of Mahasarakham province located in central Isan was still being recognised as 'the far province' from Bangkok; it was difficult to visit and took at least a day to reach (Cripps, 1965).
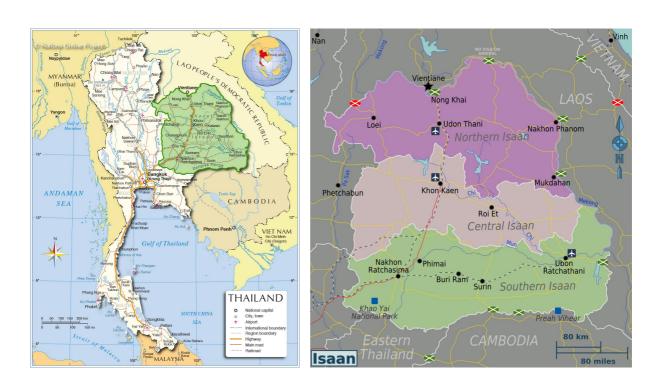
Figure 4.3 Map of Isan in the mainland Southeast Asia

(Source: https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/thailand-region-map.htm, 2020)

Figure 4.4 Map of Isan — Northeast Thailand

(Source: https://wikitravel.org/en/Isaan, 2020)

Similar to other rural areas, various significant changes occurred because of the coming of modernity, including migration to the centre, Bangkok, and the peripheral industrial sectors. Agricultural changes occurred as well according to the national economic policy on agricultural products' exports and changed at a faster pace after Thailand launched the first national economic development plan in 1961. These changes affected Isan in several ways: politically, economically and culturally. At various times since becoming a part of Siam, different rebel groups emerged in Isan, and in the eyes of the government, this area was seen as problematic and difficult to govern. In part, this also involved cultural differences between Isan people and the Thais in Bangkok, in the centre of Thailand. This cultural prejudice probably involved class issues and reflected problematic issues about Thai-ness, Thai culture and Thai identity.

In responding to this cultural atmosphere in Thailand, Isan has built up a new identity of 'Khon Isan' or Isan people who seem to be neither Thai nor Laotian. 'Isan' became a new term which does not refer to the geographical area but to culture, language and cultural identity and, increasingly, locality as Keyes (1967) addresses 'Isan' as a form of regionalism in Northeast Thailand. The spirit of Isan as regionalism is reflected in a large number of studies of local histories of/in Isan, which were released a couple of decades ago. In addition, interests in Isan histories have been reinforced by several factors and actors – not only as academic interests but also as supports from national government concerning local wisdom – and significant influences from globalisation and international institutions such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This concern also involves the emergence of local government agencies which were legally established after 1997.

Another academic movement that occurred simultaneously was an alternative approach to the official national history, which focused on the royal histories, the Thais and Thai-ness. One of the pioneering scholars is Srisakara Vallibhotama; based on his archaeological and anthropological background, his works synthesise both disciplines and propose a crucial knowledge about the past of Northeast Thailand. One of his major works is '*Ang Arayatham*

Isan' (แอ่งอารยธรรมอีสาน in Thai) or '*Isan Ancient Civilization*' (Vallibhotama, 1987), which was not only concerned with archaeological evidence but interpreting the scientific evidence with folk tales, myths and local narratives.

Regarding Isan folklore, Charuwan Thammawat, an important folklorist, has compiled several volumes of local folklore and rural traditions in Northeast Thailand. This project, in fact, runs simultaneously with those in other areas across the country, such as in the North, Southern and Central Thailand, and is supported by the government through the Office of National Culture.

There are great changes, such as increasing economic growth, active political and social movements, occurring in this area and in wider areas over the region including large and increasing numbers of educational institutions and a considerable amount of research is being undertaken on Isan studies by various disciplines. Isan has often been stereotyped as a difficult area of the poor, less educated and those painfully situated in a marginal area of the Thai nation-state.

However, these situations and aspects of social reality are the historical background and context of the Isan area, which is a significant location for a number of local museums. The small-scale museums have been made and run by local people in order to preserve their local heritage and present their cultural identities; several of these concern the sacred.

Museums in Northeast Thailand: dynamics and diversity

This section will briefly illustrate the dynamics and diversity of museums in this region, which are connected with histories of local museums in Northeast Thailand. According to an online database of museums in Thailand created by the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (Public Organisation) or SAC (Accessed in June 2015), overall, in the country there are 1,376 museums recorded. There are 225 museums located in Northeast Thailand and around 50% are non-governmental museums which can be broadly called 'local museums' run by monasteries, communities, and private agencies. These local museums are very diverse in terms of collections, stories, participants and backgrounds. Chronologically,

local museums primarily are seen as a late evolutionary stage of museum development in Thailand. These small-scale local museums have often been described as seeming like storage rooms, not very progressive and limited in quality in comparison with institutional museums either in Thailand or abroad.

This thesis argues instead that these local museums can be seen as museum entanglements or a consequence of connected histories with other kinds of museum in Northeast Thailand, especially national museums. Establishment of local museums may link with colonial contexts and unbalanced power relationships between the centre in Bangkok and the local North-east as the Isan region was politically integrated to be a part of modern Siam, namely, Thailand nowadays. The emergence of local museums also relates to critical issues about cultural identities because of significant differences between the local cultures in the Isan areas and Thai culture (or perhaps Thai national culture) at the centre of Thailand. This argument draws on a post-colonial standpoint and uses an analytical actor-network framework to investigate case studies of sacred objects, which are significant collections for both national and local heritage (This argument will be discussed further in the fifth chapter). The dynamics and diversity of museums in Northeast Thailand, which will be illustrated further, therefore can be seen as a part of the complexity of this museum landscape.

National museums and the safeguarding of national heritage

Similar to most regional areas of the country, the first groups of museums established in Northeast Thailand were national museums run by the Department of Fine Art. There are seven national museums located in this region out of a total of 44 in the country (Department of Fine Art, 2008). The timing and reasons for establishing these national museums mainly relate to both central government policy and local situations, especially the location of museums. Initially, national museums were primarily established to preserve and exhibit material objects found or connected to significant historic places or existing archaeological sites.

The first National Museum in Northeast Thailand is Maha Virawong National Museum in Nakhon Ratchasima province (opened in 1954). The museum was developed from existing collections, mainly religious and antique, collected by an important and charismatic monk named Somdet Phra Maha Virawong. The second National Museum in Isan is Phimai National Museum (opened in 1960), which essentially focuses on archaeological materials found both at Phimai Temple and nearby areas, and several areas of the Lower Isan. The Phimai Temple is substantial as an archaeological site relating to a historical period, in Thai language, the so-called 'Lopburi'. This period is linked closely with the ancient Khmer Kingdom because the temple was located on the route to Angkor Wat.

The third is the Khon Khan National Museum (opened in 1963). This National Museum was not located at the archaeological site but functions as a central storage and exhibition space for valuable materials found in the vast area of the Upper Isan region. The museum collections, as national treasures, are therefore very diverse and came from various local areas across the Upper Isan. Another noticeable National Museum is Ban Chiang National Museum (opened in1972) locating at Ban Chiang – an Isan village in Udon Thani, which is currently known as a World Heritage Site in Northeast Thailand. Ban Chiang is one of the pioneering prehistoric sites in Thailand and Southeast Asia. The museum was established in order to preserve, present and research archaeological materials found in the area. Major collections here include a number of human remains, painted pottery, and iron and bronze instruments related to prehistoric times.

The last three national museums in Isan provinces are a result of two factors – the first is local initiatives and requirements to memorialise and present stories about the local area. The second factor is about the national policy to increase new branches of national museums in provincial areas. Three national museums which were successfully established under those conditions are the Ubonratchathai National Museum (opened in 1983), Roi Et National Museum (opened in 1993) and Surin National Museum (opened in1996).

In comparison with earlier national museums, these national museums attempt to engage with major critics and to improve on the old styles of exhibitions and epic narratives in

earlier national museums – which primarily focus on Thai national history, archaeology, and ancient civilisation found in Thailand. For instance, Roi Et National Museum initially included various socio-cultural features related to the provincial area and the Upper Isan in permanent exhibitions. Besides Thai national history and archaeological narratives, the museum also exhibits local histories, and ethnographic narratives on local traditions, migrations and ethnic groups, including the social memories and biographies of local people.

University museums, modern education and Isan identities

Although national museums have been important and active in the museum landscape for a century, other dynamic and formative kinds of museum are also being cultivated and appear publicly. One of the new museum agencies is the university museum. These museums are significant as agencies of modern education and the construction of Isan identities. Some pioneering museum projects and university museums in the Isan region are the Anthropological Collections Room at Khon Kaen University (opened in 1986); Mahasarakham University Museums (opened in 1987 and 1999) and the Research Institution for Isan Art and Culture (opened in 1994).

For more than a decade, Mahasarakham University has continually run museum activities in Northeast Thailand, and especially in the middle of Isan. These cover the activities both of an institutional museum and those of an active supporter of local museums in the middle of Isan where the university is located. The university museum has been working collaboratively with several local museums on exhibitions, providing guidance and workshops on museum practices such as preservation techniques and cataloguing of material objects. This collaboration also includes a long-term project working on an archives database, preservation, translation and research on palm-leaf manuscripts in Northeast Thailand. This project was launched by the Research Institution for Isan Art and Culture, which also operates another large-scale museum focusing on arts and cultures in Northeast Thailand.

Another group of university museums is run by Rajabhat Universities (formerly colleges of education) such as Loei Rajabhat Museum (opened in 1987). Mainly, these museums call themselves 'cultural centres' and focus on folklore and folk cultures of the area including local languages, folk literature and oral traditions. At the initial stage, these cultural centres partially involved governmental cultural policies on preservation and protection of cultural heritage, which involved various key terms, such as folk culture, local wisdom, ethnic or indigenous knowledge, and cultural diversity.

Governmental agencies run museums – dinosaur museums and city museums

In comparison with other regions of Thailand, dinosaur museums may be unique to the Isan museums. There are two institutional museums dedicated to dinosaurs and palaeontology in the Isan region. The museums were established and run by the government's Department of Geology and Minerals. The first dinosaur museum at Phu Viang, Khon Kaen opened in 2001 and the second one at Phu Kum Kao; Kalasin, namely, the Sirindhorn Museum opened in 2008. Both museums are located in the area where a number of dinosaur fossils, which are new species, have been found and extracted. The first collection of dinosaur fossils was found at Phu Viang, Khon Kaen in 1976. Since 1980, researchers in the department have, until now, continually carried out research on these fossils in collaboration with various international research institutions.

In addition, recently there are several city museums, which were legally established since 1997, that have been constructed and operated by local government agencies. These museums focus on social histories and memories relating to the city and its changes. Enthusiasm in the past and the requirements of both local government and the people for a space for provincial histories and memories may have led to increasing numbers of city museums in several Isan provinces since then. For instance, a city museum, namely, 'Hong Mun Mang' (meaning 'the treasure house' in the Isan language) was opened at Khon Kaen in 2003 and followed by several others at Sakolnakhon, Mahasarakham, Kalasin, Yasothon, Udon Thani, and so on.

Local museums, cultural differences and expression of local identities

Several decades ago, a significant dynamic and diversity of museums in Northeast Thailand became visible. This vibrancy came with new agency in the museums external to the government, that is, the increasing numbers of monastery museums, local museums, community museums, school museums and private museums. These small-scale museums are also distributed widely in the Isan region. This museum phenomenon is also happening in other regional areas of Thailand. Substantially, the diversity of these local museums may reflect cultural differences and local identities in the Isan region and the following examples reflect this.

Monastery museums and safeguarding of local heritages

To some extent, the increasing numbers of local museums may relate to the structural changes in Northeast Thailand associated with state policies on economic development and modernisation in regional areas including the Isan region. Large numbers of local museums are located in monasteries and are often known as monastery museums. This may relate to intimate relationships between the monastery and nearby communities, especially in rural areas like Isan where Buddhist monasteries and monks are traditionally respected and trusted by community members. Monastery museums have substantially been functioning as storage and exhibition space for various expressions of local heritage. Collections in monastery museums are very mixed and may reflect a complexity of social networks and cultural differences related to those objects.

One good example is Wat Mahachai Museum (opened 1970) where storage of several kinds of cultural objects was found in the Isan region. Some of them are cultural objects such as archaeological materials, including statues of Hindu gods and goddesses, found in nearby areas. Some are valuable objects, which have been inherited and possessed by the monastery, since they were donated as offerings and objects for gaining merit. Several are Buddha images and religious objects used in Buddhist rituals. Some are folk collections and objects of everyday life, which local people donated to the museum, since those objects were no longer used and thus they continually disappear from local life because of

change, in particular modernity. Some monastery museums therefore identify themselves as folk museums such as Wat Chaisri Folk Museum, Khon Khan province.

Cultural centres, ethnic minorities and cultural identities

Local museums or cultural centres dedicated to cultures of some ethnic groups in Northeast Thailand are also significant. The two museums that I have visited are Tai-So Cultural Centre, Sakolnakhon province and Tai-Dum, Banna Panad Cultural Centre, Loei province. The first is run by local government in collaboration with local people, and opened in 1981. The museum collected and exhibited objects and stories relating to local ways of life, rituals and persons. At Banna Panad, there are two little museums, one of which is run by the community council (opened in 2003) and the other is a private museum run by a senior member of the community and his family (opened in 2013). In Thailand, these museums are significant for ethnic minorities as their cultural practice is to express ethnic identities, which often have been overlooked and perhaps assimilated. Significantly, several pieces of museum collections in both cultural centres are involved with witchcraft and magic according to ethnic beliefs, and some objects such as cloths, weapons and personal belongings relate to the ancestors' spirits.

Memorial museums for the masters of forest monks

Another group of local museums locating in Isan monasteries are the memorial museums dedicated to the masters of forest monks. This Buddhist tradition engages with the well-disciplined practices of the forest monks and the school of meditation that was initially established in the Isan region. Furthermore, the masters and their religious practices have been highly respected and appreciated until they became a part of Isan identities. After Phra Arjan Mann Phuritatta Thera who was the grand master of the Isan forest monks passed away, his student monks and local people proposed setting up a memorial museum to worship him. The museum aims to preserve and exhibit his biography and the everyday life objects belonging to the master. In this case, it seems to me that those objects may not only be 'ordinary' as it were but are possibly becoming 'sacred' owing to intimate relationships with the charismatic master. Since it opened in 1973, the

museum-making has become the exemplary practice for local people and student monks to worship, memorialise, and respectfully present to their masters after they passed away. So far there are about 22 memorial museums for the masters of Isan forest monks (SAC database, June 2015).Local museums, social suffering and marginal voices

Another museum which seems different from others and should be addressed as a new kind of Isan museum is Pakmun Museum, Ubon Rachathani (opened in 2003). This museum relates to an environmental movement consisting of local people who have been negatively impacted by the Pakmun Dam. The museum was set up and run by a group of local people who lost their settlements under water and thus cannot maintain their traditional ways of life as river fisherman. For more than 20 years, they have been struggling with the Thai state over civil rights and people's participation in state decision-making regarding mega projects, which may impact negatively on local communities and the natural environment. This museum is dedicated to telling stories about people's suffering after the dam was built, and the development of their movement over the long term since then.

To sum up, the dynamics and diversity of Isan museums above are crucial contexts connected to sacred objects. This is because sacred objects seem to be a substantial and significant part of material collections in Isan museums either locally or nationally. However, their sacredness has probably had different levels of concern. Based on the definition of the sacred as presented in the third chapter, religious objects have basically been defined as sacred objects. Large numbers of religious objects in Buddhist monastery museums including Buddhist images, palm-leaf manuscripts and ritual objects, therefore, can be seen as sacred objects. In fact, these religious objects can be found in national museums as well – such as Khon Kaen National Museum and Roi Et National Museum. Basically, these religious objects may be linked with current debates and contested issues regarding possession, ownership and cultural rights as well as with other national treasures or valuable objects.

Furthermore, this debate seems to be more complicated in cases of sacred objects. In these cases, material objects may not only link with economic values and political power but also with cultural values and power relating to beliefs, knowledge and sacredness. In order to understand this complexity, this research initially proposes to investigate the following case studies of sacred objects: Buddha relics, palm-leaf manuscripts, religious statues, standing stones and buried potteries. These material objects are basically religious objects and have been recognised as sacred objects in Isan traditions and contemporary contexts. In the everyday life of local people, these sacred objects are still worshipped, respected and perhaps feared. These case studies are largely a part of the collections or exhibitions in local museums that I have visited and carried out multi-sited museography and interviews with some museum staff.

Sacred things in Isan museums: selective case studies

This section aims to introduce three case studies of sacred objects based on the following questions: Why do these objects matter? Where are their locations? How do they link with other Isan museums and museum agencies? What are the critical issues or debates relating to them? How do they link with the theoretical frameworks and analysis in further chapters? Initially, this research analysis will begin with four case studies of religious objects, which are possibly connected with either Buddhism (the predominant religion in Thailand) or non-Buddhist beliefs. The first case study of sacred objects is relics – primarily relics of the Buddha which, for the Buddhist, are highly respected and definitely constituted as 'sacred things'. The second case study is of palm-leaf manuscripts, which have been recognised as the sacred texts of Theravada Buddhism. However, nowadays these manuscripts seem to be in decline and have less function in Isan Buddhist life than in the past. They also have been replaced with new kinds of media and language, and particularly the Thai language. The last case study involves religious statues relating to several religions and beliefs e.g. Theravada Buddhism; Mahayana Buddhism; and Hinduism.

Case study I: Buddha relics

In Northeast Thailand, a local museum focusing on Buddha Relics is Champasri Museum, Maha Sarakham. This museum is located near the Nadun Pagoda, which was constructed in order to contain the Buddha relics found in the nearby area in 1979. For the Isan people, Buddha relics locally known as 'Phrathat' or พระธาตุ (in Thai and Isan) essentially involve being respectful and worshipping as the sacred thing. In Isan and other areas of the country, there are a number of Buddhist pagodas and temples constructed for housing and worshipping Buddha relics. The discovery of Buddha relics in Nadun District therefore is crucial and meaningful for local people; as the museum describes it, this discovery is a miracle.

At the beginning, there were a number of images of the Buddha found on the private land of a local villager. Shortly after, this news became public and people from both nearby areas and faraway came to the land to see the objects; some wanted to dig and find pieces of sacred objects for themselves. The situation became massively confusing and chaotic. The landlord therefore called the governmental officers to stop people illegally excavating his land. Subsequently, the Department of Fine Arts, who were in charge and undertook the archaeological excavation in the area, found part of an object that would turn out to be the container of the Buddha's relics but the rest of it was still missing. In fact, the lost part of the container had been found earlier by a local villager and soon after he decided to return that part in order to complete the object; both pieces together are shown in Figure 4.5.

The situation seemed to be resolved but unfortunately it was not due to a critical debate about where this Buddha relic should be kept? At Nadun District where the relics were found or in the office of the provincial government at Mahasarakham province, or elsewhere? This issue became a serious point of tension and local people reacting strongly and determinedly. They intended to keep the Buddha relics with the local communities and would not allow the relics out of the district. For a while there was conflict and negotiation; Phrathat Nadun Pagoda, in the end, was constructed in Nadun District in

order to keep the Buddha relics and a number of other valuable objects found, together. Those materials were mainly the worshipped objects of the relics of the Buddha. This is an important case study of cultural heritage management relating to sacred objects in the Isan region. The case study apparently reflects imbalanced power relationships in decision making on cultural heritage management. Noticeably, at that time the decision had been entirely made by the government and was less concerned with local communities or cultural rights.

Figure 4.5 Phrathat Nadun, Mahasararkham Province

Figure 4.6 Model of bronze Buddha's relic stupa at Muang Champasri Museum

Figure 4.7 Muang Champasri Museum, Mahasarakham province

Case study II: Palm-leaf manuscripts

In Theravada Buddhism, palm-leaf manuscripts were traditionally known and treated as sacred texts. Moreover, Northeast Thailand is a major area of Southeast Asia where this Buddhist tradition has settled and flourished. In its original context, these manuscripts were restricted but might be accessed by monks and men – women were not allowed even to touch these manuscripts. Owing to their significance either as cultural artefacts or media records of ancient wisdom, palm-leaf manuscripts became one of the target collections collected and preserved both internally and internationally by several agencies e.g. national governments, academic institutions including some local people and communities.

In Northeast Thailand, Wat Mahachai Museum, Mahasarakham Province is well-known as a pioneering centre for the preservation of Isan cultural heritage, and particularly local languages, palm-leaf manuscripts and various kinds of objects belonging to Isan culture. Since 1964, large numbers of cultural objects had been collected from the nearby countryside and other areas of Northeast Thailand by the museum founder and the former monastery abbot – the Venerable Ariyanuwat Khemajaree. The museum first opened the Centre for Preservation of Isan literature in 1979. Collections of palm-leaf manuscripts actually may cover not only palm-leaf manuscripts but also related objects such as iron pens, wrapping cloths, wooden storage and so on. During several decades of his working life with the museum, the Venerable Ariyanuwat Khemajaree continually translated and published several important pieces of Isan manuscripts and folk literature from traditional languages into Thai. His works were valuable and substantial contributions to Isan studies – especially Isan literature studies and local histories, which have been overlooked owing to limitations in translating or understanding the local language.

In fact, the manuscripts are diverse and relate not only to Buddhism and restrictions within the religious text. They also cover 'ordinary text' and mundane stories such as poetry, tales, medicine manuals, astrology books and so on. The key means of making distinctions between the different kinds lies in the language used for writing those manuscripts. Substantively, a traditional language in so-called 'Tham' has been used for religious manuscripts and another language – the so-called 'Tai-noi' – has mainly been used for popular literature.

Figure 4.8 The preservation process of palm-leaf manuscripts

The case study of palm-leaf manuscripts can be traced and analysed intensively both in the colonial context as a part of connected histories and colonial relationships, and in the contemporary context as a case study of curatorial practices and debates about indigenous curatorships (Kreps, 2003) and appropriate museology (Kreps, 2008). For example, in practice, there is a critical debate about best practices for preserving palm-leaf manuscripts involving whether these objects should be wrapped with a new white cloth or original handmade cloths as they were traditionally. In addition, this case study also links to different kinds of knowledge and power. The decline of Isan traditional languages and cultures and its revival may reflect problematic relationships between the centre of Thailand and local Isan, and also may illuminate new museum agencies in local contexts such as local museums and indigenous or vernacular curators. This case study also links with issues of collaboration in museums, and heritage practices among local communities and museum agencies outside the community such as among university scholars, governmental officers, museum professionals and so on.

Case study III: Religious statues

In Northeast Thailand, religious statutes are major collections in several museums both national and local. From time to time, owing to its cultural landscape and geo-politics, the Isan location has been connected with several centres of political power e.g. Khmer, Lan Chang, Siam in the past and Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and China in the present. The Isan region therefore can be seen as a contact zone for those cultural influences, especially the middle area of the region such as Mahasarakham, Khon Kaen, Roi Et, Kalasin and Yasothon located on both sides of the Chi River. The middle Isan seems settled on the edge of cultural terrains or overlapping areas among the several cultural influences mentioned above. When traced back to the past, according to archaeological evidence found in the area, the Isan region also has links to various prehistoric times – the Stone, Iron, and Bronze Ages, Dvaravati, which relates to early Theravada Buddhism, and several periods of ancient Khmer related to Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism. This cultural complexity can be seen through collections of religious statues found in the Isan area. In the beginning stage, this thesis focuses on religious statues in local museums but in the end those

statues also connect with some collections in national museums because they came from the same original locations.
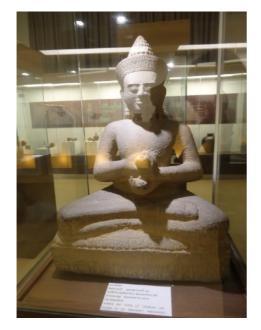
Figure 4.9 Ku Santarat's statue exhibited at Khon Kaen National Museum

One interesting case is the Ku Santarat Museum, which recently was opened to the public in 2010. This museum is located beside Ku Santarat – a stone temple, which was the Arokayasala (public hospital) and linked to a period of the ancient Khmer in the reign of King Jayavaman VII. The local museum basically was built in order to keep religious statues recently found at Ku Santarat. Although the museum opened just a few years ago, local people have prepared for, and attempted to establish this museum for a long time. Their efforts began when the statues were found at Ku Santarat – the first time around 1973, the second time in 1995. This situation possibly relates to a crucial debate about ownership and cultural rights on cultural heritage owing to the fact that some of the statutes and archaeological materials found here have been moved to be kept and displayed at the Khon Khan National Museum.

Figure 4.10 Ku Santarat, Mahasararkham province

Figure 4.11 Ku Santarat Local Museum, Mahasarakham province

This is a good case study of active communities living around the historical site, which currently also functions as a religious site. Local people usually come to the temple in order to worship and maintain the annual ritual ceremony in mid-April. In this case, the sacred seems to be a part of local everyday life. Furthermore, local people, and especially community leaders, are also highly concerned with their local heritage whether those objects are kept in the local museum or Khon Kaen National Museum. Several times, they have voluntarily gone to Khon Kaen National Museum in order to check their collections in the storage room. Some of them questioned how to ask for the return of those collections to the community and how to keep them at their local museum. In addition, this is also a significant case study of community engagement with museums and heritage as we can observe people's participation and active roles in the vernacular museum and local agencies over a long period of time. This includes the collaborative dimensions of this local museum with agencies outside the community, such as governmental agencies, the university staff, museum professionals, and tourists.

Significantly, each sacred object in local museums can sometime be linked to several owners and layers of space and time. They seem to be elementary objects which can be assembled or interpreted in several ways. For instance, several national museums explained frequently that they attempt to preserve and look after valuable statues as part of the national heritage, which is evidence of an ancient civilisation founded in Thailand. At the same time, several local museums also intend to keep the objects with the land as local heritage. In fact, local people are also concerned with those objects as a part of national heritage, but they may prefer to keep and look after them in their local museum rather than in the national museums.

Substantively, the long-term efforts of local people to establish this local museum are responses to the government's critics about the potential of local people and communities to look after valuable objects found in local areas. One major criticism is that they may lack the capacity because they do not have the museum and enough knowledge to take care of those objects. These critical issues apparently relate to major arguments in this thesis on the relationships among museums, power and knowledge.

Additionally, in the case of religious statues, curatorial practices for sacred objects seem to be problematic and need more in-depth analysis as well. On the one hand, some local people may fear being involved with sacred objects because of their unknown and uncontrolled power. On the other hand, other people may approach objects to worship and acquire good fortune, expecting success or healing in their lives. These aspects can be meaningful as seen through the eyes of the post-colonial theorist, especially given a dialogic approach that is concerned with dialogues of differences, novelistic narratives, heteroglossia and marginal voices. By contrast, stories and interpretations of sacred objects in local museums seem quite different from the epic narratives exhibited in the national museums, which mainly focus on a linear timeline of ancient civilisation found in the land or perhaps the nation.

In summary, this chapter started with an introduction to Isan or Northeast Thailand, which is the location of case studies of sacred objects and their local museums. The second section attempted to capture the dynamics and diversity of museums in the Isan region, which would be significant contexts of all case studies. The last section briefly introduced the three case studies of sacred objects: the palm-leaf manuscripts, the statutes, and the relics on topics about Isan's significance and connections with local people and museums, and the crucial debates related to them. Based on these case studies, the next chapter will be concerned with investigation and discussion of trajectories of sacred objects and their connected histories – how have they been reassembled and interpreted in local museums and other Isan museums? How are they linked and negotiated given unbalanced power relationships and colonial contexts?

In case of local histories in and of Northeast Thailand, several of them still focused on history of the kingdom or nation-state where the nation-state, politics and national heroes are the centre of narratives. Whether Thai history, Cambodia history, Laos history or Isan history, they may have the same problem with this linear, progressive and homogeneous history. There are many historical details and evidence that is unable to fit into this kind of history. Stories, which tended to be marginalised and absent, are stories and memories

of ordinary people including relationships and interactions across the geographical areas and historical periods which since have been divided or demarcated.

Emerging during the same period of colonialism, Thai national museums frequently have been criticised as cultural instruments of political and cultural colonisation. On the other hand, museums, especially small-scale and local museums, also have been used by various groups of people as their cultural instruments in order to resist power and echo marginal voices. Local museums in Thailand also emerged in an atmosphere of resistance to the centralised power of military government and requested democracy since the uprising of people in 1973. Since then, local histories and people's stories emerged and grew as a new cultural movement especially in local areas that once had been controlled and limited to Thai history and Thai-ness.

Several local museums also play their significant role as a channel of local histories in various scales of locality. Locality and local identity became the centre of narration and exhibition in the museum. Local collections including sacred objects mainly have been exhibited in a chronological frame that is relevant and meaningful for the locale. Based on the museography of museums that I have visited, some folk museums, local museums, and also city museums in Thailand and the UK present their local histories in this way to some extent — for example, the Ryedale Folk Museum, Beck Isle Museum of Rural Life, Whitby Museum, Wat Muang Folk Museum, and Ban Kao Yee San Museum.

In the scale of Isan history or the local history of Isan, a number of Isan studies and a wide range of literatures on Isan histories show that Isan was closely related to Laos, Cambodia and a part of complex relationships of trade between Southeast Asia and other areas of the world – China, India, Middle East Asia and Europe (Reid, 1993).

In terms of religion, Isan area have been involved with various kinds of religious belief. According to archaeological studies on prehistoric Isan, animism and spirit cults seemingly existed for a long time before Buddhism and Hinduism came to the land. Standing stones that were found in the same area with prehistoric painting possibly are evidence supporting this argument. Since Buddhism arrived and influenced the Isan area, plain

standing stones probably were altered into Buddhist forms e.g. Dvaravati Sema carving with scenes of Buddha Jatakas (Vallibhotama, 1987).

Although local histories, especially those involving ancient civilisation and prehistory, can fulfil people's enthusiasm on their local past and antiques, similar to Thai national history and mainstream history, local histories mostly also concentrate on a chronological approach and linear evolutionary history rather than connected histories. This critical issue will be examined and discussed further in the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Time-spaces and Connected Histories of Sacred Things

In the previous chapter, I introduced the case studies of sacred things and the emergence of local museums to preserve some of those things in local areas. In this chapter, I investigate further how they have been assembled and exhibited in the institutional museums in Northeast Thailand and elsewhere as they were found in local areas. How have they been identified and interpreted in those institutional museums? How do those identifications and exhibitions reflect the influences of colonialism and nationalism in the museums?

In contrast to post-colonial critiques of museums, especially in the case of national museums that see museums as the instrument or mechanism for governance and colonisation (Anderson, 2003; Bennett et al., 2017), this thesis argues that local museums, in fact, can be seen differently, as dialogic practices for ordinary people to respond to and dialogue with colonialism and nationalism. Encounters and interactions between local people and museum actors from the institutional museums, especially national museums and university museums, to some extent lead to the emergence of local museums and entanglements between them and the institutional museums that collected the same kind of things.

To explore museum entanglements that have often been overlooked through their evolutionary history, this chapter investigates the provenance, connected histories and trajectories of sacred things since they were found. The key idea of connected histories is suggested by Subrahmanyam (1997) and effectively elaborated by Bhambra (2009) as an alternative way to think about the past beyond evolutionary history. Such history has been critiqued for its role in legitimising colonial power and colonisation (Wolf, 1982; Hall, 1992; Anderson, 2003).

The chapter contains five parts: the first part presents key ideas of chronotope (time-space), the chronotopic frame, and relationships between time, the past, and the sacredness. The second and third part examine Isan things in the Thai national

museum-scape and the global museum-scape, respectively. The fourth part explores the connected histories of Isan things and some alternative accounts or possibilities to interpret those things beyond the shadow of colonialism or nationalism. Finally, this chapter concludes with the issue of the sacredness and the unintended consequences when those sacred things became prestigious collections according to academic and aesthetic values, as there was massive assembling and trading that led to illegal excavations and trafficking of those sacred things. This devastating situation can be considered as the process of secularisation or the disenchantment of sacred things. In the institutional museum-scape, those sacred things mainly have been interacted with or handled as scientific or artistic objects although, in several cases, they have been labelled or explained as religious or sacred things.

Time-space and the chronotopic frame

Mikhail Bakhtin's key idea of the chronotope or time-space is useful here as a departure from the complex networks of things. Bakhtin (1981) pointed out that time and space actually are deeply linked and unable to be analysed individually in literature. Inspired by his idea, I experimentally analyse the sacred thing in relation to the chronotope and chronotopic frames in museums. The chronotopic frame seems to me an analytic tool to encompass the temporal and spatial frames of things and the various links between them.

Basically, this chapter concentrates on aspects of time and the past in relation to museums and colonialism. Referring to modern knowledge and academic disciplines, questions and curiosity about time and the past seem to be the core interest of archaeology and history. In Thailand as well, both academic disciplines are the key players in the museum field especially in the case of Thai national museums. Furthermore, historians and archaeologists have often also been expected by the public, including local museums and villagers, to inform and confirm the age or the chronological period of material things found in local areas. Several local museums that I have visited in Northeast Thailand and other regions of the country often mention this curiosity and would like to

receive academic support with dating and classifying things into their 'correct' or 'real' age or period of time.

However, in archaeological practices based on scientific methodologies, dating and framing chronological periods are probably not simple tasks that can be completed easily. This was especially so when those material pieces of evidence were collected and moved out of their original location or context. Furthermore, their significance, dating, and chronological framing seem to be problematic and controversial issues that have been critiqued as a limitation in the discipline, particularly according to post-colonial archaeology (Gosden, 1994; 2001; Murray, 1999).

Although sharing an interest in the past, history and archaeology are not fundamentally the same discipline. In fact, they establish a distinctive boundary and employ different temporal frames in/of the past. The fundamental criterion or marking point that differentiated the temporal frame of history from prehistory is a written language. This includes the basic identification and classification based on scientific discipline or research into those collections. For local people and perhaps the public in general, these technical terms sometime may not be only epistemic differences but also lead to puzzles and barriers to understanding material things in museums.

The problematic issues and limitations of the chronological approach have also been critically discussed in history (Tanaka, 2015). In anthropology, Alfred Gell (1992) comprehensively compiled and discussed temporality and different ways to see and think about time, time series and time maps. Importantly, Gell (1992: 151–152) pointed out differences between two kinds of time series in *Philosophy*: *The A-Series of Past, Present, Future and the B-Series of Before and After*. These fruitful debates reflect different ways to see and think about time, the past, and history.

In the case of Thai national museums, the historical narration, however, has still been restricted by the chronological and evolutionary approach. In several cases of Southeast Asian nations including Thailand, Benedict Anderson (1991) implemented Walter Benjamin's idea of homogeneous empty time to analyse how history is involved with the

cultural construction of the nation as an 'imagined community'. In this process, museums and the nation's single linear progressive history has been criticised as a cultural tool to obtain power and legitimise the superiors but, at the same time, to also marginalise and colonise the others. Not least on the scale of a nation, but on a different scale, the influences of colonialism and progressive history or cultural evolutionism can be seen in the global museum-scape where local collections, such as material things found in Northeast Thailand, are exhibited.

Isan things in Thai history and the national museum-scape

Thai history is an unsettling and contested area and often appears in heated debates about the existence and origin of Thais or Thai-ness and others within Thai history (Winichakul, 2000). Troubles, and the uncertainty in Thai history can be seen in Thai national museums through the identifications and classifications of several iconic collections found in the geographical area and nowadays named Thailand. The spectacular collections found in the Isan area have been assembled and exhibited in the national museums both in Bangkok and the provincial branches in Northeast Thailand. Some of them are the sacred things or material things that were linked or involved with the religious or the sacred to some extent. These include, for instance, Ban Chiang's prehistoric collections e.g. burial pottery, metallic tools, human skeletons, Dvaravati standing stones, and Khmer statues that are associated with Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism. This part aims to explore how these things have been exhibited in the chronotopic frames in the national museums. How do these interpretations reflect the influence of nationalism and colonialism in relation to those museums?

Ban Chiang's prehistoric collections

Ban Chiang's archaeological collections are part of a striking case study that has prompted interest in the prehistoric period in Northeast Thailand and mainland Southeast Asia since the 1970s. Although there are various kinds of materials found at Ban Chiang, one of the most spectacle collections is the red potteries, which became the iconic item of this site.

These potteries were not used in daily life but made for burial. Most of it is found with human skeletons as offerings devoted to death (Ban Chiang National Museum, 2010).

Ban Chiang is one of the earliest sites of the prehistoric settlements found in Thailand and mainland Southeast Asia. The astonishing archaeological discovery at Ban Chiang significantly altered the typical image of the Isan area – from the land without such a long-term past to a significant location of ancient civilisations stretching back to the prehistoric age. Prior to this prehistoric site being founded, mainland Southeast Asia was understood as a land dominated by great civilisations from outside, especially ancient India and China. George Cœdès (1968) an academic figure in this field – who was the former director of the National Library of Siam (1918–1929) and the former director of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) (1929–1946) – once noted that

> It is interesting to note that even in prehistoric times, the autochthonous peoples of Indochina seem to have been lacking in creative genius and showed little aptitude for making progress without stimulus from outside.
> (Cœdès, 1966 cited in Gorman and Charoenwongsa, 1976, p. 14)

However, this perspective may lack concern with the indigenous culture that independently developed prior to the diffusion of the great civilisations, and also with the indigenous agency to select and manage their knowledge in use. The discovery of prehistoric sites, especially the Bronze age in the Isan region, therefore, is significant as it became empirical evidence supporting the idea that this land was not uncivilised prior to the arrival of ancient civilisations from the lands currently known as India and China. (Vallibhotama, 1997, p. 4)

According to the beginning state of archaeological research at Ban Chiang, this area had possibly been a human settlement since prehistory around 5,600 years ago BE (Ban Chiang National Museum, 2010). There is material evidence of the Bronze age and some metal tools were of high quality. Moreover, some are bronze tools which possibly were made in this area earlier than other areas of Asia (Vallibhotama, 1997, p. 8). Subsequently, there

were several archaeological sites that discovered and excavated gradually in the Isan area as well as in several other regions of Thailand. Owing to these archaeological discoveries, Isan became an important location among the prehistoric sites in Thailand and was evidently linked with other areas of mainland Southeast Asia, especially the prehistoric sites in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia (Higham, 2014).

In 2015 when I visited the museum, there was a temporary exhibition at Ban Chiang National Museum presenting the significance of this archaeological site not only for Thailand but also for Southeast Asia and the world:

Ban Chiang: Discovery of a Lost Bronze Age

The ancient villagers of Ban Chiang carved no tablets, painted no frescoes, built no cities. Yet these remarkable people were part of an innovative, early-farming tradition that began to smelt ores and cast sophisticated bronzes sometime after 3000 BC. Recent archaeological excavations in Northeast Thailand are challenging the established theories of how and where man began the rise to civilisation.

Southeast Asia: The Unexpected Place

Archaeologists have long considered Southeast Asia a cultural backwater, believing that the arts of civilisation were introduced from India, China, and even Europe. The traditional theory held that bronze technology was established in the Middle East by about 3000 BC and eventually spread to Southeast Asia 2500 years later. The recent discovery of an early bronze technology in Northeast Thailand, dating to sometime between 3000 and 2000 BC, thousands of miles from the accepted centres of cultural innovation, was completely unexpected.

Since late 1970, there were large numbers of painted pottery, ornaments, bronze tools, and human skeletons found at Ban Chiang and nearby areas in Northeast Thailand.

Material things from those archaeological sites have been identified and classified into the chronological topic frame as part of the prehistoric period and its variations e.g. the Neolithic, Bronze and Iron-age periods. On the regional scale, this is a significant finding in the Isan region, which once had been overlooked and underestimated as the land without any ancient civilisation; such a long history became a land that has been significantly recognised in academic accounts of the past. Moreover, the Isan areas also deserved their designation in Thai national history, which extends to the new frontier of the long distant past known as prehistoric Thailand.

Figure 5.1 Ban Chiang's prehistoric collections at Ban Chiang National Museum

To date, this site continues to be well-known. In 2009, Ban Chiang was recognised as a World Heritage Site and a branch of the National Museum was built on the archaeological site. Ban Chiang National Museum aims to preserve archaeological collections found in the area, carry out research, and support public education. As a World Heritage Site, the museum, including opened archaeological sites, has been widely known and become a part of the tourist trail in Northern Isan. According to an exhibition at the site museum, the Pho Sri Nai Buddhist monastery was the initial site and gave support to researchers and professionals from national museums and related alliances until establishing the National Museum of Ban Chiang. The land, which is the location of the National Museum, was partly donated by local people to be the open excavation site.

In fact, there are critical debates relating to the prehistoric case study of Ban Chiang especially about the dating and trafficking of the archaeological objects. Scientific dating is one of the problematic issues related to the prehistory at Ban Chiang particularly the Bronze Age. This is because the site's earliest dating was around 3,600 BC. Thereafter, it was argued that this date was problematic, and the site should not be dated earlier than 1,000 BC. This debate also links with methodological issues about scientific techniques using for dating at that time and the later revision of scientific dating (Higham, 1996; White, 2008).

However, as part of 'the national narration' (Bhabha, 1990) through museums, these scientific findings mainly have not been presented as an unfinished debate but as established knowledge, which appears to be static and uncontroversial. In the permanent exhibitions of Ban Chiang National Museum, the development of archaeology in Thailand, spectacular collections, and the process of archaeological excavation appear as the major narratives. According to the National Museum's exhibition, Ban Chiang collections has been classified and exhibited in three periods: the early period of 3,600–1,000 BC; the middle period of 1,000–300 BC; and the late period 300 BC–AD 200. Because of their academic value, Ban Chiang collections have often been addressed and materially exhibited, whether with authentic or replica forms, in several city museums in the Isan region. For instance, the story of Ban Chiang has been exhibited at the city museum of Khon Kaen,

Mahasarakham, and Sakon Nakhon as one of the oldest prehistoric sites found in Thailand, the Isan region, and mainland Southeast Asia.

From a post-colonial perspective, the unexpected and striking discovery of Ban Chiang has recently been re-examined in relation to the context of the Cold War (Peleggi, 2016). In fact, the colonial contexts in Southeast Asia, including Thailand, were complicated and interconnected both in terms of temporal and spatial frames and colonial legacies still exist until now. Moreover, colonialism and imperialism are actually not only involved with the European empires but also with the United States of America, Russia, Japan, China, and also Siam in some extent. After the Second World War and during the Cold War, US imperialism was substantively examined and criticised (Said, 1978).

Peleggi (2016) analyses the case of Ban Chiang and archaeological discovery there in relation to the context of the Cold War and critiques regarding the domination of the United States in Thailand and Southeast Asia. The discovery of the prehistoric settlement at Ban Chiang and related areas in Northeast Thailand and the research findings by the university from the United States were not only significant in the international academic arena but also in the area of world politics. Peleggi points out that the hypothesis of the earliest Bronze site at Ban Chiang was recognised as a fact liberating Southeast Asia from India and China. During the period of the Cold War, the United States had been increasing its significant role in the academic world as well as in colonial politics through another empire and neo-colonialism in Southeast Asia, especially after the Second World War.

> Khorat Plateau was a metallurgical region older than China's and the Indus Valley's. In addition to challenging accepted wisdom on the origins of metallurgy in Asia, this hypothesis contradicted French colonial archaeology's diffusionist model according to which Southeast Asia's early cultural development was owed to imports from its more advanced neighbors—India and China (Peleggi, 2016, p. 95).

During the period of the Cold War, the location of Udonthani province and several areas of Northeast Thailand had been the battlefield, and some were under military control. In local areas, the situation on the ground was encountering unintended and tragic consequences. As the site was well-known, there were many Ban Chiang collections that had been dramatically looted and trafficked. For the governmental agencies, particularly the Department of Fine Arts and the academic community of archaeology and history in Thailand, the trafficking issue was of serious concern, and required urgent solutions. As the country, at that time, had no effective law or law enforcement to protect this kind of heritage and archaeological materials, the trafficking of Ban Chiang collections became worse because there were an increasing number of collectors from Bangkok and abroad, who demanded and expensively purchased these collections. Some scholars and archaeologists struggled against this and attempted to fight for the legal protection and the state preservation of Ban Chiang's collections (Charoenwongsa, 1965).

In 2017, a seminar about Ban Chiang and Thai Archaeology took place at Thammasat University; Preecha Kanchanakhom – an emeritus professor in archaeology and former dean of the Department of Archaeology, Silpakorn University – states that as there was a law to protect these archaeological objects, several collectors and anyone who illegally possessed Ban Chiang collections were arrested and forced to return those collections to the government. Those Ban Chiang collections then became a part of collections in several national museums whether in the central branch in Bangkok or the provincial branches in Northeast Thailand.

As prestigious collections from the oldest prehistoric site, Ban Chiang collections were highly interesting and were in demand from a number of collectors and museums both in Thailand and abroad. In Bangkok, Ban Chiang's prehistoric collections have not been kept and exhibited only in the national museums. The collections, especially the red painted pottery, have also been exhibited and addressed in both institutional and private museums. For instance, Suan Pakkad Palace Museum exhibits a number of Ban Chiang's painted potteries and related prehistoric collections. Some art museums also exhibit Ban Chiang potteries as an early style of Thai art or arts in Thailand and Southeast Asia. The

Southeast Asian Ceramics museum, Bangkok University presents Ban Chiang potteries as a part of the Southeast Asian history of ceramics and overseas trade. At the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (SAC), there is a small-scale museum curating a permanent exhibition on the development of ceramics made in Thailand. Some pieces of pottery from Ban Chiang certainly have been exhibited alongside a variety of ceramics from various areas of the country.

In addition, Thammasat Museum of Anthropology located at Thammasat University, Rangsit campus is another university museum that exhibits Ban Chiang's prehistoric collections e.g. the painted potteries, tools, ornaments and skeletons. In this case, the collections from Ban Chiang are part of an archaeological and ethnographic research study that was a collaborative project between Thammasat University and Silpakorn University during 1972–1973 (Pitiphat and Kanjanakhom, 1974). Collections from Ban Chiang are an important part of the museum's collections and were established at the university museum in 1987 (Thammasat Museum of Anthropology, 2016, p. 102).

Even without the material collections, images and stories of Ban Chiang potteries can be seen in the museum exhibitions not only in the museums dedicated to archaeology, history, and culture but also in some science museums as a part of the evolution of human technology. In addition to those in several city museums in Northeast Thailand and also some local museums, some pieces of Ban Chiang collections, images of red potteries, and stories about this site have often been presented in their museum exhibitions as well.

Ban Chiang's prehistoric collections would be the first case study presenting how sacred things have been exhibited in the chronotopic frame in the Thai National Museum and the wider museum-scape. Owing to the fact that material collections were mainly found underground with human skeletons as those things were offerings devoted to deaths, they would have been involved with the death ritual and a kind of sacredness. However, this aspect has not been addressed or is concerned with past rather than present sacredness. In this case, the museum space mainly seems to be a secular space for scientific knowledge and education.

Becoming material collections in the modern museum, therefore, became the process of secularising the sacred things. This process frequently appears alongside the commercialisation of those things since they were excavated and illegally traded. The case study of Ban Chiang evidently illustrates a tragic consequence when these things became prestigious collections because of the academic value that comes with the economic value, and the high demand to possess them whether by private collectors or the institutional museums that aimed to preserve them.

Fa Daed Song Yang's Dvaravati Standing Stones

Similar to the discovery of prehistoric sites, there is archaeological evidence of the ancient civilisation broadly known as Dvaravati culture found in the middle Isan region. Two Dvaravati sites are well-known in this area. The first is the ancient town, namely, Fa Daed Song Yang, where a number of Buddhist standing stones or Sema (เสมา in Thai) were found. Another site located nearby is the ancient town named Champasri where a store of Buddha relics and several Buddha images were found. This topic mainly will focus on the Dvaravati standing stones found at Fa Dead Song Yang, Kalasin Province (Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2 Fa Daed Song Yang's Dvaravati standing stones at Khon Kaen National Museum

When the spectacular archaeological discoveries became headlines in public media, it was striking and good news for local people and the relevant governmental agencies. However, this new evidence was challenging and raised some critical questions for the evolutionary history of Thailand – which mainly recognised the first kingdom as Sukhothai; this was followed by Ayutthaya, Thonburi, and Rattanakosin as the current kingdom centred on Bangkok. This established a single linear history that has been widely known and promoted by the government as the core content of formal education (Department of Fine Arts, 2015).

The formation of such history as a national narrative of Siam, was closely related to the colonial politics and the making of modern nation-states in Southeast Asia, particularly during the reign of King Rama IV (1851–1868) until the reign of King Rama V (1868–1910), King Rama VI (1910–1925), and King Rama VII (1925–1935). Furthermore, colonialism and colonial politics in Southeast Asia, in fact, entail long and complicated stories involved with both world wars and the Cold War. In particular the Second World War could be seen as the beginning of the post-colonial period in Southeast Asia. However, the afterwar years can also be considered as the beginning of colonial politics that changed from being between the European empires to being between the earlier established nations and the newborn states, which were declared independent after the end of World War II.

After World War II, this conventional history was repeated and reinforced and would be addressed as a further phase of colonial politics that would cover the period of the Cold War. Meanwhile, In the case of Siam, which recently had changed the country's name to Thailand, the idea of nationalism and colonialism were reinforced, especially by the military government led by Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram (Wyatt, 2003). The national museums have often been explained as a further stage of the royal museums initiated and developed by King Rama IV and King Rama V. However, the political transformation since the Siam Revolution in 1932 was also responsible for the re-structuring and development of the national museums several decades later.

In addition, the unpleasant situations of illegal digging and trafficking of the treasures found in the ancient sites, such as Ayuthaya, Ban Chiang, Fa Daed Song Yang, and several others across the country raised critical concerns and the need for the national museums' provincial branches to keep and preserve these material things. This is the colonial context when these sacred things were found and interpreted in the chronotopic frame of Thai history that primarily focuses on the kingdom and cultural civilisation, particularly the formation of ancient states in Southeast Asia. In the national museum-scape, this frame is highly influential and almost unchanged to date.

In relation to knowledge and cultural meanings, the material things found in Northeast Thailand have been interpreted and included into the national history. The standing stones found in the Isan region initially were identified as 'Dvaravati Sema' and interpreted as Buddhist boundary stones according to their iconography. However, there are a number of standing stones found in several areas in Northeast Thailand and these probably are not connected only with Buddhism. There are recent archaeological research discussions about the limitations of the conventional definition of the Dvaravati; this discussion looks for different ways to interpret these standing stones, especially given the connected evidence in the Isan area and Mekong region, rather than focusing only on central Thailand, the Siamese Kingdom on Chao Pra Ya River (Rungrote Thamrungruang, 2015, pp. 5–6).

> There will be both the advantages and disadvantages to identifying art and culture found in Northeast Thailand, which look similar to the Dvaravati found in the central Thailand and distinctive from the Khmer as Dvaravati or Dvaravati Isan. The advantage is that this identification is clearly about Buddhist culture, which is similar to the Dvaravati in central Thailand. However, to do so may lead to some disadvantages as well.
>
> The first point is about the confusion or misunderstanding that the Dvaravati Kingdom settled in central Thailand had ruled or politically dominated the land where the Dvaravati Isan were found. The second

confusion is the Central Dvaravati and the Isan Dvaravati only share similarities. In fact, there are several differences between them as well. The third confusion about the complete distinction between the Dvaravati art in Isan and the Khmer art as both having been exchanged and hybridised. The fourth point is the confusion over whether the Dvaravati Isan is homogeneous. In its details, there are a variety of differences in Dvaravati Isan, which are evidently argued and debatable.

(Rungrote Thamrungruang, 2015, pp. 6–7)

Referring to the formation of the academic disciplines, there are differences between the archaeological concerns and the artistic-historical concerns, and this case study reflects some differences between them. So far, a large number of standing stones have been collected and removed from the original settings owing to the need for preservation and research. Large collections have been kept at national museums, especially the provincial branches. Some have been kept in local museums and the monasteries or the village area. There are a very few that are still located in the original site. Thus, it seems to be very difficult to contextualise or interpret them in relation to the original setting as expected in archaeology.

As a consequence, these standing stones have mainly been interpreted artistic-historically as iconographic artefacts and written inscriptions. In the case of inscriptions, they mainly have been preserved in museum storage or open storage and translated. Several inscriptions record significant information about the past when they were made, particularly marking the name of kings or the local leaders at that time. In modern times, they have been catalogued, identified, and classified into chronotopic frames as mentioned above.

Another problematic issue about interpretation of Dvaravati collections relates to the Mon as an ethnic group evidently living in mainland Southeast Asia for a very long period of time. The Mon was also recognised as the earliest group of people in mainland Southeast Asia who embraced Buddhism (Wright, 2016, p.10). However, the Mon have not been

recognised explicitly in the Thai national museum-scape with respect to their influence or strong relationship with Dvaravati culture. This is in contrast to academic literature in English that primarily addresses Dvaravati as Mon culture. Ethnicity, therefore, is a problematic issue relating to colonialism and Thai nationalism in Northeast Thailand that requires more attention.

However, both the Dvaravati art and culture were linked with Buddhism and the strong influence of civilisation diffused from ancient India and China to the mainland. The interpretation and understanding of Southeast Asia in the shadow of major explanations of Indian and Chinese civilisation is part of the colonial legacy and colonialism that involved the enthusiasm of European scholars for oriental civilisation and oriental studies. One example relating to the area of Isan and Mekong region is the École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), which was a colonial institution initiated alongside the formation of French colonies on the mainland of Southeast Asia. In a recent book, it compiles the history and experiences of this institute in Asia over the century since it was established as a colonial institution.

> At the time, scholars subscribed to the belief that Indochina (a term invented by the French colonial powers and, for a long time, written Indo-Chine) was a meeting-place of two great civilisations, the Chinese (Vietnam) and the Indian (Champa, Cambodia, Laos) which had been superimposed onto the native civilisations. The only vestiges of the latter were thought to have survived among the Montagnard.

> What did studies of Asia consist of, at the turn of the century? Scholars study Indian and Chinese civilisations. That is why for a long period of time, the first researchers in EFEO were either Indologists and Sinologists (the latter often trained in Sanskrit) who major in philology as well as history. This also explains why early research conducted at the EFEO extended beyond the border of Indochina. The goal was to deepen knowledge about the civilisations of India and China and their influence

on Southeast Asia. From the time of its founding, the school sought to extend its research into the whole of East Asia, from India to Japan. Various disciplines in the humanities were an integral part of its programme – it was not, as has been often thought, confined to archaeological work. (Clémentin-Ojha and Manguin, 2007, p. 26)

The strong interest in oriental studies and the ancient civilisation in Asia for the Europeans and willingness of the Siamese elites to know their own land led to relationships and collaboration which were initiated and set up between the European academic institutions and the emerging modern institutions in Siam. These relationships may not be colonial relations but also friendships and apprenticeships or studentships such as the close relationship between Prince Damrongrajanuparb and Prof. George Cœdès; or Prof. Philippe Stern and Prince Supatradis Diskul. They are the academic figures strongly influenced by the formation of modern knowledge about the past in Southeast Asia and this continent. Significantly, Siam/Thailand, EFEO, and several European Institutes in Southeast Asia have cultivated constructive relationships and academic collaboration since the formative years of EFEO after the French colonies were established; the institute recently looked back and reflected that

> Since the time the EFEO was established, it has collaborated very closely in particular with two partners outside French Indochina: firstly, the archaeological Service of the Netherlands Indies, which became Indonesia after independence was achieved in 1945; and secondly, institutions of the Kingdom of Siam, that remained shielded from colonisation. In 1939, it became Thailand. (Clémentin-Ojha and Manguin, 2007, p. 49)

While looking at these standing stones as a relational matter, there are some significant links that can be considered here. The Dvaravati Sema has been recognised for its uniqueness because of the form of the standing stones with the Jataka stories beautifully crafted on the stone surface. In the wider context, standing stones were found in several

areas in Northeast Thailand and linked with prehistoric human settlements. Moreover, in the same location, there are not only prehistoric standing stones but also prehistoric painting on the cliffs and caves founded in the Isan region such as Phu Prabart, Udonthani province and Pha Taem, Ubon Ratchathani province (Vallibhotama, 1987).

Ku Santarat's Khmer statues

The Isan region, in particular the area of southern Isan, had been the location of several Khmer Temples, which connected Angkor to Pimai Northeast Thailand and Lopburi in Central Thailand. In the past, both areas of Thailand had been connected with the Khmer Kingdom at Angkor, which nowadays is located in Cambodia. Religious statues are a large collection found in the Isan region because there are several stone temples and archaeological sites located across the region. This is especially so in the middle and lower areas of Northeast Thailand where the influence and connection with the ancient Khmer Kingdom in Cambodia have been observed in academic research. (Clémentin-Ojha and Manguin, 2007)

In several branches of the National Museums in Northeast Thailand and the National Museum in Bangkok, a number of Khmer statues have been classified as a part of the 'Lopburi Period'. This period is broadly known to Thai archaeologists as an official title for Khmer collections found in Thailand (Department of Fine Arts, 2013). Some English literature has also addressed the term 'Lopburi Art' with a blanket gloss that refers to the 'Khmer Art' found in Thailand. One example is the Khmer statues found at Ku Santarat, Mahasarakham Province, which was the area of Arokaya Sala – the shelter built for travellers in the ancient Khmer Kingdom.

To some extent, a possible reason why Thai national museums proposed the term 'Lopburi' instead of 'Khmer' may be linked with the colonial politics operating when these statues were found and interpreted. In particular, it related to the politics of sovereignty between Siam and France over the land on both sides of the middle Mekong River, which nowadays covers Northeast Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia (Therasaswat, 2009). Several historical and archaeological sites and evidence found in the Isan region look similar and are related

to those found on the opposite side of Mekong River. For the government of Siam, this can be a sensitive political issue that legitimises the French empire to claim land on the right side of Mekong River, including the Isan area. The influence of colonial politics later is also inherited by nationalism and the new nations e.g. Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand, especially during the period of the Cold War.

Figure 5.3 Ku Santarat's statue exhibited at Khon Kaen National Museum

In the academic field of Thai art history, Piriya Krairiksh (2010) critiques the periodisation system in Thai national museums that classified Thai history into seven periods: *Dvaravati, Srivichai, Lopburi, Chiangsan, Sukhothai, Ayuthaya,* and *Rattanakosin*. He proposes to identify and classify ancient or Thai art according to religions and ethnic groups rather

than the kingdoms, as illustrated in Thai national museums (Krairiksh, 2010, pp. 12–13). However, this classification also has been critiqued for the unclear links between the ethnic identification and artistic forms or iconography. (Thamrungruang, 2008, pp. 150–151) Although both explanations sound different and are at odds with each other, they mainly concentrate on mutually exclusive classifications of the past or the chronotopic frame and may be less concerned with connected histories and the entanglement of differences shown in the iconography of material things. The conventional classifications, especially the periodisation of Isan things in national museums, are complicated and problematic. Discussions about developments and classifications of material collections in the Thai national museums, therefore, are most likely unavoidable, as, significantly, they are the epistemic infrastructure. An appropriate way to deal with this trouble may be to be aware of this limitation and carefully use those identifications and classifications as the relational rather than the mutually exclusive category. Moreover, each category also covers immensely long periods of time e.g. centuries or even millennia.

Moreover, the conventional classification not only reflects the influence of Thai nationalism but also colonialism in mainstream knowledge and interpretation, which sees Southeast Asia as a further India or the junction of Indian and Chinese civilisation. In the case of Thailand and the national museums, this knowledge and system of classification is not only knowledge given or inherited but collaboratively produced or dialogued since the institute and the body of knowledge were established. One of the colonial legacies in Southeast Asian studies, especially in the past, is what Saskia Sassen (2014) states is the eclipse of the major explanation, which in this case is the strong interest in Indian and Chinese civilisation and their ancient knowledge.

Insofar as Southeast Asia has often been studied as an extension and the land entirely dominated by both great civilisations, a relevant example is the EFEO – an academic institution that has played a significant role in this area for a century. A recent book compiles the history and experiences of this institution in Asia over a century since the institute was established as a colonial institution.

Indologists had been aware of the cultural importance of India long before it became a great political power. By then, Indian studies had been an established and well-researched field for many years. In France itself, there were several prestigious chairs in Indian studies. The discipline was well established in the French university system, be it in the realm of Sanskrit, other Indian languages, classical literature, the history of art, or philosophy. Indian studies, however, were confined to small erudite circles, and their works had little impact.

It was therefore not necessary to organise a new field of study. The aspiration was simply to set up a great French research centre in India that would be comparable to that of the Mecca of Orientalism, the Asiatic Society of Calcutta. Unlike the British, for lack of any dedicated base in India, French Indologists had great difficulty carrying out long-term studies in their chosen country. They had to work principally outside the frontiers of the subcontinent. Some studied the effects of the expansion of Buddhism or Brahmanism in Southeast Asia, or "Further India", as the regions which had undergone Indian influence were then known. (Clémentin-Ojha and Manguin, 2007, p. 64)

In addition, it is necessary to be concerned that colonialism and colonial politics to some extent were inherited by nationalism and post-colonial politics after the Second World War. In the case of Thailand, Thai nationalism that concentrated on Thai-ness and Thai civilised culture had been reinforced again under an authoritarian government led by Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram. One of the most significant signs of this transformation was changing the country from Siam to Thailand (Chanvit Kasetsiri, 2003). There was even a law to force people to enact civilised manners and ban several activities that look uncivilised or un-Thai through the lens of the authoritarian government (ibid.).

In relation to the Isan region, the centralisation and political integration of the area into Siam as the nation-state have influenced the interpretation and curatorial practices on

collections found in this area in several ways. At the least, the key elements of Thai-ness or the official Thai culture mainly have been recognised and been a priority. At the same time, this orientation sometimes may overlook the differences, or the entangled possibility eclipsed behind the major narratives of the nation, especially framing things by the kingdom and the great civilisation. This may have led to a lack of alternatives and decreased possibilities to see and connect the Isan area and the collections found there with neighbouring countries or even to see them as the centre of analysis or interpretation.

Although this thesis critiques the influences of colonialism and nationalism in Thai national museums, especially through the museum exhibitions or museography, it is necessary to address the important mission of Thai national museums to preserve the national treasures and heritage found in Thailand. With this concrete function, the Thai National Museum has worked with many expectations but limited resources. This valuable mission and the efforts of national museums therefore are considered and appreciated as well.

In relation to the sacredness, although these collections have been recognised as sacred things or religious collections, the sacredness that has been mentioned in captions or explanations seems to be sacredness in the past or the past rather than the present sacredness. These collections have not been handled as sacred things in the museum exhibition although they sometimes may involve stories of the invisible owner, spirit possession, or supernatural circumstance.

Isan things in the global museum-scape

Sacred things from Isan areas are not only presented in chronotopic frames of Thai history but also in the global museum-scape. Basu (2011) analyses the museum collections from Sierra Leone as 'object diaspora'. His research traces the provenance, routes, and destinations of those museum collections from Sierra Leone and reflects on how those colonial legacies relate to geography and mapping geographical space since the colonial period (Basu, 2011, p. 28).

Likewise, sacred things from the Isan areas have been assembled and exhibited in several museums outside local areas. Their appearance is part of the cultural index or sample of the same kind of material things. Painted potteries from Ban Chiang, Dvaravati Sema from Fa Daed Song Yang, and Khmer statues from various sites are iconic artefacts from the Isan area, which also have been exhibited in spatial frames of Asian Arts and world cultures in several well-known museums, particularly in Europe and North America.

In the global museum-scape, geography and spatial mapping are significant as well as problematic. Several problematic issues have been debated continually in post-colonial studies and critical museum studies. Geographical mapping also has been criticised as following steps in its role as a part of the colonising process: survey, mapping, and declaring ownership of the land (Winichakul, 1994; Anderson, 2003; Etherington, 2007). Since the formative period of modern museums in Europe dedicated to collections from other cultures, there are gigantic numbers of material things have been collected from local areas across the world (Bennett et al., 2017; Gosden & Knowles, 2001; Zimmerman, 2001).

In this section, I will present some case studies of Isan things at the British Museum, London and the former Museum of Asian Art at Dahlem, Berlin, which I visited in 2015; another case is to do with Isan things that were repatriated from two institutional museums in the United States. In the case of exhibitions at the British Museum and the Museum of Asian Art, Dahlem, both exhibitions are currently removed. Recently, the British Museum has just re-exhibited the Asian Gallery. I visited the British Museum in 2018. The new exhibition mainly focuses on India and China and cultural diversities inside both countries rather than the influences of those civilisations on the cultures outside. This change reflects the chronotopic frames of things that are analytical tools.

In the case of the Museum of Asian Art, the museum at Dahlem is closed down and in the process of moving to the new location at Humboldt Forum in Berlin's city centre. In their details, both cases have been presented in both similar and different frames – the first case is part of Asian culture and the second is part of Asian art. The last topic is about two significant case studies of Isan collections that had been repatriated from the United

State: the first case is the lintel of the Sleeping Vishnu or Naraibanthomsilp (in Thai) and another case is Ban Chiang's prehistoric collection.

Isan things at the British Museum

In 2015, I saw a Dvaravati Sema and Ban Chiang painted pottery exhibited at the British Museum. These things were exhibited in the Asian Gallery or Room 33 (China, South Asia, and Southeast Asia) and it had been noticed that they were found in Northeast Thailand. Ban Chiang's pottery had been presented as a prehistoric collection found in Asia. The Dvaravati Sema had been described as an object that was influenced by Indian civilisation, particularly Buddhism and Hinduism.

Primarily, the collections from Northeast Thailand have been collected and exhibited in two epistemic frames as the objects of science and of art. As the objects of science or scientific evidence of culture, they possibly have been known as 'ethnographic collections' or 'objects of ethnography' (Kieshenbrett-Gimblett, 1998). In the global museum-scape, the geographical space seems greatly significant as those objects mainly have been identified by their location. Moreover, it would be necessary to notice that those ethnographic collections, in fact, were not collected as historical evidence, or the objects of the past as well as the objects of the present, or as scientific evidence of the ethnographic present.

Several institutions, especially national museums or ethnographic museums that aim to be a universal museum or world museums have collected a gigantic number of indigenous, both ethnographic and artistic, collections from around the world. However, in their details, it seems to me that the diversity of collections reflects colonial relations between the country of the museums, which are the exhibitors, and the country, in which they are exhibited. Based on my museum observations, some examples of institutional museums in this case are not only the British Museum but also the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Leiden Volkerkunde Museum, the Leipzig Volkerkunde Museum, and so on.

As objects of science and its derivation e.g. the ethnographic objects or objects of culture, Isan things basically have been exhibited in the spatial frames of Southeast Asian,

Asian, and also world culture. These frames, in fact, reflect the academic fashion and position of the observer as the outsider and are Eurocentric in particular. However, given long-term debates and responses to post-colonial critiques, some ethnographic museums have been re-exhibited or re-organised and changed their names to the Museum of World Culture (Macdonald, 2016, p. 215). This includes changing curatorial practices and processes of exhibition making and social engagement.

Figure 5.4 Ban Chiang's pottery and Dvaravati standing stone at the British Museum (2015)

Isan things at the Museum of Asian Art, Berlin

Another frame is with regard to objects of art and aesthetics. In this case, the spatial frames based on the geographical mapping are still influential but shift the focus from objects of science to objects of arts. Several objects from Isan and another area of Thailand have been exhibited in this epistemic frame known as arts in Thailand, arts in Southeast Thailand, Buddhist art, Dvaravati art, Southeast Asian art, and so on. When looking closely into the details and concrete materials, Ban Chiang's pottery, Dvaravati Sema, Buddha images, and Khmer sculptures are frequently a part of these frames.

In dialogue with another exhibition that I visited at the same time in the Golden Triangle that is located at the junction of Burma, Laos, and Northern Thailand, it seemed to me that collections from the area of so-called Thailand had been classified or organised, consciously or unconsciously, in the way that the cultural civilisation or high culture would be at the art museums and the folk culture would be at ethnographic museums. The significance of the religious statues and artefacts are involved with the influence of Buddhism and Hinduism, which closely link with the Indian civilisation or the Indianisation of Southeast Asia that was the academic enthusiasm at that time.

Likewise, Paine (2012) critiques the institutional museums, especially art museums where religious objects have been treated as art objects and also as museum pieces that require archiving and scientific treatments for conservation. In several art museums focusing on these collections, religious objects have been exhibited and curated as art objects. In this case, aesthetics and artistic objects seem to be the centre of concern and appreciation.

In the case of museums of Asian Art, Isan things mainly were exhibited as a part of spatial frames as in case of burial potteries from Ban Chiang at the British Museum and the Dahlem Museum of Asian Art. In addition, material collections exhibited at the Museum of Asian Art recall issues of repatriations of collections from Thailand that have been trafficked and are currently exhibited in some art museums in the United States. Some cases had been repatriated according to their provenance and some are in the process of claims and debates that will be presented in the next section.

Figure 5.5 Ban Chiang's Pottery at the Museum of Asian Art, Dahlem (2015)

Repatriations of Isan things from the United States

In 2016, in Thailand, there was a news headline in Thailand about an auction of a statue of Bhodhisatawa – a Buddha avatar in Mahayana Buddhism, found at the Prai Bat Temple in Buriram province around 50 years ago. In that period, Thailand and Southeast Asia were struggling with the atmosphere of the Cold War. The Isan area, which is part of mainland Southeast Asia, was a conflict zone and part of the battlefield. This unsettling circumstance became a convenient condition for illegal trading and trafficking antiquities or archaeological collections from Thailand and neighbouring countries to Europe, North America, and so on.

There is no clear evidence of how those iconic collections had been bought from Thailand by other countries until they appeared at public and private museums, especially in Europe and North America. The interest in Asian Arts, Religious Arts, and also Indigenous Arts increased demand and the number of trafficked artefacts from local areas in Thailand and Southeast Asia (Errington, 1998; Peleggi, 2016).

In addition, there is another statue of this kind currently exhibited at an art museum in the US. Since the news spread widely through the media, there is a group of people in the province in collaboration with some scholars, local leaders, and politicians talking about the way to repatriate the statue as in the earlier case of the Naraibanthomsilp lintel at Prasat Phanom Rung,[12] which was successfully returned in 1996. Some local residents recently gave interviews and recalled memories of the situation of illegal digging and trading in hundreds of similar statues at that time while others shared their joint memories and stories. This case is evidence of the troubles and difficult legacies of colonialism in relation to museums, which are not yet the past but are still controversial as contemporary issues. This is just an example of Isan things that have been exhibited in the global museum-scape.

Ban Chiang collections are another case of Isan collections that have been repatriated from the United States. There are at least two cases of the repatriation of Ban Chiang

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[12] http://www.bangkokpost.com/print/439664/

collections. One is from Brown Museum, which was returned because it is illegal for the museum to keep things that have been trafficked because of provenance. Another case is the return of skulls and artefacts from the University of Pennsylvania after several decades of studies and research on those archaeological collections.

The earliest and most prominent case of repatriation in Thailand appeared in 1996 when Thailand claimed the Naraibathomsilp lintel from the Chicago Art Museum. Pisit Charoenwongsa, who was one member of the Thai government's team to claim the repatriation of this lintel, spoke about the situation and the process of negotiation. These conversations substantially reflect colonial relations and difficulties in the process. According to Pisit Charoenwongsa (1995), there were unpleasant and difficult negotiations between Thai governmental agencies and the Art Institute of Chicago. The negotiated issues and debates were expanded from the institutional level to the national level and included the public in both countries. Moreover, the result of this negotiation led to a significant impact at the international level about the repatriation debate between the institutional museums – especially the state-run museums that collected the indigenous artefacts and the provenance and legal agencies of those things.

A problematic issue involved with the negotiation to exchange the lintel with some comparably valued artefacts rather than to return it unconditionally was whether the lintel was stolen and illegally brought to the US. In this instance, the institutional museum was very concerned that this case would set the standard for other cases to claim repatriation of museum artefacts due to the fact that a number of museum collections involved unclear or even unknown provenance. In addition, it is necessary to notice that there are differences and disagreements on each side of the negotiation.

After all, these case studies raised several questions about the timing of those things that were delivered from Thailand to the US and their significance as prestigious collections. In this case, art and aesthetics were crucial. In art museums or museums of Asian art, these material things were identified differently from those in the earlier period that were primarily concerned with objects of science whether in terms of archaeological or

ethnographic collections. In the case of ethnographic museums, the ethnographic collections from the countries outside Europe were collected and preserved as the treasure of mankind or world culture from the perspective of collectors. This status and the international recognition are meaningful and raise both the academic and commercial value of those collections.

Connecting histories through trajectories of Isan collections

In comparison with the contemporary debates and research in academia and public media, stories and exhibitions about Isan collections in national museums and the global museum-scape look quite static and out of date. Those collections mostly have been identified and presented broadly in the chronotopic frames of conventional art history and national history particularly based on the history of kingdoms or ancient states. Although the museum space has been refurbished and re-exhibited, the concrete changes seem to involve a new look featuring interior design rather than the core content and chronotopic frame, which mostly remain the same.

In fact, there are several significant stories and questions leading to the connected histories of Isan things that can be briefly addressed in this topic. Several points which have been overlooked and influenced by colonialism centre around Thai nationalism and Eurocentrism. A difficult problem is that the colonial legacies and colonialism are not easy to review because they entail a fundamental language used for understanding and communication. This is especially the case in regard to modern knowledge and academic disciplines that were established and developed on the unbalanced power relation with colonialism.

As the colonial period in Southeast Asia is very long term and is also ruptured, the consequent colonial situations are tremendously complicated and relational. In relation to the Kingdom of Siam and then Thailand, there are two waves of colonialism and colonial periods that were related. The first wave was the period around a century ago from the reign of King Rama IV to King Rama VI until the Second World War and in the interim, King

Rama VII. The second wave is after the end of the Second World War until the end of the Cold War, which was during the reign of King Rama VIII until King Rama IX.

In fact, the geographical area of Northeast Thailand covers approximately 168,800 square kilometres, which include considerable diversity in terms of nature and culture. The Isan area has often been situated between a variety of differences; the land consequently became a location of co-existence, entanglements, and complexities. This is a reason why further research on Isan history and its connected histories is relevant and very much needed. This section is certainly unable to address such historical research but aims to speak to some problematic issues that were overlooked or invisible in the shadow of a mainstream history strongly influenced by colonialism and nationalism.

Tracing case studies of Isan things, we can ask how they reflect local histories and missing stories about Isan? In case of local histories in and of Northeast Thailand, several are primarily focused on the history of the kingdom or the nation of Siam/Thailand. In these historical narratives, the kingdom, politics, and national heroes are at the core of the narratives. Whether the history of Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, or Isan, they encounter the same problem with a single linear progressive history, which is concerned with homogeneity rather than the heterogeneity or difference. In fact, there are many historical details and much evidence that are incompatible with this kind of history. Stories which have been marginalised and are absent are mostly stories and memories of ordinary people. This also includes the entanglements and interactions across the geographical areas and historical periods that once were divided.

As Thai national museums were initiated and developed in relation to the colonial context and atmosphere of colonialism, they frequently have been criticised as a cultural instrument of political and cultural colonisation. On the other hand, museums, especially small-scale and local museums, also have been used by various groups of people as their cultural instruments to resist colonial power and echo marginal voices. Local museums in Thailand also emerge in an atmosphere of resistance to centralised power by the military government and people's movements for democracy in 1973. Since then, local histories

and people's stories have emerged and grown up as a new cultural movement, especially in local areas that once had been controlled and limited Thai history and Thai-ness.

Several local museums also play a significant role as a channel of local histories in various scales of locality. Localities and local identities became the centre of narration and exhibition in the museum. Local collections, including sacred objects, have mainly been exhibited in a chronological frame that is relevant and meaningful for the locale. Based on my multi-sited museography of museums in Thailand, several folk museums, local museums, and city museums in Thailand presenting their local histories in this way include Wat Muang Folk Museum, Ban Kao Yee San Museum, and Muang Mahasarakham Museum (or Mahasarakham City Museum). In the scale of Isan history, research in Isan studies and literature on Isan histories show that Isan was closely related to Laos and Cambodia and was a part of complex trade relationships between Southeast Asia and other areas of the world – China, India, Middle East Asia, and Europe (Reid, 1993).

In terms of religion, the Isan area has been involved with several religions as well as with magic. According to archaeological studies on prehistoric Isan, animism and spirit cults seem to have existed for a long time before Buddhism and Hinduism were introduced. Standing stones that were found in the same area with prehistoric painting are possibly evidence that supports this argument (Vallibhotama, 1987). Since Buddhism diffused and influenced the Isan area, plain standing stones probably were adapted to Buddhist forms e.g. Dvaravati Sema carving with scenes of Buddha Jatakas (Vallibhotama, ibid.).

Although local histories apparently can fulfil people's enthusiasm about their local past and antiques, they mostly may be limited to a chronological approach or a homogeneous empty time as well as to Thai national history and prehistory. History itself can potentially fulfil needs and gain power for those who owned and produced it. The crafting of history and storytelling of the past would be possible for every group of people rather than being the preserve of the privileged and reserved for the elites thereby leading to epistemic colonialism, which has been problematic so far.

Although material things are unable to escape ephemerality and uncertainty, they have a much longer lifespan than people. According to the idea of the biography of objects (Hoskins, 1998), things potentially may record significant times, spaces, and stories or memories. In terms of time, its possibilities include times when they have been found, moved, relocated, kept or displayed in museums. These possibilities can be observed in terms of space and people who experienced those things in specific time-spaces. Awareness of this unconscious complexity would be a significant contribution to the biography of objects.

Troubles in naming or identification and classification of things into periodic categories also reflect the influence of colonialism, and Orientalism, which was fashionable at that time. In concrete situations, the influences of colonialism and Orientalism led to an entire focus on the ancient state and the domination of ancient civilisations from India and China on Southeast Asia. One significant work is this area is the Indianized states in Southeast Asia (Cœdès, 1968).

Conversely, in the same period of time, there is a lack of concern about links or connections between identifications and classifications of things and political issues, particularly between the Khmer, Mon, and Lao in Thai national museums. This problematic issue reflects the orientation to use or select the appropriate identification such as by using Lopburi for Khmer, using Dvaravati without any explicit connection to Mon, and using Lan Chang instead of Lao. Doing so includes much more concern with Theravada Buddhism and Hinduism in comparison to Mahayana and Tantra Buddhism.

Isan and Mahayana Buddhism are an entangled issue, especially in relation to Dvaravati collections. In more concrete forms, Dvaravati Sema and the crafted stories of Jatakas, Buddha images, and Buddhist rituals and practices in the everyday life of local people reflect the strong influences of Mahayana Buddhism. However, this influence has not been addressed as much as Theravada Buddhism, which has been recognised as the established Buddhism in Thailand and mainland Southeast Asia.

When looking at material things and archaeological evidence inside and outside the Isan area, it may be impossible to understand the area without recognising connections with neighbouring countries and other regions of Thailand. This crucial point has resonance with new perspectives or approaches that have been proposed in post-colonial studies to sort out the limitations of conventional history, which are mainly dominated by a single linear progressive history. For instance, there are several historical studies that address key ideas of connected histories, relational histories, interactional histories, and so on. In other words, these alternative approaches reflect more concern about space and connectivity between the unconnected in historical studies, and thinking otherwise about time and the past.

Isan and ancient civilisations in Southeast Asia are one of the critical issues that have suffered a lack of concern and careful research, particularly through the lens of post-colonial studies and connected or entangled histories. The Isan area and also Southeast Asia have often been understood in the shadow of Indian and Chinese civilisation. That this is a fact has been supported by archaeological evidence and written texts, especially Chinese literature. However, there are entanglements and connected histories that can be observed through the trajectories of Isan things, which seem to me the relational things. This is especially so in the case of the sacred things that absorb cultural influences from India and China and cultural differences inherited from the ancient past e.g. animism and magic.

Relationships between Isan, diasporic collections, and the colonial world around one hundred years ago are very crucial and sit at the core of debates about museums and colonialism today, as Isan often has been eclipsed in the shadow of Thai history and Indian civilisation. Although Southeast Asian countries were politically colonised and struggled in conflicted situations, the situation on the ground may look different in comparison with the view from the eyes of the state or the rulers, as in the case of local museums that have done different things to respond to and negotiate with the colonial powers both from outside and inside the country.

Furthermore, there is another kind of eclipse associated with mainstream history about colonialism, namely, that it is not that everything has been colonial or fully colonised because there are many connected stories, especially those relating to ordinary people. The situation might be a kind of web or fabric of networks of interactions, connections and associations. A crucial question pertains to agency and differences in those interactions, connections and associations. In addition, the issues of class and inequality in relation to museums and curatorial practices are critical issues requiring more concern from contemporary museum studies.

Conclusion – prestigious collections and the past sacredness

In this chapter, I have illustrated how sacred things have been identified, classified, and exhibited in the chronotopic frames in museums outside the local area. They have been exhibited in several institutional museums in Thailand such as the national museums, university museums and city museums. Some of the prestigious collections have been collected and exhibited in the global museum-scape such as the British Museum, some ethnographic museums and museums of Asian Arts in Europe, particularly in the UK and Germany, and some art museums in United States.

Moreover, this chapter explores debates and the problematic identification and classification of those sacred things in relation to colonialism and nationalism in the institutional museums. How can the sacred things from a specific area be exhibited in several places, in different chronotopic frames, and involved with multiple identifications? Although those collections have been addressed as sacred things or linked with religion, their sacredness has not been of concern as a present sacredness as well as a sacredness in the past, or as a past sacredness. Those sacred things have mainly been exhibited as scientific evidence and thus as historical or artistic objects. They have been identified by several names and classified into several chronotopic frames that relate things to multiple identities and their belonging to different museums whether national or international museums.

A key question is what is hidden behind the mainstream history and conventional identification and classification? There have been heated debates about the identification and classifications of things in Thai national museums for several decades. The key points that this thesis has attempted to propose is that both classifications, in fact, are a kind of frame. Although both frames are different and concerned with different classification criteria, they mainly regard the temporal frame as a linear evolutionary history comprising mutually exclusive categories. Moreover, in a wider range of interpretation, those collections have mainly been understood and explained in the shadow of the great civilisations from India and China through the ideas of cultural diffusion and human evolution.

The periodisation and evolutionary history are useful tools for analysis and exploring the past. However, there are some limitations that are of concern. Based on the Isan case studies, two things that need to be addressed are to do with the spatial scale and the heterogeneity or diversity in the unit of analysis. Similarly, Doreen Massey (2003) characterised these critical issues as the spatialisation of history and the significance of spatial time. The national narration was largely unconcerned with this issue and frequently produced a homogeneous history with a lack of agency on the part of ordinary people that recognised the differences among them.

Since those Isan things have been recognised as ancient collections relating to a significant period of time and ancient civilisation, they have become prestigious collections for collectors and museums and are highly desired. The result is high demand and commercialisation of those prestigious collections; this has unexpectedly led to negative impacts on archaeological sites involving looting, trafficking and an illegal trade in sacred things.

The emergence of the institutional museums concerned with these collections, especially museums of Asian art and ethnographic museums therefore, can be seen as a museum entanglement between Western and non-Western museums as well. The museum entanglement can be seen in the case of local museums in Thailand, which respond to the

same things and the same situations but in different ways. In relation to the sacred, curatorial practices in the case of local museums look quite different. The sacredness in this sense does not become entangled with the presentness and meaningfulness of people's contemporary lives, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 6

The Sacred, Museum Gaia, and Dialogic Practices

This chapter focuses on curatorial practices on sacred things in local museums in Northeast Thailand. It examines relationships between space and the sacred and is particularly concerned with epistemic co-existence of religion, magic and science in local museums. In dialogue with the influential idea of indigenous curatorship (Kreps, 2003; 2008) that points to indigenous knowledge as different curatorial practices in comparison with Western museums, this thesis aims to put this argument forward in the area of co-existence and entanglement of epistemic differences in local museums. In addition, it also attempts to explore possibilities to dialogue and collaborate between different kinds of knowledge and curatorial practices.

Instead of exclusively seeing local museums as non-Western or indigenous museums, this thesis examines them as entangled museums, which are a result of museum entanglements. Local museums, in fact, have interacted with the institutional museums and modern knowledge in several ways and on several occasions. Co-existences and dialogues of epistemic differences, therefore, are a part of working life and curatorial practices. Several local museums use and welcome both indigenous and modern knowledge from various sources and academic disciplines. This situation sometimes depends on the skill and knowledge of volunteers who work with those museums.

Several local museums in Thailand, especially located near national museums, have received advice and support from some museum practitioners of national museums – particularly about collection managements e.g. cataloguing, dating, basic techniques for conservation. Some local museums have been worked closely with scholars and practitioners from the university's museums or departments, which provide educational programmes about museums and cultures including cultural heritage. Such interaction has occurred in relation to several local museums in Northeast Thailand as well. One of the active cases for a long while was Mahasarakham University – the University Museum and the Research Institute for Northeastern Arts and Culture have been working with several

local museums and Buddhist monasteries locating in the middle Isan or the Chi River basin for more than a couple of decades.

This chapter consists of four parts. The first addresses key ideas of Gaia and presentness and seeing the museum space as Gaia. The second part explores curatorial practices in local museums with three case studies of the sacred things found in Northeast Thailand – the Buddha relics, palm-leaf manuscripts, and religious statues. The third part discusses curating the sacred as dialogic practices. Finally, the fourth part concludes with the significance and relevancies of museum Gaia and dialogues of differences.

Presentness and imagining space as Gaia

Basically, this chapter concentrates on space and presentness and examines the museum space as Gaia (Latour, 2016). In contrast to seeing space as geographical space that would be measurable and absolute, the idea of Gaia can be seen as a different way of seeing and imagining space in relation to time and the sacred. In the case of institutional museums, which have incorporated modern curatorial practices, the sacredness has often been addressed primarily in labels and captions in the museum exhibition. However, the sacredness relating to things in those modern museums is practically concerned with the past rather than the present. Mainly, the sacred has been presented as historical narratives or stories in/of the past rather than connecting with people's experiences at the present time. In contrast, for local museums and Isan people, the sacred still exists and is effective through the rituals and religious practices of everyday life.

In relation to geographical space, sacredness has primarily been defined by the demarcation between the sacred and the profane space (Durkheim, 1912/2001). Another kind of explanation about relationships between space and the sacred is about religious cosmologies (Eliade, 1959; Sadakata, 1997). This kind of explanation would be relevant to understanding the religious architecture or the sacred place that was constructed according to the specific religious cosmology. However, this kind of explanation may be limited when it comes to making sense of ambiguous spaces like local museums where

various kinds of sacred things and religious differences co-exist in the same museum space at the same time.

Although some local museums are situated within the area monasteries, this space probably was not created following any religious cosmology. The museum space of local museums seems to be a long-term 'contact-zone' (Clifford, 1997) where several religious statues from different religions and different time-spaces came to stand side by side. In this situation, how to make sense of the co-existence and dialogues of these differences?

Instead of seeing the sacred space as somewhere in the past or as an imagined space out there and explaining its sacredness by religious cosmology, this thesis proposes to see the sacred space as the space of the 'here and now' or the space we live in. In this situation, the idea of Gaia is relevant and insightful. This idea was initiated several decades ago by James Lovelock (1987) in the field of earth science and living ecosystems. He explains key meanings and the beginning of his Gaia hypothesis as follows:

> I first put forward the Gaia hypothesis at a scientific meeting about the origins of life on Earth which took place in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1968. Perhaps it was poorly presented. It certainly did not appeal to anyone except Lars Gunnar Sillen, the Scandinavian chemist now sadly dead. Lynn Margulis, of Boston University, had the task of editing our various contributions, and four years later in Boston Lynn and I met again and began a most rewarding collaboration which, with her deep knowledge and insight as a life scientist, was to go far in adding substance to the wraith of Gaia, and which still happily continues.

> We have since defined Gaia as a complex entity involving the Earth's biosphere, atmosphere, oceans, and soil; the totality constituting a feedback or cybernetic system which seeks an optimal physical and chemical environment for life on this planet. The maintenance of relatively constant conditions by active control may be conveniently described by the term 'homeostasis'. (Lovelock, 1987, p. 10)

A few years ago, Bruno Latour (2017) elaborated and enriched this key idea in the social sciences, particularly in science studies, first through his lectures on the new climate regime at the University of Edinburgh, which were then published in his book entitled *Facing Gaia*. Latour addresses the key idea and implications of Lovelock's insights, which went well with his prior works on ANT and reassembling the social:

> At first glance, Lovelock seems to have managed rather badly, since the most common definition of the Gaia theory is that Gaia acts as a *single, unique coordinating agent*. Gaia would be the planet Earth considered as a living organism. (Latour, 2017, p. 94)

> Now the problem Lovelock saw very well is that, in the literal sense, in the objects that he studied, there are neither parts nor a whole. (Latour, 2017, p. 95)

> It is in this sense that Gaia is not an organism, and that we cannot apply to it any technological or religious model. It may have an order, but it has no hierarchy; it is not ordered by levels; it is not disordered, either. All the effects of scale result from the expansion of some particularly opportunistic agent grabbing opportunities to develop as they arise: this is what makes Lovelock's Gaia totally secular. If it is an opera, it depends upon constant observation that has neither a score nor an ending, and it is never performed twice on the same stage. If there is no frame, no goal, no direction, we have to consider Gaia as the name of the process by which variable and contingent occurrences have made later events more probable. In this sense, Gaia is a creature no more than of chance than of necessity. Which means that it closely resembles what we have come to regard as *history* itself. (Latour, 2017, pp. 106–107)

In light of the theory of assemblage or ANT, it seems to me that Gaia could be defined, in other terms, as a rhizome or complex network of differences and/or different things. To

some extent, this approach could potentially be an alternative way to think and imagine space or time-space in relation to museums. By seeing the museum space as Gaia, the co-existence and dialogues of different things and knowledge in local museums at the same time can be a sensible one. Consequently, this approach can lead to different perspectives on the curation of museum things with the participation of local people to whom those things belonged and are meaningful. The following sections will present how the idea of Gaia works comprehensively to make sense of curatorial practices in local museums. The three case studies of sacred things that will be presented are Buddha relics, palm-leaf manuscripts and religious statues.

Buddha relics, museums and practices of worship

In Thailand, particularly for Buddhists, Buddha relics or '*Phrathat*' (พระธาตุ in Thai) are tremendously respected and recognised as sacred things. There are many stupas built for Buddha relics throughout the country. These stupas frequently have legends or folktales about Buddha Jatakas and miracles relating to the sacredness of Buddha relics. In the Isan region as well, there are several stupas dedicated to keeping the Buddha relics, and as sacred places for pilgrimage and worship. Two cases involved with local museums in Northeast Thailand in this regard will be presented: Phrathat Phanom, Sakon Nakorn province and Phrathat Nadun, Mahasarakham province. Both stupas have been pilgrimage sites and are greatly important not only for local people but for Buddhists in Thailand and neighbouring countries such as Laos and Cambodia.

Buddha relics and the narration of the Buddha Jatakas for Buddhists are meaningful and have been recurrently illustrated in various ways. Not only in the form of material artefacts, the Buddha Jatakas and Dharma also have been visualised through various traditional media such as mural paintings, folklore, performances, rituals and so on. In relation to these activities, material things in various forms are a part of the process and, subsequently, some of those things became a part of collections in Buddhist monastery museums or local museums located in the monastery area.

Several local museums located in the monasteries, which are the location of stupas, collect and display many things that people donated to the monastery as offerings and worship of the Buddha relics. These include pieces of things that people picked up from the monastery area but cannot keep because they encountered bad fortune such as a fatal accident or serious illness. Such stories are often heard by local museums' practitioners, including the monks who look after the monastery museums. For example, in the souvenir book published by the monastery in 2017, Wat Phrathat Phanom proposes guidelines for people who come to visit and worship the Buddha relics; a part of the notice states:

4. Do not steal any kind of thing that people offer in worship to the Buddha relics. With your cupidity and misconduct, you will encounter bad fortune and serious difficulties including possible illness and insanity. There are mysterious powers or guardians protecting the sacred relics. The sacred will punish and create misfortune for the wrongdoer.

5. Do worship the Buddha relics with respect and if you wish for virtue, your good wishes will be fulfilled sooner or later.

Similar to other cases of sacred things, stories about the sacred power and danger in relation to Buddha relics are significant and frequently addressed by local people. The sacredness of the relics can be seen through the ways people have shown concern and interacted with the Buddha relics. Merit-making (Thambun or ทำบุญ in Thai), offerings, worshipping and wishing for good fortune are a part of everyday life for the ordinary people in Northeast Thailand. In fact, material things are a very crucial part of local life. In practice, what people have done as merit-making is to donate or offer the best and most valuable things they can provide to the sacred relics through the monastery and the monks. A large number of material things in local museums, especially the monastery museums, promptly reflect these religious practices both in everyday life and seasonal ceremonies.

In this case, Phrathat Phanom Museum, in fact, is not the place where the Buddha relics are kept but a place housing a large number of varied things, which were once people's offering to the sacred relics. Some of the valuables and offerings of worth include Buddha images, gold, silver and jewellery – some of which are also kept inside the stupa with the Buddha relics. In addition to functioning as treasure storage, the museum attempts to present visitors with a learning space for local heritage, folklore, and religious knowledge or wisdom, particularly in reference to the Buddha Dharma. According to a museum booklet published in 2015, the museum was later renamed as the Srikhotaboon Cultural Centre. The name 'Srikhotaboon' refers to an ancient town significantly addressed in an important manuscript known as the Urangkhathat folktale, which is about the journey of the Buddha's chest-bone to this location.

The major plot of the Urangkathat folktale or *Tamnan Urangkathat* (in Thai) is about the situation since the Lord Buddha passed away and his body could not completely burn because of waiting for the arrival of the important monk, namely, Phra Mahakassapa. There was a mission the Lord Buddha asked Phra Mahakassapa to carry out after his death. That was to bring his chest-bone to the Phu Kham Pra where the Phrathat Phanom is located. This story is meaningful for people living on both sites of the Mekong River. There are several related stories about the journey of Phrathat and several stupas were constructed to mark the remarkable location where Phrathat or the Buddha's chest-bone stopped along the way until it arrived at Phu Khampra. In the past, this significant story marked this standing stupa as a very important landmark for Buddhists in this area and also for people from other areas of the country in modern times.

The story of Urankathat is also linked with the folktales of Naga that are meaningful for Isan people and people living alongside the Mekong River. One well-known story of Naga is about the origin of the rivers in the Isan area, especially the Chi and Mun River, which is a branch of the Mekong River. The stories of Naga and related actors in the folktales are meaningful for local people and remain lively in their imagination and daily lives. There are several significant rituals and ceremonies relating to Naga (Saiphan, 1996). The

existence of Naga in people's imaginations is also reflected in architecture, religious artefacts, and crafts in Northeast Thailand (Sirisuk et al., 2015).

Figure 6.1 Phrathat Phanom and Wat Phrathat Phanom Museum

Another case is that of the Muang Champasri Museum located in the area of Phrathat Nadun, Mahasarakham province where a small container of the Buddha's relics was found in 1975. The museum did not function as a treasure storage but presented stories about the Buddha's relics in general and the discovery of Buddha relics in Nadun District. The

construction project of Prathat Nadun took several years to build the stupa and associated buildings, including a museum. This project, entitled the Isan Buddha Mandala, was proposed as the centre of Buddhism in Northeast Thailand. The construction project had obtained financial support from the government and also from people's donations.

This museum does not look like the treasure storage at Wat Prathat Phanom museum. The museum looks more likely to be the information centre for people who come to do merit-making and worship the Buddha's relics at the stupa. The museum mainly presents stories about the discovery of the Buddha's relics here, the significance of the relics and how the stupa and Isan Buddha Mandala were established. The stories of the relics exhibited in the museum also refers to the sacred places associated with the biography of Buddha. These include his place of birth, enlightenment, the first teaching, and passing away which are nowadays located in India and neighbouring countries. The permanent exhibition also concentrates on the discovery of Buddha relics in India and the spectacular excavation by archaeologists.

In addition, it is significant to notice that the sacredness of the Buddha's relics at Nadun is also linked with a supernatural miracle. At the Muang Champasri Museum, stories about the miracle of the sacred relics have also been presented through audio-visual media in the exhibition. There is a documentary film told about the sacredness of the Buddha's relics when the sacred relics were placed into the stupa and some rituals and celebration occurred on this occasion. The story is that on the opening celebration day of the Nadun stupa where the Urangkathat was kept, the sun had a stunning halo and snakes appeared at the Nadun stupa. Snakes in Isan tradition refer to Naka or the giant snake who lived in the underworld; there are several legends and folktales about them that are shared among local people throughout the Mekong basin.

In both cases, the museums are not the place for keeping the Buddha relics but involve practices and material things related to the sacred relics. Phrathat Phanom Museum keeps and exhibits material things that people donate as Buddha relics as a part of the practices of worship, offering and merit-making. In a different way, Muang Champasri Museum works as

an information centre to present stories about the Buddha relics in general and also addresses and voices the narratives of miracles and astonishing situations relating to the sacred relics.

Palm-leaf manuscripts: archiving the sacred text

Palm-leaf manuscripts are one of the significant targets to assemble and preserve both in the national and the global museum-scape. The manuscripts have been assembled and addressed in various ways – such as through historical evidence, material culture, religious artefacts, and also artistic objects. In the Isan context, palm-leaf manuscripts mainly have been recognised as sacred things or as sacred texts because they contain the Buddha's Dharma and have also been used for chanting and sacred rituals (Nilarthi, 2014, pp. 158–159). However, not every palm-leaf manuscript is about Buddhism; some manuscripts are about folklore, others are handbooks of medicine, astrology, magic and so on.

In Theravada Buddhism, the making or re-making of the sacred manuscripts is a crucial part of the Buddhist traditions. The ultimate purpose of this religious practice is to keep the Buddha's Dharma alive and pass it on to future generations. Moreover, donating the manuscripts to the monastery and sharing Dharma with the people can be considered as one of the best practices of worshipping and merit-making. It would be necessary to explain merit-making because in the everyday life of the Isan people, especially the Buddhists, merit-making is of dramatic significance. Based on his fieldwork in an Isan context, Tambiah (1967) described merit-making in local life as follows:

> Tham bun (to make merit) and aw bun (to take merit)—used as equivalents—refer to the giving of gifts to the Buddhist monks and the Buddhist wat. The second expression per se is 'acquired' by the willingness of the monk who receive. (The sociologist may phrase the transaction thus: the give-taker in this context is superior and is capable of transferring some kind of spiritual grace to the giver.) The concepts 'make merit' and 'take merit' express a double relationship in which the transaction is given a particular ethical twist.

Performing acts of merit and avoiding acts of demerit are directed to the achievement of certain results. The value of merit-making is discussed by villagers under two aspects: first, it is said that one's fund of merit accumulated in this life will ensure a rebirth blessed with happiness, prosperity and wealth. (The achievement of salvation or final extinction (*nirvana*) is not usually stated as a goal nor does the matter have any personal relevance for them.) While merit-making is thus given ideological direction in terms of somehow immunising the consequences of death and ensuring a prosperous rebirth, villagers also say that it has certain consequences in this life: the giving of gifts to monks produces a happy and virtuous state of mind. (Tambiah, 1967, pp. 53–54)

In fact, several kinds of museums whether national museums, university museums or local museums are highly concerned with the values of palm-leaf manuscript collections and attempts to keep, archive, and preserve them from time to time. However, preserving them requires considerable effort and practical treatment. These manuscripts were made from palm leaves that are organic and require very good care to keep them for long periods of time. In the Isan tradition, these manuscripts were kept by wrapping them in cloth and storing them in a wooden box. Since the establishment of modern educations and printing, these palm-leaf manuscripts had their traditional functions reduced and they often vanished. Instead of the traditional ways of using handwriting to produce them, some of the later palm-leaf manuscripts were produced using modern typing techniques and not used for reading or as learning materials but for donations to the monastery as merit-making.

Although there are various kinds of thing that can be donated as Buddhists' merit-making, 'Buddha Dharma', as the ultimate knowledge for Buddhists is highly appreciated, respectful, and a very popular way to donate to the monastery. In Northeast Thailand, the wrapping cloths were often donated by women to protect the manuscripts. As palm-leaf manuscripts traditionally had been wrapped and kept in the wooden box for a long period

of time, there are several artefacts and tools related to producing and using the process such as stands, pens, inks, wrapping clothes, boxes and so on. Curating and preserving the manuscripts, therefore, are involved with these related things as well.

In Thailand, a country in which Theravada Buddhism is deeply established, women are not officially allowed to be ordained. The ways women can contribute to Buddhism lie in donating things and support to the monks and the monastery. In Northeast Thailand, donating wrapping cloths is a very important tradition that Isan women undertake (Samuthkupt and Kittiarsa, 2003). The result of this popular tradition is a large collection of wrapping cloths in the Buddhist monastery alongside the manuscripts in the case of Wat Tha Muang, Wat Mahachai, and Buddhist monasteries in the Isan area in general.

However, those palm-leaf manuscripts have not been used in the everyday life of the Buddhist monastery and monks for several decades; some of them were overlooked and decayed. To preserve them, modern treatments are useful and welcome, especially cataloguing, digitation and also cleaning and re-wrapping the manuscripts with the new cloth. On the one hand, this treatment changes the setting and is not the traditional way. On the other hand, it is one of the best possibilities to preserve the manuscripts with limited funding and staff resources, especially given the large number of local museums and Buddhist monasteries and the collections of manuscripts kept there. In the case of Wat Tha Muang, Roi et province, the monastery and community have worked collaboratively for several years with academic institutions, especially Mahasarakham University. Sakchai Butphrom, a village headman once described this:

> At first, Luang Pu (the grandfather monk) and Phra Kru Suthamvoranat, the former abbot who is mainly in charge convinced local people and the community to be concerned with its importance and the values of this important work. There are lecturers, researchers, and staff from several universities involved who support the basic knowledge and tools to preserve these palm-leaf manuscripts. The community was increasingly aware of the significant value of their palm-leaf manuscripts and started

to get involved with activities regarding palm-leaf manuscripts. The first activity was to unpack and clean the manuscripts.

One significant change from the past is that the monastery allows females to touch these manuscripts. This alteration is very significant and helpful for the schoolgirls who come to learn about the manuscripts as the girls and women could access the manuscripts more easily and can read the language written upon them. A long time ago, women were not allowed to touch the palm-leaf manuscripts and if she wanted to support or make merit, she would weave and offer some cloths for wrapping the manuscripts.

The first institution that came to support this community was the Mahasarakham University. First, the university staff worked collaboratively with the monastery and community to clean, classify, and catalogue these manuscripts. This step could not be finished at one time and the university had to work on them several times. They also organised workshops for students during the school breaks. Local students mainly had learned the traditional Isan language. Prior to learning to read and write, they also had learned how to clean and preserve the palm-leaf manuscripts and wrapping cloths. (Sakchai Butphrom's interview in Sarawasee and Boonyakiet, 2014, p. 137)

As a type of material collection, these palm-leaf manuscripts are valuable to collect and are one of the top targets for the institutional libraries and museums both in Thailand and abroad. One major reason is that writing and written language are identified as a symbol of cultural civilisation and a significant source of knowledge for the modern world. Writing and scripts are known as a marker or parameter to classify the historic period from the prehistoric period. The groups of people who have their own written language likely seem more civilised than those who have not and who have often been mentioned as people without history (Wolf, 1982).

As archives, these manuscripts are worthwhile and there is high demand by several grand museums, and libraries including the private collectors, to gather and possess them. For long periods of time, many manuscripts have been assembled and kept in national or institutional museums and libraries. Moreover, there are several projects to collect and preserve palm-leaf manuscripts in local areas across the country. According to local practitioners, the important agencies in this field are the National Library of Thailand, the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) and the National Museum of Ethnology, Japan. Especially in Europe, there are collections of manuscripts, of various kinds – particularly ancient languages and traditional knowledge – from Siam or Thailand at the institutional museums and libraries in several countries because of the strong interest in oriental studies and oriental culture. In 2017, there was a special volume of the Journal of Manuscripts Studies that focused and compiled articles on Siamese and Thai manuscripts collections in the UK, Germany, Ireland, the US and Japan. Justine McDaniel, who is the editor of this special volume, states the gaps in this academic area:

> When travelers from Europe, North America, and Japan, among other places, started exploring Southeast Asia, they often brought manuscripts back to their own museums and homes. Manuscripts were portable, beautiful, exotic, and informative. Thai travelers and diplomats often brought manuscripts as gifts when going abroad as well. Thai manuscripts have made their way into foreign collections for more than four hundred years. Although they were rarely translated, they were put on display and presented as the quintessential representatives of both Thai and Buddhist culture. Unfortunately, despite the large number of Thai manuscripts available in museums, libraries, and private collections abroad, they have been understudied. When they have been studied, they have not been studied comprehensively. Moreover, we know little about the people that acquired them, traded them, collected them, or stole them.

This special issue of *Manuscript Studies* seeks to begin the process of studying these manuscripts. The contributors have closely examined the largest collections of Thai manuscripts abroad. (McDaniel, 2017, p. 8)

In the Isan context, Wat Mahachai at Mahasarakham province is one of the Buddhist monasteries that initiated the gathering and preserving of palm–leaf manuscripts by Phra Ariyanuwat, the abbot, and a very well-known folklorist on Isan literature. After the abbot passed away, the collections were preserved and became the museum of palm-leaf manuscripts and Isan literature. The museum has been collaboratively established and supported by the Institute of Isan Arts and Culture, Mahasarakham University. The institute has hosted a project of preservation and set up a digital database of Isan manuscripts (Rawarin, 2010). This project aims to archive, digitise, translate and preserve those manuscripts. Since the country has been modernised, these palm-leaf manuscripts have been overlooked and have decayed because their traditional functions were declined and replaced by modern media e.g. printing and published books that coming with the modern education.

In 2017, I had opportunities to observe how the conservation team from the Institute for Isan Art and Culture, Mahasarakham University work at another monastery museum in Northeast Thailand. The process of archiving the manuscripts consists of cataloguing, visual recording by taking photographs and digital scanning and then cleaning and wrapping the manuscripts in a new cloth (See Figure 4.8 in the fourth chapter). Some decayed manuscripts might require preservation and scientific treatments. Data of each manuscript then will be recorded into the university project's digital database. Some significant manuscripts will be translated into Thai by the university researchers and some of those will be published in Thai.

In fact, not only religious practices but also scientific practices and treatments play a significant role that help local people to keep these collections in good condition and live longer. Moreover, the digital database and translation also provide significant chances and possibilities to learn about the content in those manuscripts, which is written in ancient

languages that nowadays few people can read and translate. Some researchers and archivists who work with these palm-leaf manuscripts told me that before beginning the process to handle and preserve the manuscripts, they will communicate with the sacred and ask permission to open the manuscripts storage and do their work in order to ensure these manuscripts last longer for future generations.

The conservation of palm-leaf manuscripts is not only involved with aspects of materiality and scientific treatments. It also involves conservation of language and folklore and other things that possibly known as intangible cultural heritage. Wat Mahachai monastery museum is a good example. Phra Ariyanuwat Kemajaree was not only concerned with material things when he collected a large number of Isan collections. He was also concerned with the traditional language, folklore and ancient knowledge in Northeast Thailand. The collections of palm-leaf manuscripts, therefore, were collected as the written texts and sources or records of knowledge and wisdom from the past or the ancient times. During his lifetime, Phra Ariyanuwat also continually translated several folktales and poems into Thai. Phra Palad Uthai Uthayo who was the secretary of Phra Ariyanuwat Kemajaree – his master and the former abbot and founder of Wat Mahachai Museum – once told the following story of his master's dedication to preserve Isan palm-leaf manuscripts and ancient objects:

> Luang Por (the father monk) saw the foreigners come to buy the old things and artefacts in the village and nearby areas. He worried that those things shall be all gone. Since 1970s he had travelled around the Isan region to collect, whether ask for donation or buy, a large number of palm-leaf manuscripts and various kinds of old things to preserve at Wat Mahachai.
>
> He particularly had concentrated on the collections of palm-leaf manuscripts and translated Isan folktales into Thai around 125 stories and had published them in 30 stories. Luang Por Ariyanuwat Kemajaree later had been highly recognised and honoured from several universities and

the academic institutions. The abbots of several monasteries in Northeast Thailand were inspired by the master's work and started to assemble and set up the museums for preserving the old things like Wat Mahachai.

As you have seen, this museum did not look like the museums in general (did not open to the public regularly), Luang Por – the museum founder, initially intended to make this museum to keep safely these ancient collections for preservation and education. Moreover, the monastery also had no staff to work at the museum the whole day and night.

<div align="right">

Phra Palad Uthai Uthayo

The network meeting of local museums in Northeast Thailand

Mahasarakham Province, 2004

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In the process of collaborating with local people, it is not only people who have to be communicated with and shown concern. The sacred, of various kinds and names, also refers to the significant beings with whom one must be concerned and communicate with. In Thailand, this situation is familiar and imaginable to many people. This includes myself while going to do surveys or work with local museums and the collections that may be linked with the sacred; I also communicate with the sacred and ask for permission to handle or work with the sacred things. Minimally, this entails telling them what I intend to do, and hoping that the work goes well and contributes some positive results to the public and future generations. I tell them that I would like to apologise and ask forgiveness if what I do is disturbing or inappropriate. The sacredness of palm-leaf manuscripts is not only involved with religion and science but also with magic and the process of magical enchantment. One serious treatment of palm-leaf manuscripts relates to their sacred quality as they are seen as a kind of sacred thing or entangled with the sacred. These sacred manuscripts, therefore, have been used as a sacred ingredient for making some kinds of amulets. This is very popular not only in the Isan area but also in other areas of the country. In this case, modern curatorial practices are useful and applicable for

archiving and preserving these palm-leaf manuscripts and keeping them alive longer so they are useful for research and education in the long-term future.

Both case studies are important collections that have been collected and preserved well in Northeast Thailand. However, this important mission cannot be successfully completed without collaborative work and the effort of museum practitioners and academic staff from outside the local community, such as Mahasarakham University, especially the Institute for Isan Art and Culture and the University Museum. In the case of palm-leaf manuscripts, modern practices became an important part of curatorial practices and relevant to preventing the decline of these ancient manuscripts and safeguarding them for the future. Collaborations between local museums and university museums, as this case shows, are significant and necessary for archiving and conserving this kind of material collection.

The case study of palm-leaf manuscripts also illustrates why this thesis proposes that local museums can be seen as entangled museums. Local museums in Northeast Thailand and also in Thailand more widely have interacted and learned about modern museology and museum practices through collaboration with the university staff and the national museums' staff. Local museum founders and museum practitioners do not usually refuse modern knowledge. On the contrary, they welcome it if that knowledge and those tools are relevant and useful, and if it will not dominate or completely replace their traditional practices. They certainly insist on keeping and maintaining some indigenous knowledge and significant practices such as merit-making, worshipping, offering, and so on alongside scientific practices.

Religious statues as the sacred person

Religious statues are another set of museum collections, which often involve critiques and debates about repatriations and appropriate curatorial practices to deal with them as sacred objects. This is particularly the case with institutional museums in Europe and North America. Paine (2012) critiques the ways in which the institutional museums, especially art museums, exhibited religious statues as art objects without concern for

religiosity or sacredness involved with those religious collections. In more recent books about the sacred objects in museum space, he also compiles a variety of case studies involved with the exhibition and curation of religious objects, especially the Asian collections.

This thesis does not argue against those ideas and it shares concerns about the significant value of these religious objects and the limitations of the scientific curation to handle these sacred collections. Instead, this thesis aims to enhance the angle of perspectives from seeing the religious statue as an object to seeing it as a person. In the case of local museums, the situation looks quite different from the professional museums insofar as scientific knowledge and curatorial practices play a major role in the latter in the process of museum curation. For local people and museum keepers, the sacred, whether involved with the material form or not, is likely meaningful and exists at the present time. The sacred can be contacted and communicated through rituals and the ways that local people interact with the sacred statue. In this case, those religious statues have possibly not been concerned and interacted with as a sacred object but as a sacred person.

At Ku Santarat Museum, there is a Khmer statue that stands in a glass room with an iron cage in order to protect the statue from theft. On the front side of the glass case, there is a place for sitting and worshipping. Some settings and practices at the museum look somewhat similar to settings and religious practices that local people enact with the religious statue at the temple. In addition, this museum also provides an area for chanting and practising meditation on the Buddhist holy days based on the lunar calendar or วันพระ in Thai. According to the museum staff, this religious activity is a requirement of local people who live in the villages surrounding the museum.

Another case study is the statue found at Ku Ban Kwao, Mahasarakham province, which has been kept at the Mahachai Monastery Museum. Similar to several religious statues found at the ancient site of monastery or temple, this religious statue is known as a sacred statue and is part of some rituals and religious practices. This statue is moved to the original place every year for the annual ritual ceremony. The statue has been identified as the

medicine Buddha or the medicine Bodhisattva namely 'Bhaishajyaguru Vaiduryaprabha' (Maneechot, 1993, p. 97). This is an identification known in the field of art history and referred to in the literature of Mahayana Buddhism. However, for local people, the statue probably involves another meaning, as the sacred person who engaged with the place or was the guardian spirit, deity and so on. In some cases, it means that those statues would occasionally be returned to the original place for worship and rituals as in case of the Bodhisattva statue (Figure 6.2).

Figure 6.2 Statue in a ritual ceremony at Ku Ban Kwao, Mahasarakham province

For local people, the sacred statues are not only artistic or iconographic figures limited by aesthetic or academic values. They can be a respected sacred person or even a relative. The ways local people interact with the sacred statues, therefore, are mostly through practices of worship, wishes for good fortune and requests for some kind of help and support. This includes communication and dialogue with those sacred statues for personal and specific purposes. These dialogic practices are distinctively different from scientific treatments in modern museums where academic disciplines such as archaeology or art

history are the significant frames or references. In those cases, iconography and provenance are possibly of primary concern rather than sacredness.

Instead of focusing on agency in religion and examining the impacts of religion on sacred objects, it would be possible to be concerned with the agency of the sacred object and people's dialogic practices with the sacred in relation to the present Gaia. In this way, the sacred time-space or cosmology is not necessarily based on only one religion but depends on the dialogic imagination of museum practitioners or observers, which can be linked with several religions. To curate the sacred here and now, what would be the appropriate or relevant museum practice? The possibilities cover a wide range but can be considered in common as dialogic practices between the actor and the sacred. This does not mean those explanations are incorrect but for them 'agency' tends to be with religion rather than the people or actors who practice religion. In this sense, religion and magic are significant and relevant because they are the repertoire of actions or sources of different knowledge and become key references for persons' interpretation and imagination.

For local people, sacredness seems to exist and to be entangled with the material statue in the present. The sacred, in this case, does not stay in the other world or outside the ordinary space, as usual in the religious cosmologies. The sacred beings perhaps co-exist and connect with ordinary people and other sacred things as part of the network of differences in the same time-space. Various Isan people are concerned with and interact with the sacred beings through their dialogic practices. In concrete ways these practices are likely talking or communicating with a particular person.

Like a person, things can be loved and invested with emotional attachments. This is the reason why some local people felt so sad and angry when their beloved things were taken out of the local area or their homeland. This issue resonates with the new interpretation of animism that is concerned with the personhood of things or seeing things as the person rather than believing in spirits (Bird-David, 1999; Harvey, 2005). Animism is also relevant to explain interactions with the sacred statues, in addition to Buddhism and Hinduism,

which have been the major explanations for the religious statues found in Northeast Thailand.

In the Isan context, animism is very influential in people's lives, alongside Buddhism and Hinduism. Moreover, they may have been entangled with each other. Statues that have been recognised as related to Buddhism or Hinduism may be interacted with by Isan people similar to animism. Local people see and interact with the statues as sacred person who have been named and existed as part of the locality and sociality surrounding them. As Harvey (2005, p. xi) states, two kinds of explanation about animism exist: the first defines animism as belief in spirits and the second defines it as seeing things (not only humans) as a person who deserves respect and is able to communicate. Substantially, animism has enhanced the core idea and perspective of 'beliefs in spirits' to seeing things as persons. (Bird-David, 1999; Harvey, 2005)

This point directly links to the ontological debate about the human and non-human. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998) critiques the demarcation of human and non-human and proposes to see human as the subject or person instead of the human species. Although his works on Amerindian perspectivism mainly focus on relationships between human and animals, the key idea about ontological perspectivism and ontologies of human and non-humans is relevant and logical because of the thought experiment used as his method. The ways in which only a human is seen as the subject or person is the limitation of ethnocentrism.

> In sum, animals are people, or see themselves as persons. Such a notion is virtually always associated with the idea that the manifest form of each species is a mere envelope (a 'clothing'), which conceals an internal human form, usually only visible to the eyes of the particular species or to certain trans-specific beings such as shamans. This internal form is the 'soul' or 'spirit' of the animal: an intentionality or subjectivity formally identical to human consciousness, materializable,

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let us say, in a human bodily schema concealed behind an animal mask. (Viveiros de Castro, 1998, pp. 470–471)

Thus self-references such as 'people' mean 'person', not 'member of the human species', and they are personal pronouns registering the point of view of the subject talking, not proper names. To say, then, that animals and spirits are people is to say that they are persons, and to attribute to non-humans the capacities of conscious intentionality and agency, which define the position of the subject. Such capacities are objectified as the soul or spirit with which these non-humans are endowed. Whatever possesses a soul is a subject, and whatever has a soul is capable of having a point of view. Amerindian souls, be they human or animal, are thus indexical categories, cosmological deictics whose analysis calls not so much for an animist psychology or substantialist ontology as for a theory of the sign or a perspectival pragmatics (Taylor, 1993a; 1993b; Viveiros de Castro 1992b). (Viveiros de Castro, 1998, p. 476)

Thus, it would be necessary to notice here that the implication of this ontological insight can lead analytically to possibilities of seeing and rethinking with things as the person or subject. If things can be seen and interacted with as a person, they potentially can be seen as relatives or kinship relations as well. In this case, the situation would make sense, as Emile Durkheim suggested, as an explanation of totemism. Things, therefore, are not only a sacred person to respect and fear their power. Potentially, they can be the ancestors who have been engaged socially and emotionally as well. Some local people, therefore, feel sacred things to be their relatives rather than property or material objects. These critical issues will be discussed further in the next chapter that focuses on things as a kind of frame that can be both non-human and human. In this chapter, the major focus is the museum Gaia as a space for dialogues of differences, which are not necessarily restricted to the human species.

Curating the sacred as dialogic practices

Local museums have often been criticised for not curating but merely keeping material things quietly asleep in storage with an absence of stories or knowledge. To some extent, it seems to me that they actually do curate things in different ways in comparison with institutional or professional museums. They not only curate the sacred thing as an inanimate object but as vibrant matter (Bennett, 2010) or even as a person (Harvey, 2005). Curating sacred things and related collections in local museums, therefore, is not about their past sacredness and the sacred space, which is unconnected or does not exist here and now. The co-existence and dialogic practice with sacredness as the present sacredness, to some extent, is similar to the augmented reality or the present Gaia of differences.

The ways in which local museums see and interact with the sacred, whether in material form or not, looks substantially different from modern or institutional museums. The differences are not only about stories and things exhibited in the museums but also about dialogic practices. Although local people and museum practitioners do interact with sacred things in diverse forms, it seems to me that they actually do interact and communicate in common with the sacred in various time-spaces and steps of life. In this case, the sacred can be seen as a social actor or person existing in the everyday life of local people at present.

In the case of Buddha relics, local museums are not the place for keeping the relics but for the various things that people have donated to the Buddha relics as offerings or in worship. In some cases, things were removed without permission and brought bad fortune to those people. Local museums are the place to keep those things. As well as other ancient things, including archaeological collections that were found in nearby areas, local museums function as the treasure house for these things, which are meaningful as local heritage. Moreover, several monastery museums have also functioned as the safe space for sacred things that are too dangerous for individuals to keep.

Palm-leaf manuscripts are an ideal case study for reflecting on how local museums can be seen as entangled museums. In practice, archiving the manuscripts not only involves scientific curation and modern knowledge but also relates to traditional knowledge, especially that of religion e.g. Buddhism and Hinduism, and also magic. Conservation and scientific treatments are useful and relevant to the contemporary situation in which palm-leaf manuscripts decayed and were overlooked. The traditional function of palm-leaf manuscripts has been replaced by new media of printing and the official Thai language. In the beginning of the process of working on archiving and conservation, preliminary rituals are conducted to communicate with various kinds of the sacred – letting those sacred beings know and asking for permission to work with the sacred collections.

In the case of religious statues, those that I have presented, the statues have been interacted with not only as sacred but also as sacred persons to some extent. They certainly are not only artistic figures in the chronotopic frames derived from modern knowledge, especially archaeology and art history. The statues also are sacred things as they are sometimes moved from the museum to be part of rituals or religious ceremonies or to be the objects of worship and chanting.

One common action that these religious and ritual practices perform is communication with the sacred in various forms and in different ways. Although sacred things are different, the actual practices look similar to interactions with the sacred thing as the sacred person. Even when those statues are the Buddha, Hindu gods, or guardian spirits, they have been respected, worshipped, and communicated. 'Respect' seems to be the significant keyword and the idea of dialogical practices is relevant and meaningful in this context.

Christina Kreps (2003; 2008) proposes an influential idea of indigenous curatorship, which is useful for recognising indigenous knowledge and different ways of curating indigenous collections and culture. However, this approach may be less concerned with epistemic co-existence and conversations of different kinds of knowledge or epistemic differences whether derived from science, magic or religion. This thesis, therefore, aims to examine

the co-existence and differences of knowledge and museum actors that interact with and are interconnected as part of Gaia.

As Harvey (2005) explains, animism is involved with two kinds of meanings: the first and major explanation involves believing in spirits who are influential; the second is about seeing things and non-human beings e.g. animals, plants, rocks, as a person. Likewise, artefacts and sacred things, especially statues of human figures can readily be recognised as sacred persons. With such sacred persons, various daily and occasional practices must be done in order to take care and be respectful to them.

In concrete forms, dialogic practices relate to several specific actions and values or attitudes. For Buddhists, merit-making and donations are in order to share and give things to anyone known to invoke good karma. With merit-making enacted as practices in everyday life, a number of things have been donated to monasteries, some of which become collections in the monastery's museums. Moreover, dialogic practices can be asking for luck, good fortune, help, and support in order to be safe themselves or keep someone else from danger, recover from illness, or be released from bad fortune. These seem to be the major expectations that local people ask of the sacred in various ways. Asking for the best fortune, protection, and help in daily life sound quite simple but it is still very important and meaningful for Isan people and also for many people in other areas of Thailand.

> **curate (n.)**
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> Late 14c., "spiritual guide, ecclesiastic responsible for the spiritual welfare of those in his charge; parish priest," from Medieval Latin *curatus* "one responsible for the care (of souls)," from Latin *curatus*, past participle of *curare* "to take care of" (see **cure** (v.)). Church of England sense of "paid deputy priest of a parish" first recorded 1550s.
>
> **curate (v.)**
>
> Be in charge of, "manage" a museum, gallery, art exhibit, etc., by 1979 (implied in *curated*), a back-formation from **curator** or **curation**.

Related: *Curating*. An earlier verb, *curatize* (1801) meant "be a (church) curate."

<div align="right">(Online Etymology Dictionary, 2019)</div>

According to the Etymology Dictionary above, the keyword 'to curate' literally is associated with the meaning of 'to take care of' or 'to care'. In the case of local museums, curating or caring for the sacred things pays attention not only to the material collections and stories necessary for exhibitions or preservation in a museum. Local museums and their museum practitioners may have to care about the sacred being and the sacredness of things, and also people to whom those things are substantial and meaningful. Caring about sacredness, particularly through the eyes of local people, especially the ordinary people who have been connected with the sacred thing is a crucial issue that cannot be overlooked. Moreover, this concern may be necessary not only in the case of local museums but also in the case of institutional museums that primarily employ scientific curation and modern knowledge as their primary reference.

Conclusion - Museum Gaia and dialogues of differences

This chapter focuses on the aspect of space and seeing the museum space as Gaia or the complex network of differences. This perspective could potentially be open to a possible location for co-existence and dialogue of differences, especially between science, religion and magic, with respectful and balanced relationships rather than colonial relations. The term colonial relations, in this thesis, means the relationship or life within the hierarchy, being exploited and marginalised, and also living individually without the recognition and connection to public resources. Substantially, post-colonial practices and interactions can be immediately different in comparison to the colonial past. Furthermore, colonial relationships and colonialism, at least in relation to museums, need to vanish and never be reproduced or returned to.

In comparison to exhibiting sacred things in chronotopic frames in national museums, the appearances of those sacred things and museum practices in local museums are entangled with both similarities and differences. Local museums often label the statues as presented

in national museums. Naming and dating academically have also been used frequently and much more required. Several museum practitioners actually would like to know and recognise that they need academic support about identifications and classifications. In fact, these different practices can co-exist in the case of local museums.

The idea of Gaia provides possibilities to see co-existence and dialogue for various epistemic differences through dialogic practices. Case studies of Buddha relics, palm-leaf manuscripts and Khmer statues reflect how the idea of space can be reconsidered and thought about differently. Not only seeing the museum space as a geographical or material space, it is also possible to see the museum space differently as a network of differences or Gaia (Latour, 2013). This perspective is an alternative solution to the post-colonial critics. Although post-colonial theory is concerned with spatial aspects, it still emphasises the geographical or material space. This critical issue also links with the limitations of knowledge in relation to colonialism and museums.

The limitations of modern knowledge, especially the restricted thinking about space have been strongly criticised in post-colonial studies. One of the major criticisms concerns the spatial mapping, which concentrates restrictively on the geographical and measurable space based on scientific knowledge. Modern geographical mapping has been continually critiqued for its impact as effective technology or power to colonise and build empires (Winichakul, 1994; Anderson, 2003; Mackenzie, 2009).

In relation to Siam and mainland Southeast Asia, Winichakul (1999) points out how modern geography replaces the traditional or pre-modern geography that is primarily referred to in Buddhist cosmology known as *Tri-Bhum* or ไตรภูมิ in Thai, which means three worlds or three-scapes. This cosmology has often been used to explain Siamese people's cosmology and worldview. This key idea also appeared in anthropological studies about popular Buddhism, practical Buddhism, and also spirit cults that co-existed with Buddhism (Tambiah, 1967). Although these studies were concerned with spirit cults, animism, and Hinduism, they still have Buddhism at the core or centre and see Thai society as a

Buddhist society; some scholars called this orientation religious syncretism (Kittiarsa, 2012, pp. 12–14).

In practice, the explanation of religious cosmology may not be as relevant as the idea of Gaia as a complex network or rhizome of actants, which includes various kinds of people, spirits, and things as the person – particularly the sacred person. These persons potentially are able to connect and communicate with each other through dialogical practices. In practice, in concrete form, the dialogic practices can be rituals or ritual practices and also the ordinary practices that people undertake in everyday life such as praying, offering food, flowers, or material gifts, or simply talking.

Time-space and cosmology in this case, are unnecessary to explain scientifically as is the case with religious theories. Moreover, the situation and perceptions of it also depend on the persons who are actors or observers. The explanation of the chronotopic Gaia of differences would be able to enhance the limited explanation of popular Buddhism or syncretism among Buddhist, Hindu, and spirit cults. In fact, scientific approval of the material space and ignorance of other kinds of space potentially allocate power to the modern world and marginalise indigenous or religious cosmology. In particular, animism and magic have been looked down upon as underdeveloped in comparison with modern, and especially scientific knowledge.

Several explanations of religion in Northeast Thailand concern religious phenomena that seem to be compatible with anthropological accounts of religion, particularly Buddhism. Some scholars explain this mixed and unfitted amalgam as popular Buddhism, or syncretism, or even hybridity. However, considering the imagined cosmologies and the sacred time-spaces involved, it seems to me that for local people, another, more relevant, explanation is that of animism, which potentially includes all figures from various sources or religion as sacred persons. Even so, this does not mean that Buddhism does not play significant roles in the everyday life of the Isan people. Buddhism is very important and influential in Isan life but in different ways from those in the conventional explanations about Buddhism. This crucial point will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Chapter 7

Enchanting the ordinary, relational things and the uncertain Being

In contrast to the previous chapter that focused on the sacred things, this chapter looks at ordinary things in relation to the sacred. The chapter concentrates on debates about the sacred/non-sacred divide and the ontological entanglement between the sacred and the ordinary, particularly relating to the process of enchantments or sacralisation. It also traces co-existences and dialogues of different kinds of knowledge about things especially derived from science, religion and magic.

Key questions here are about how the ordinary thing can be sacralised or enchanted to be the sacred thing. How do these transformations relate to local museums and their curatorial practices? These questions will be investigated and discussed in relation to the ontological debates and the uncertain being of things in museums. Three case studies will be examined: the daily objects belonging to masters of the forest monks, fossils found in Isan areas, and the mannequins displayed in a museum exhibition.

The chapter consists of four parts. The first part sets out the ontological debates about the sacred thing and different ways to enchant the ordinary thing. The second part concerns the three Isan case studies: the daily belongings in memorial museums for the masters of forest monks as the sacred ordinary; fossils and museum curation beyond the nature/culture divide; and mannequins as enchanted things that involve stories about sacred power and danger. The third part points out key ideas concerning the uncertain being and epistemic differences between the classified things and relational things in museums. The last part concludes with the trilemma of science, religion and magic in relation to enchantments.

To be or not to be the sacred thing?

Shifting the focal point from time and space, this chapter looks more closely at things as relational things that also link with time-space. Things, like time and space, can be seen as a kind of frame. Owing to their solid form and materiality, this idea possibly sounds unconvincing, particularly in comparison with seeing 'space' or 'time' as a kind of frame.

However, this is the core idea that I propose here in order to make sense of some case studies of the uncertain things or beings in local museums. The idea was inspired by basic concepts of quantum physics especially the quantum state, uncertainty, and the uncertain being of things (Barad, 2007).

In contrast to the ordinary thing, the sacred or enchanted things are involved with uncertainty not only in the layer of materiality but also of sacredness. To be or not to be the sacred thing, to some extent, can be seen as a kind of frame and an uncertain being. Moreover, being the sacred, it is unable to be entirely separated from its 'pre-' and 'post-state' of being the ordinary or the non-sacred. This is so particularly in the Isan context where several kinds of rituals and the process of sacralisation or enchantment can be seen in local life. In this case, things in relation to sacredness probably could reflect the epistemic and ontological differences between science, religion and magic that co-exist in the Isan context.

The enchantment by magic is also significant and can be considered as a kind of ritual practice and local knowledge. In Northeast Thailand, magic also has been influential and entangled with Buddhism. Some Buddhist monks know and use magic through various kinds of ritual practices in order to sacralise or enchant the ordinary thing to become the sacred thing (Terwiel, 1975/2012; Tambiah, 1984; Kittiarsa, 2012). Furthermore, magic not only co-exists and is entangled with Buddhism but also with Hinduism and animism as they can be a source or reference of sacred power.

Elements or materials of the sacred things sometimes can be obtained from nature or the natural world e.g. animal remains, plants and minerals. Moreover, some sacred ingredients can be obtained from the sacred artefacts or material things that have been involved with the sacredness in various ways – such as palm-leaf manuscripts, material fragments of religious architecture, Buddha images and so on. Mixing these ingredients with some kinds of rituals potentially turns them into sacred artefacts such as amulets, charms or talismans (Terwiel, 1975/2012; Tambiah, 1984) and also Buddha images (Swearer, 2004).

The entanglement between magic and religion, especially Buddhism, is significant in the case of local museums in Northeast Thailand. There are theoretical concepts analytically concerned with relationships between Buddhism and magic such as popular Buddhism, practical Buddhism, and Buddhist syncretism (Kittiarsa, 2012). What these have in common, is that those concepts tend to keep Buddhism at the centre of analysis as the core value of Thai society and culture. In several cases, it possibly would be more relevant to explain and understand ritual practices to sacralise or enchant things as magic instead of Buddhism or religion in general.

Religion and magic basically can be seen as kinds of knowledge which are different from science or scientific knowledge. This thesis, therefore, attempts to work with the concepts of 'epistemic differences' and 'aspects of knowledge' rather than with 'belief'. Moreover, epistemic differences and a diversity of entanglements between different kinds of magic and religion are also involved. These epistemic differences are not trivial but basically rely upon the ontology of things and the sacredness, which are not intrinsic and permanent but relational and uncertain. These critical issues will be illustrated and discussed in the following case studies.

Museums for the masters of forest monks – exhibiting the sacred ordinary

A distinctive group of local museums in Northeast Thailand are the memorial museums for the master of forest monks, who are highly respected and well-known in Isan and other areas of the country. According to the SAC database (accessed in December 2018), there are 22 museums of this kind in Northeast Thailand. This part presents three memorial museums dedicated to Phra Arjan Mann Phuritatta Thera at Sakon Nakhon province, Phra Arjan Sao Kantaselo at Ubon Ratchathani Province, and Phra Arjan Cha Supattho, Ubon Ratchathani Province. The forest monks are a specific tradition of Theravada Buddhism which is dedicated to meditation and pilgrimage through solitary living in the forest or areas distant from towns or large villages.

These memorial museums were set up as the masters pass away in order to keep and exhibit their belongings particularly 'Auttabarikarn' or 'อัฐบริขาร' in Thai, which means

eight necessary things for the Buddhist monks: triple robes, girdle-cloth, alms bowl, needle, razor and water-filter. The museum also exhibits the daily objects used by the masters when they were alive and also books, photographs and official documents such as identification cards. The exhibition mainly presents the master's biography and stories about the forest-monk's way of living and religious practices, particularly the meditation and pilgrimage. Theravada Buddhist monks, particularly the forest monks, inherit this discipline to date. These museums perform the practice of remembrance and respectful tribute to the masters.

One of the pioneering museums of this kind is the memorial museum for Phra Ajarn Mann Phuritatta Thera at Wat Pa Suthavas, Sakon Nakhon province. The museum was set up in the monastery where the master passed away around 40 years ago. Phra Arjan Mann has been recognised as the grand master of the forest monks in Isan areas and is well-known as one of the charismatic monks not only in Isan but also in other regions of the country (Tambiah, 1984). A biography of Phra Arjan Mann was written by Phra Arjan Boa, one of his successors, who later was one of the important masters of the forest monks and passed away a few years ago. According to this biography, Phra Arjan Mann was born in Ubon Ratchathani province in 1870. He was ordained in 1893 and lived his life as a Buddhist monk for 57 years until he passed away in 1949.

During his lifetime, Phra Arjan Mann travelled around the wide area of Northeast Thailand and some areas of Northern and Central Thailand. The master also had stayed for a long while at several places and forest monasteries, taught many monks for several generations and been respected as the grand master of the forest monks. Since the master passed away, his belongings from several places he had stayed or pilgrimaged were assembled and kept at the last monastery he lived in during the terminal stage of life – Wat Pa Sutthavas. The new museum was set up here through the collaboration and charity of his student monks and lay people who knew and highly respected the master. This museum is known in Thai as Phiphitthaphan bǒ̌rikhān or พิพิธภัณฑ์บริขาร, which means the museum for the monk's necessary belongings.

In the museum, there is a statue of the master placed at the visual centre. The master's personal belongings and daily objects have been exhibited in the large glass containers standing on the left and right wall. Like several other museums of this kind, material things exhibited are 'อัฐบริขาร' (Auttabarikarn) or the eight necessary things for Buddhist monks, especially the arms bowl and triple robes, which are meaningful and significant in the ordination ritual. The museum also exhibits the personal belongings used in daily life e.g. shoes, bag, walking stick, books, and the identification cards of the ordained monk living in Thailand.

Figure 7.1 Memorial Museum for Phra Arjan Mann Phuritatta Thera

On the first occasion that I came into this museum, I held a small bunch of flowers and put them on a tray in front of the master statue as a kind of offering, as I did at the Buddhist temple. The setting seemed to me unfamiliar and different from entering into museums in general. This museum also reminded me of a city museum in Northeast Thailand in which

an exhibition room presents the statues of several masters of the forest monks and while some visitors come in, especially elderly people, they also sit on the ground and present respect to the masters by prostration or กราบ (krāp) in Thai.

The second museum is the memorial museum dedicated to Phra Arjan Sao who was the master of Phra Arjan Mann. The master Sao was not known as a good teacher because of verbal explanations but as a good practitioner exceptionally dedicated to practising meditation. Phra Arjan Mann highly respected and recognised him as his master. He therefore has been respected as the master of the masters and is known as the grand master of the forest monks alongside Phra Arjan Mann.
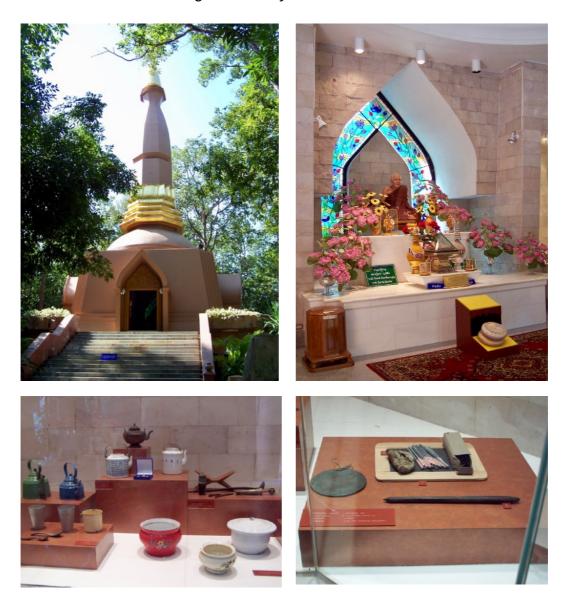
Figure 7.2 Memorial Museum for Phra Arjan Sao Kataselo, Ubon Ratchathani province

This museum is located on a little island in the Mun River known as Don That – where the master lived and practised mediation. To visit this museum requires using a boat to cross the river. Surrounded by the forest, the museum building is constructed in the shape of a stupa with the exhibitionary space inside. Similar to several museums of this kind, there is a sculpture of the master in the museum. The main exhibition presents the master's biography and daily belongings exhibited in glass cases. This museum exhibits fewer objects than the previous museum – mainly the arm-bowl, triple ropes and books.

Figure 7.3 Hut and the meditation path of Phra Arjan Sao Kantaselo

This museum also looks like an eco-museum or a place-based museum. There are the exhibitionary spaces outside the museum building because this area was the master's living place. Beside the museum, there is a hut or small house where the master stayed and the location where the master had been living and practising meditation. Nowadays, the hut looks like a shrine and in front of the shelter there is a large table that is full of offerings that people brought to worship the master. Another significant spot is the path that he used to practice meditation through walking or 'เดินจงกรม' in Thai. In front of the path, there is a sign warning visitors 'Don't walk on this path'. This is because the path

has been enchanted and is a distinctive space, separate from the profane space, as in Durkheim's account (1912).

This case is one example of the uncertainty of the sacred, which is not permanent or intrinsic but uncertain and happens sometimes depending on relations or engagements with the sacredness belonging to various sacred agencies. The sacredness is also linked with magic and the source of magical power also relates to a sacred person like the master monks who have practised and meditated continually for a long period of time.

> It is clear that many of these human, deity, animal, and bird amulets are used for the control and manipulation of other persons; a few are used for distinctly nefarious purposes. Although these amulets can be made and sacralized by lay specialists, still some of the most famous makers are said to be certain *luang phu* (respected father) monks. (Tambiah, 1984, p. 227)

Another memorial museum addressed is the museum of Phra Arjan Cha Supatho in Ubon Ratchathani Province. According to this monastery's disciplines, practising magic is not allowed for the forest monks. Given the strong tradition and discipline of Theravada Buddhism, differences between Buddhism and magic can be seen more clearly in this case. The significance of Buddha Dharma, in fact, can be seen in everyday life and especially at the moment of dying or when facing death. With an understanding of karma, samsara and reincarnation, the moment of death is ultimately critical and deeply linked with rebirth to the next life. Although some forest-monk masters knew magic, they did not encourage Buddhists to use it and hold on to it this way as this cannot be a sustainable way to be released from the suffering of life.

As a relational thing, the sacredness of a thing, therefore, is not intrinsic and permanent but varied and deeply related with time-spaces, observers, and the thing itself – particularly the pre- and post-state of the sacred being. These issues are relevant and insightful to understand in term of ontological entanglements between the sacred and the

ordinary. The sacredness, from this perspective, looks similar to uncertainty and may be unnecessary for being mutually exclusive, innate and permanent.

The masters' daily objects have been interacted with and handled as enchanted things because those things belonged to the master and serve as a bridge between the masters and people who respect and remember them. In the case of Phra Arjan Sao, his hut and the path for walking meditation also have been preserved and a sign indicated that this path was used by the master and that visitors are not allowed to walk on it.

These museums reflect differences of sacredness and ways of seeing and creating them. In both cases the sacredness occurred in the present moment and is situated as the present sacredness. These ordinary things have been enchanted and became sacred things as they had been used and belonged to a sacred person. Tambiah (1984) also stated that this issue was linked with the case of amulets as sacralised things, which are distributed widely in Thailand:

> In this book we are primarily concerned with the amulets that are currently being sacralized by famous forest saints and meditation masters. But because these amulets belong to a larger tradition and universe of amulets, it is necessary to have a fair idea of the major classes or types of amulets that circulate in Thailand, even if this enumeration is incomplete and the classes in part a construct of the author.
>
> I would differentiate four classes of amulets:
>
> 1. Amulet representations of famous and historic Buddha images, which have played the roles of palladia in the Thai kingdoms.
>
> 2. Amulets that owe their fame to the reputation of famous Buddhist monks, especially of the nineteenth century, who sponsored their making and sacralized them. The most famous of them are called *phra somdet* and *phra kling*.

3. Miscellaneous amulets, a large residual class of representations of gods, humans, animals, birds, and anomalous beings, sacralized by monks and lay experts skilled in *saiyasdt* ("base arts").

4. The contemporary amulets being blessed by the forest-dwelling meditation masters, some of whom are acclaimed as "saints" *(arahants)*.

(Tambiah, 1984, pp. 206–207)

Unlike several Buddhist monks who utilise magic, the forest monks have discarded the use of magic because this is unable to release suffering or pass beyond, which is the ultimate purpose of Theravada Buddhism. Unexpectedly, although the forest monks pay no attention to magic in practice, their dedication, endeavours and long-term self-discipline have led them to be highly charismatic sacred persons respected by many people. As the masters have been respectful, their belongings also have been recognised and handled as a kind of enchanted thing, which has been commemorated and respected like the masters themselves.

Isan fossils: curating beyond the nature/culture divide

Stories about the discovery of fossils in Northeast Thailand are also linked with the sacred and supernatural power. One case is to do with fossils of palaeontological fishes at Phu Nam Jan, Kalasin Province. These fossils were first identified by a Buddhist monk, who was later named as the founder of this kind of fossil – Phra Arjan Sakda Dharmarato. He said that he saw the location of the fossils during his meditation. Then he went to see that place and found the pieces of fish-fossil.

Phra Arjan Sakda Dharmarato then informed Dr. Worawut Sutheethorn, an important palaeontologist who works at the Department of Geology and Minerals and has carried out palaeontological research in Northeast Thailand for a couple of decades. After stories of the fossils' discovery became widespread, people from nearby areas came to the site to seek the fossils. Some people found and collected the fossils and then encountered misfortunes. Some acquired a serious illness and some, unfortunately, passed away after

owning the fossils. The people, therefore, brought the fossils back to the monastery and returned them to the monk. The monk later built a little museum at his monastery to host these fossils and opened it to the public.

I visited this museum once in 2004 when the museum was initially set up. The museum is located in the area of the monastery and has a room for glass cases displaying the fossils found in the area – both by the abbot and those pieces that had been returned from local people who found but could not keep them because of fear about bad fortune and the danger of sacred power. These kinds of stories are often heard and are the reason why local people feel more comfortable donating the objects to the monastery or the public institution rather than keeping them themselves.

Stories like this also appeared to have been heard in the cases where palaeontological fossils were discovered – seeing by dreaming or having visions during meditation. Another case involved with this kind of story was the discovery of dinosaurs at Phu Kum Kao, Kalasin Province where several new species of dinosaurs were found and later a large-scale museum dedicated to them. At the beginning, the abbot and local people unexpectedly found some pieces of huge animal bones by seeing or having visions about their location while in a state of meditation. The abbot then asked the government officers and professional palaeontologists from the Department of Geology and Minerals to examine them. The systematic excavation and research since then have led to a remarkable discovery of a new species of dinosaurs here. At the site museum, there is a caption of the story of the dinosaur discovery told by the abbot of Wat Sakawan:

> It began in 1970, I and a group of monks and novices had worked together to construct the road around the mountain for several days. When we reached the point where the dinosaur fossils were found, I did not know these were the bones of dinosaurs. I understood that they were wood that became the stone that we can see often on this hill. It's about ten meters long and around six kilos in weight. It would be part of a very big tree, I thought, and then brought it back to keep at the monastery.

In 1999, I went to do meditation on the hill known as Phu Kum Kao. It was a rainy day. During my mediation, I had a vision about a kind of animal with a long neck standing at the water pool and the scene disappeared after a short while. In 2000, I saw the same vision and again in 2001; the scene happened very close to me — just ten meters away. Three days later I had a vision about the yellow light and then a bus running from the southern area heading to our monastery. There was a monk who came out of the car. He walked to me and pointed his finger to the southwestern area – where later the dinosaur fossil was found and said "Here is complete!" For a little while, the scene faded away in my vision.

Since then I have gone to see that location and found the big bones that look like the stones on the ground and some of those were partially underground. I assembled them together — there were about 20–30 pieces. Shortly after, I informed the district leader and then he informed the provincial government and asked the Department of Geology and Minerals to examine those fossils.

Phra Kru Vijitrasahatsakhun

The abbot of Wat Sakkawan, Kalasin Province

4 February,1995

In these cases, the key points are not about whether these stories are provable or not. The significant points are about how these stories reflect cultural meanings or perceptions about sacredness and the enchanted things or things that are linked with the sacred in Isan contexts. What do these fossils mean to ordinary people? How to make sense of stories about fear and danger including the punishments when someone stole or possessed the fossils as their personal property? How to understand and handle these stories? At least, these stories indicate that the ways to think about and deal with the sacred as relational and uncertain beings are most likely different from pre-quantum science.

Concerns about the sacred and such irrational or unprovable stories have often been overlooked by science and scientific museology.

In the museum space, how do these sacred things affect museum practitioners? There are a variety of possibilities and directions. Mainly, there are stories about fear and danger of the objects related to spirits of the unknown owners. Some people or their relatives received misfortunes and strong negative effects e.g. serious illness and tragic death. Thus, they had to return those objects to the museums or other public institutes such as a Buddhist monastery instead of keeping them as their private property.

This kind of story has often been mentioned in the case of local museums. Some local museums have been set up in order to keep these unusual things. One such is the museum of 160-million-year-old fish-fossils in Kalasin Province nearby where those fossils had been found. In local museums, this kind of story seems to be an important part of the narrative alongside the scientific discovery and descriptions of the fossils, such as their scientific name and classification. In addition, these kinds of descriptions are not opposite or mutually exclusive. For ordinary people, scientific explanations are welcome if they do not exclude them and their knowledge and practices.

Stories of these fossils also led me to think carefully about the definition of the sacred, which in the beginning stage of this research closely related to the religious and supernatural. The sacred seems to be an area of culture and the social rather than nature. Certainly, the current debate on ontology and how to think beyond nature and culture substantially shapes the major argument of this chapter. In addition, the key literature about magic and sacralisation or enchantment is a major concern in the pre-modern or pre-scientific world.

Natural things such as fossils, animal remains and plants including inorganic materials like the minerals or jewels once looked unconnected to sacredness or religion unlike religious statues or artefacts that have mainly been recognised as collections of culture and involved with the sacred. However, in Isan contexts both nature and culture are not entirely demarcated, and those material things are not understood as natural affairs. In

fact, demarcation and links with ritual practices and interactions between human and nature can be seen in their entirety and separated. The idea of curating the sacred beyond the divided nature and culture, therefore, would be necessary and relevant to local museums.

Substantially, the ontological debates are relevant here as Descola (2013) critiques the demarcation between nature and culture and proposes the critical idea of going beyond nature and culture. Moreover, Descola also points out four ontological differences between the human and the non-human. Referring to the case studies of sacred things in Northeast Thailand illustrated above, his analytic tools could potentially be applied and are useful for analysing things in museums in both cases of ethnographic (or cultural) and biological (or nature-related) collections.

In addition, the debate on the demarcation of nature and culture also relates to the posthuman concern. On this point, Rosi Braidotti (2006) summarises very well the title of her paper and recent lecture (2017) as 'Posthuman, all too human'. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Viveiros De Castro, likewise, points out that the human and humanity do not mean only the human species but also the subject and person. In the case of things, as discussed earlier, some sacred things can, to some extent, be seen and communicated with as persons.

Moreover, the entanglement between the nature and culture in a restrictive sense can be reconsidered as well. This is because several cultural rituals also have natural elements as the significant ingredients. The process of sacralisation and enchantment by the sacred ritual frequently also involves the scared power whether derived from the supernatural, religion, or magic as will be discussed below.

Enchanted things, the sacred power and the uncertain sacredness

Similar to the case of fossils, several kinds of ordinary things can be enchanted by different kinds of sacred power e.g. magic, spirits, or religious rituals. It seems to me that the sacredness of things is not only defined by what those sacred things are but 'what they do' or 'can do'. In this sense, things are sacred because they can bring good or bad

fortune into life. Fear of sacred power and its negative effects, therefore, leads to several kinds of practices to care and deal with the sacred as I have demonstrated in an earlier chapter.

Figure 7.4 A female mannequin at an open-air museum

The sacred power in some cases is related to links with spirits and spirit possession. Some ordinary things sometimes have been seen to be enchanted as they brought the best fortune to some people or fulfilled their wishes. Since then, they have returned to worship and presented some offering to the sacred. A case study that is relevant to this topic is that of a mannequin displayed at an open-air museum, which became an enchanted thing for local people. Some people there told me that people have even come to ask for lottery numbers from the mannequin and won. Since then, those people have come to worship and offer presents such as money, gold, and flowers to the sacred that is entangled with the mannequin, who has been recognised as the spirit of an elderly woman.

Why are spirits very familiar and meaningful to Isan people? There are two relevant accounts that need to be addressed here – the first is about the Buddhist's conception of reincarnation or rebirth, and the second is about the essence of life or *khwan* involved with animism. They are not the same but exist as two references in everyday life that can be seen through rituals and religious practices. Tambiah's ethnography on the co-existence of Buddhism and spirit cults in Isan area precisely illustrated both accounts. Let us start with the reincarnation or rebirth particularly related to spirits of various kinds.

As verbal categories, the words *thewada* and *phii* are habitually used by villagers to refer to certain supernatural agents or personifications. The two categories are in their general reference opposed: the *thewada* (devata) are divine angels, benevolent in nature, and living in heaven (swan); the *phii* are malevolent agents, either free-floating, localised in the world of human beings, or condemned to hell (*narog*).

This way of stating their characteristics immediately raises the question of how *thewada*/*phii* concepts are linked with human ethics status—*bun*/ *baab*—and life/death. Now, in general, it is said that wingman of every individual turns into a *phii* at death. *Phii*, then, are after-death phenomena. Villagers say that those persons who have lived a meritorious life go to heaven, but this heaven is quite different from the heaven in which *thewada* reside. A human being can never become a *thewada*; he can go to heaven and he can then be reborn; *thewada* are never reborn. This statement is quite different from the doctrinal position in Buddhism. Humans who have lived a life of *baab* are condemned to hell or become malevolent spirits living (disembodied) in this world. I would seem then that *phii* are pictured as after-death human phenomena; there is a basis for their differentiation into kinds of phii, with characteristics ranging from benevolence, prestige and responsible power to malevolence, notoriety and caprice. (Tambiah, 1967, p. 59)

In the case of *khwan*, which refers to the spiritual essences connected with the human body, that closely involved the agency of things entangled with *khwan*. In the Isan context, the ritual and practices in everyday life of local people relate to *khwan*. *Khwan* involves the well-being not only of the human being but also all kinds of things or any living being.

Some writers have rendered it as "life soul"; others as "benevolent guardian spirit of an extremely ephemeral essence". The villagers' characterisation of *khwan* subsumes a number of ideas: the *khwan*

resides in the human body; it is attached to the body and yet can leave it. The causes and consequences of the *khwan*'s departure are formulated in a circular manner: the *khwan* takes fright and leaves its own body (*chao khong*) when he is frightened, sick or in trouble, or *caj bau dee* (mind not good). The very act of its fleeing the body in turn exposes the owner to suffering, illness and misfortune.

The flight of the *khwan* itself cannot be seen; it can only be inferred from its effects. But in some instances the evidence is more direct. "Supposing you are in one place and someone sees you elsewhere, then your *khwan* is wandering and must instantly recalled."

The *khwan* is one entity; it is also fragmented into 32 separate essences associated with different parts the body. (No villager can list the body parts where they reside.) But the rites for recalling the escaped *khwan* treat the totality, that is, the separate essences as a unity.

The *khwan* must be understood in relation to *winjan*. The *winjan*, also a spiritual essence, resides in the body. But it is different from *khwan*. The *khwan* can leave the body for good, followed by the *winjan*. The *winjan* leaves the body only with death. In fact, death is described as the escape of the *winjan* from the body. After death, people are not concerned with the *khwan*, only with the fate of the *winjan* and its subsequent transformations. (Tambiah, 1967, p. 58)

As I have discussed in an earlier chapter, it is important to see the present sacredness or the sacredness here and now and the relevance of seeing the museum space as a Gaia of differences instead of a religious cosmos. This is because Isan people have been living with a variety of sacred beings involved with various references. Thus, the situation would be possible and more relevant to understand and analyse in terms of knowledge and experience than belief. As a relational matter, the sacred things including ordinary things have been sacralised or enchanted, as in the case studies above, raising more concerns

about the sacredness and the sacred thing as an uncertain being instead of an intrinsic and permanent being.

More widely, it may be unnecessary to link sacred things with religion. Spirits, magic, and various kinds of sacred power could potentially enchant or sacralise the ordinary thing to become the sacred thing. A situation like this can happen with other kinds of objects, especially in the case of artificial objects made for display in the exhibition. In this case, the term 'enchanted thing' would be useful for the ordinary thing, which has been sacralised by any kind of sacred power whether related to religion or not.

Fear of sacred power is a strong concern that frequently affects curatorial practices in local museums. In some cases, ritual practices such as chanting, using blessed water, and binding with the sacred string would be necessary and would become a part of museum practices in order to control and protect sacred power and danger. It would be more relevant to discuss this issue in the frame of magic even though there are relations with religion like Buddhism, Hinduism, animism, and so on. Commonly, the major part of these involve magic as tools to resolve problems in everyday life in local traditions.

In Thailand, the Buddhist monastery is mainly an expected place for keeping sacred things and being able to control sacred power or danger involved with those things. Moreover, the charismatic monks and someone who is highly respectful or recognised as person with merit would potentially possess or look after the sacred things. In particular, this includes some kinds of communication or dialogic practices with the sacred before acting or organising activities related to the sacred things. For instance, asking for permission, making an apology, making a wish or asking for help, support and so on. This is a major reason why sacred things have often been donated to the monastery museums and kept in the monastery. The danger and risk from sacred power seem to be a kind of uncertainty that museum practitioners and local people feel great concern about, such that they attempt to stay away from it and not interact or be involved with those sacred things.

Furthermore, the issue of uncertainty is also crucial in the case of enchanted things as sacredness is not a permanent quality but, rather a thing can be enchanted and

disenchanted. Its uncertainty, therefore, would be considered carefully and this is the first problematic issue about uncertainty. The second problematic issue is in regard to the sacred danger, risk, and uncomfortable emotions such as fear, haunting, worry or anxiety. In some cases, keeping the objects within the monastery or the public museum seems to be an appropriate solution or the proper place for the enchanted things.

In the case of sacred things, the aspect of being or ontology is probably not the whole story. For local people, can the aspect of doing and the effective result of those things to people's lives be more crucial and substantially define what the sacred is? There are several ways and factors that potentially can desacralise or disenchant the sacredness of things and turn them into ordinary things. The uncertainty of the sacredness therefore reflects problematic issues relating to the ontology of things and the uncertain being and differences between the classified thing and the relational thing in relation to museum collections.

The uncertain being: from classified things to relational things

The uncertainty of the sacredness and materiality links with ontological debates about things and beings in at least two directions. First, when the sacred things have been collected and exhibited in modern institutional museums, they have mainly been handled and interacted with as scientific and artistic objects. Those things may not be regarded as a sacred thing or as a sacred person as in local museums. Second, the ordinary thing can also become the sacred thing as case studies discussed in this chapter reveal. As a relational thing, the sacred things that were removed from the original context, in fact, were not disconnected from their original actant-networks but just have not been realised or been visible to the eyes of some observers.

Those relational things have possibly brought the original networks with them and are still distantly entangled with their provenance. This possibility is relevant and useful for understanding the situation of repatriation and requests to return the sacred things as the ancestors. The sacred thing for Isan people is not an object or the material but the sacred

person as explained by animism. Moreover, more intimately, that thing can be relatives or family and the concept of kinship and totemism would then be relevant and meaningful.

This issue is also linked with the debate about returns in the case of indigenous collections and leads to rethinking the uncertain being of the sacred thing as the classified thing in the museum. In this case, the state of co-existence and the uncertain being requires more attention. This situation is also related to the system of classification that is mainly based on pre-quantum science, which is primarily concerned with fixed and mutually exclusive categories. In fact, there are many unsettling histories and memories of ordinary people that I have heard from local museums, which are meaningful and inspiring. Indeed, a few of them have been presented in the national museum-scape and even within the institutional museums, which are usually restricted by conventional typologies and classification.

As museology was established as a science of museums, systematic museums also have been adopted and have altered the cabinets of curiosity to cabinets of science and scientific knowledge. In the formative period, science had classified things and created a division of labour on their subject matter and knowledge (Pickstone, 2000). According to Pickstone, the diversity of science and scientific disciplines has been growing with these fundamental epistemic infrastructures. This result is reflected in modern museums and curatorial practices, which are closely entangled with the production and consumption of scientific knowledge.

When walking into local museums and looking around their collections and displays, those classifications and familiar settings had disappeared and were replaced with different and unfamiliar arrangements. Some visitors felt these settings looked quite messy, untidy, or even chaotic and needed re-arrangement or tidying up. However, this kind of space is actually useful for learning to think otherwise about things and museums, especially in relation to the idea of re-assemblage (Latour, 2009; Harrison, 2013b). Moreover, when looking closely at details, several material things in local museums look similar to several

collections exhibited in national museums and institutional museums but have been exhibited and curated in different ways.

Not only differences in term of identification and stories in exhibition, those things were also different in terms of their sacredness. In the institutional museums where scientific knowledge and curatorial practices play a major role, sacredness is not major concern as much as in the case of local museums. To understand this situation, it is necessary to be concerned with epistemic differences and the co-existence of science, religion, and magic in relation to the sacred things.

Mary Douglas (1966/2002) critiqued the major theories of religion and magic, that to some extent, were developed with an unconscious orientation to Christianity and materialism. In Europe, even though science did not stand opposed to religion and magic anymore, the demarcated space for science, religion, and magic – whether in the name of the secular or the sacred space, in the Isan context, especially for local people, religion e.g., Buddhism, Hinduism, and animism never ever stood opposed to magic and science. Instead, they co-existed and were entangled.

In a different religious context, the word 'thing' or 'สิ่ง' in Isan and also in Thai can be both the material and the non-material. However, it makes more sense with regard to non-material and abstract meanings. In English, this word primarily means the material thing and is involved with intrinsic and certain beings. The material orientation of materialism currently has also been questioned and criticised since arguments about the agency of objects and vibrant matter entered the spotlight (Latour, 2009; Bennett, 2010).

Therefore, the perspective on seeing things as a kind of frame would be relevant and useful as an analytic tool to reinterpret and reassembling things in different ways. In contrast with space and time or the chronotopic frame that has often been limited with chronological alteration, things have often been analysed directly with a lack of alteration. As a way of thinking, it can be said that things have often been limited by permanent materiality rather than uncertain materiality or material alteration.

Substantially, there are two major points about the sacred and religion that will be addressed here. The first point is about seeing religion as a kind of knowledge instead of belief. The second point is about the working definition of 'the sacred' which initially is equivalent to 'the religious'. In the beginning stage of this doctoral study, I started to explore religious objects and this initial definition was then expanded and re-imagined during the research process as the meaning of religion covers knowledge, which also relates to religious experiences and practices. Thus, in this thesis, science, magic and religion potentially can be and will be seen on the same Gaia as different kinds of knowledge or different explanations about the ontology of things.

Not only critical issues about independent things but also about things in time-spaces are important and relevant to museums. As I have shown in earlier chapters, that one thing or the same thing can be framed in different chronotopic frames. Owning to different frames they possibly have been identified and interpreted in different categories. The relational thing is a useful concept that links museums with a relational database (Gosden and Larson, 2007) and it has often been implemented in contemporary museum studies. I identified this key idea from the project *England: analyzing British collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum*.

Moreover, the idea of relational things also resonated with a contemporary social theory, namely, actor-network or actant-rhizome theory. After working with this concept for a while, I realised that many material collections and the gigantic number of things in museum worldwide including local museums are more likely the Big Data of the ancient world and also connected with the contemporary world in so many ways. With this kind of data, there are enormous possibilities to reassemble, re-connect and return them. These include not only returns of material things but returns of people, stories, memories, meanings, knowledge, respect, dignity and so on. These can be possible if things are allowed to classify other things rather than restrictively being the classified things.

In Berlin, for example, collections from Siam, including things from Isan and some areas nowadays called Thailand, have been classified in several state-run museums. The

situation has not happened in one museum but in a network of museums. For instance, the manuscripts are kept in the state library; photographs and sound archives including ethnographic collections which mainly belong to ordinary people are kept at ethnological museums. Some religious statues and objects involved with aesthetics and high culture have been kept and exhibited in the Museum of Asian Art. The case of the Siamese collections is a good example of what seems to me the poetics of differences or material semiotics (Law, 2008).

As a relational thing, the sacred thing is involved with at least three layers of identification: the first is about materiality; the second is with regard to the chronotopic frames, and the third is about sacredness–to be or not to be the sacred thing. Three layers are bound together and involved with 'thing–time–space' in different attributes. The first and second layers have fixed things as the ordinary that has been classified into the chronotopic frames. The third layer is about the sacred 'here and now' or the ordinary 'here and now'. Moreover, the observer would be another variable in this equation. To be or not to be the sacred thing probably is not the quality of the thing itself. However, the sacredness is also involved with the observer's imagination about the sacred.

In an Isan context where several kinds of religion, magic, and science currently co-exist on the same Gaia, the sacred things are possibly facing uncertainty and being uncertain. As an uncertain thing, its identification as a classified thing is likely a kind of chronotopic frame. This frame, in fact, is useful and necessary for communication and as an analytic tool. The vital debate about the identification and classification, therefore, is not about the chosen one or the best system of identification and classification but about linking them together as a navigation or tracking system. Epistemic differences can be linked and dialogued at the knot of time-space or relational things.

Dvaravati Sema found in Northeast Thailand is a good example. This material collection would be able to connect with the prehistoric standing stones as well as with Buddhist Sema in Central Thailand. In terms of geographical space, the Dvaravati Sema is a special form for Isan and also look similar to Dvaravati culture in other areas of Thailand,

especially Central and southern Thailand. These similarities can be interpreted as civilisation from India as well as indigenous characters.

The stone inscription is another ambivalent thing that can be linked with Dvaravati standing stones. Instead of looking backward as in the case of the prehistoric standing stone, the inscription can be seen as a historic stone-board with written language. This is a kind of manuscript made from stone rather than palm-leaf. In the formative years of the national library of Siam, stone inscriptions, palm-leaf manuscripts and traditional books had been assembled from several regional areas to Bangkok for the first national library (Jory, 2000, p. 352).

Instead of classifying things into the chronotopic frames, which are mutually exclusive categories, it would be more relevant and useful to let things be classified and connected by the time-spaces and chronotopic frames. Accordingly, things can be seen as the subject or even person with agency instead of as passive object. This imagination sheds light on different possibilities and perspectives to see and interact with material things. Furthermore, seeing things as the person would be a different way of thinking about epistemic differences in relation to sacredness and enchantment.

As material things can physically exist longer than a human life, they potentially could absorb and record very long-term experiences through their trajectories. The material qualification of things allows them to be a recorder of time-spaces and relationships that things as uncertain beings have been and have analysed and carried out. Allowing things to classify seems to be an appropriate way to know more about these sacred or enchanted things.

Referring to ANT (Latour, 2009), it would be relevant and sensible to be concerned with the agency of material things and let them classify frames and related things instead of being classified restrictively. Given these possibilities, the uncertainty and the uncertain being of the sacred thing could involve at least three relational layers of materiality, identification, and sacredness.

In the layer of materiality, the category of materials that the objects were made of are fundamental data. The category of identification would be able to problematise and reassemble it substantially. The identification and classification rely on language and the conceptual framework, which are uncertain and changeable. The category of the sacredness is also relevant and has to be concerned because of the observer's lens and the uncertain being of relational things related to the process of enchantment or sacralisation.

In the case of the enchanted thing or the ordinary thing that has been enchanted or sacralised, the sacredness, therefore, is uncertain and also of the non-permanent quality, dependent on four conditions: time, space, thing, and observer. In this case, Viveiros De Castro's perspective on perspectivism (1998; 2015) is insightful for elaborating and analysing this museum phenomenon further. As it would be possible not only to see from the perspective of animals but also from the perspective of things as the person or the subject

> Thus self-references such as "people" mean "person", not "member of the human species", and they are personal pronouns registering the point of view of the subject talking, not proper names. To say, then, that animals and spirits are people is to say that they are persons, and to attribute to non-humans the capacities of conscious intentionality and agency, which define the position of the subject. Such capacities are objectified as the soul or spirit with which these non-humans are endowed. Whatever possesses a soul is a subject, and whatever has a soul is capable of having a point of view. Amerindian souls, be they human or animal, are thus indexical categories, cosmological deictics whose analysis calls not so much for an animist psychology or substantialist ontology as for a theory of the sign or a perspectival pragmatics. (Taylor 1993a; 1993b; Viveiros de Castro 1992b) (Viveiros de Castro, 1998, pp. 476)

The existence of sacred things and the sacredness in everyday life of ordinary people reflecting in local museums, therefore, looks different in comparison with the institutional museums. Those things are not scientific evidence or historical archives and have not been identified and classified exclusively and explicitly. The uncertainty of identification and classification turns things to uncertain beings in two directions. On the one hand, they are uncertain because of materiality or the physical characteristics that can be identified differently by different disciplines and lead to things facing multiple identifications. On the other hand, they are an uncertain being because of their epistemic co-existence and ontological entanglement.

Conclusion – Enchantments and the trilemma of science, magic and religion

This chapter has mainly discussed enchantments and ontological entanglements between the sacred and ordinary things. Enchantments, whether referring to religion, magic, or spirits' possession are relevant to understanding the sacred things in local museums as presented through three case studies of ordinary things that became enchanted things–the daily objects belonging to the grand masters of forest monks, palaeontological fossils and mannequins displayed in an exhibition.

The daily objects belonging to the masters have been exhibited and are respected as memorials to the forest monks' masters. At the same time, those are the significant things that required preservation and were kept in an appropriate condition. The museum became a relevant and meaningful solution. Since the memorial museum dedicated to Phra Arjan Mann was established, there have been several museums following this exemplary case that were set up after the masters passed away. The daily objects that once were ordinary became sacralised things because they belonged to the master, who was recognised by his students and many Isan people as a sacred person.

Fossils are a case study reflecting the critical issue about curating beyond the nature/culture divide. In the case of local museums, the fossils have not only been handled as palaeontological or biological specimens. Some of these fossil collections, which had been previously found by monks and local people through dreaming and meditation, have been

excavated archaeologically. Those fossils also involve stories about bad fortune when some people found and possessed them as their private property. Someone was ill and encountered a serious accident for example. Thus, they donated those pieces to the monastery. Based on this case study, the natural specimens and minerals therefore can be linked with the sacred, especially supernatural power. Some kinds of magic and shamanism are also concentrated with ways to release and manipulate this kind of power.

In the Gaia of differences, some material objects, which are displayed in the museum exhibitions, potentially can be enchanted and involved with the sacredness to some extent. One example is the mannequin displayed at an open-air museum in the middle Isan area. Some people have won the lottery or successfully achieved the best fortune or the answer to their desires from the sacred existing there. They then come to worship and return something as an offering or gift to the sacred being, which in this case seems to be a woman spirit. Amulets are also a kind of enchanted thing made from the ordinary that have been enchanted by some kind of sacred power and ritual practice.

These case studies have substantially presented sacredness as not being intrinsic or innate but as uncertain. As relational things, the collections in museums can be linked with the sacred in several ways even those that were initially ordinary or non-sacred things. The uncertainty of the sacredness led me to rethink the identification and classification of the museum collections.

If considering those collections as the relational things, the identification and classification that they link with can be seen as an index or code that is analytically linked with the neighbouring categories rather than a container that separates them from the other categories. Given the potential of data science, an online database of museum collections and digital archives that is dramatically expanded, opportunities and possibilities for research and understanding collections have been enhanced and opened to more analytic and creative findings.

To sum up, this thesis started with an argument about colonialism and the limitations of science and highlighted further concerns with religion and magic in relation to indigenous

collections and museums. However, at this stage, it would be necessary to address the limitation of religion and magic as well as the potential of scientific museology to preserve and conserve material collections as cultural heritage for future generations.

Finally, I would like to conclude this chapter with some troubles about the trilemma of science, religion and magic in relation to enchantments. Sharon Macdonald (2005) points out the dilemma of enchantments in reference to Nazi buildings in Nuremberg. In that case, the original intention to enchant sometimes brought an unexpected result such as haunting or feeling uncomfortable rather than enchanting as expected. Likewise, in cases of Isan museums and collections that link with the sacred, seeing epistemic differences between science, religion and magic are relevant and useful for understanding and working with them. Whether science, magic or religion, there are both potentials and limitations. Moreover, epistemic dogmatism can lead to some troubles or problematic issues.

For instance, within the framework of science's epistemic dogmatism, museums may lack concern about the sacredness and people's respect for sacred things. This can be seen in several institutional museums that adopted scientific and modern approaches, especially national museums and university museums. Here, sacred things have mainly been curated and interpreted as scientific evidence and artistic objects, rather than attending to their earlier provenance as sacred or religious.

Given the epistemic dogmatism of religion, the museum may become the religious space that is redundant to the religious space which already existed. At the same time, the museum space may receive less concern as the complementary space for education, identity expression, safeguarding cultural heritage and alternative activities that it may be unnecessary to link with religion. Moreover, issues about religious differences and the co-existence between people from different religions are crucial and being aware is especially so in the multi-cultural or multi-religious society.

In case of the epistemic dogmatism with magic and less concern about the religious and scientific values of things, several sacred items could be destroyed and used as the sacred

materials for the magical enchantment or sacralisation of amulets. This situation nowadays in Thailand has become an industry involved with strong demand and economic values. The strong values of the sacred materials or sacred elements has led to the sacred things being in demand, targeted for collecting and trading and has thus brought negative effects to cultural heritage.

After a century of modernisation, the Isan area currently has been connected with various parts of the world inside and outside the country by diverse technologies and infrastructures. Local traditions and cults have also been reproduced and circulated through various kinds of media and spread widely as a kind of commodity beyond its limited area to other areas, including the market. These kinds of commercial objects have been in high demand not only for Thai people from other areas across the country but also for interested foreign customers with shared values.

In this situation, museum Gaia potentially could be an alternative way to seeing science, religion and magic as the actor-network or actant-rhizome and dialogues of differences. Substantively, this key point is about people and subjects not only human but also things that were once seen as non-human. This change would include the human that once had been overlooked or treated as the non-human as well.

Chapter 8

Conclusion – local museums, entanglements and returns

This thesis aims to understand local museums in Northeast Thailand and their curatorial practices concerning sacred things. The research questions and major arguments of this research are substantially concerned with problematic relationships between museums, and colonialism and colonial legacies in the contemporary world, particularly relating to knowledge and curatorial practices. The study is framed by post-colonial theory, actor-network theory, and Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope and dialogical approach. The research is qualitative, mainly using multi-sited museography integrated with documentary and visual research.

This thesis is part of a long-term research project that initially began with my curiosity about the dramatically increasing numbers of local museums in Thailand around two decades ago. It was framed in my prior research on case studies of local museums in the countryside of Thailand since 2000, and North Yorkshire, the UK, during 2012–2015. For my PhD research, I selected case studies of local museums and sacred things found in Northeast Thailand because they clearly reflect the colonial relations and influences of colonialism. These significant collections are widely known for their special value and the academic significance that led them to become prestigious collections and targets to be assembled and possessed by private collectors and museums worldwide. Those selective case studies are religious statues, standing stones, palm-leaf manuscripts and burial pottery. Moreover, this thesis is also concerned with the ordinary things that are enchanted or sacralised, such as things that belong to sacred persons, fossils that have stories relating to sacred power and danger, and also some objects displayed in exhibitions, such as mannequins.

In particular, this research examines the influences and legacies of colonialism on museums and related knowledge in the contexts of Thailand and Southeast Asia, especially the Mekong region where Northeast Thailand is located. To do so, it traces trajectories and connected histories of sacred things found in the Isan region and investigates how they

have been collected, curated and exhibited – similarly, differently or relationally, in various kinds of museums inside and outside the local area.

This concluding chapter consists of three parts. The first compiles the major arguments of this thesis – museum entanglements and entangled museums. The second part presents a methodological reflection from Isan museums. The final part addresses the possibilities for further research in museum studies particularly regarding debates about returns.

Museum entanglements and entangled museums

Museum entanglements and entangled museums are the focus of the major arguments and core ideas of this thesis. This set of arguments has been analysed in relation to time, space and things as illustrated in the three main sections of research findings: [1] time-space and connected histories of sacred things; [2] the sacred, museum Gaia and dialogic practices; and [3] enchanting the ordinary, relational things and uncertain being. These topics are convergent with aiming to think and imagine beyond dichotomised concepts and conventional classifications in relation to museums, things and knowledge. In addition, this thesis also attempts to explore alternatives and possibilities to see and work beyond those conventional classifications and the restricted boundary of categories in museums.

This set of arguments is concerned with debates about the differences and co-existence of 'indigenous and non-indigenous museums' and 'Western and non-Western museums' — which have been one of the major explanations about local museums and community museums in Thailand and non-Western countries (Kreps, 2003; 2008). Instead of seeing local museums exclusively as indigenous or non-Western museums, this thesis proposed seeing local museums in two different ways – as 'museum entanglements' with prior museums that collected and exhibited the same collections; and as 'entangled museums' that involved both indigenous and non-indigenous knowledge and curatorial practices.

As *museum entanglements*, this thesis illustrated that local museums are not subsequent or underdeveloped museums in comparison with the earlier established national museums or institutional museums. In fact, they can be seen as local practices developed in response to the colonialism and nationalism associated with the institutional museums

that collected and exhibited the same material collections. This argument was examined and discussed further in the three following chapters.

The third chapter basically looks at local museums as a new museum movement in Thailand. It presented the voices of local museums and museum amateurs not only from Northeast Thailand but also from other provincial areas of the country. Local museum amateurs explained the circumstances that led to them becoming inspired and enthused in museum affairs before deciding to make their own museums. Their reasons and experiences shed light on the complex relationships between local museums and institutional museums, particularly national museums that accumulated and exhibited collections from local areas. Several local museums reflected a sense of loss and feeling of being unrecognised in Thai history and society, which primarily centred on Thai-ness and Thais. At the same time, their own museums have also fulfilled local needs and desires particularly with regard to self-recognition, expression of cultural identities and protection of their local heritage – which in several cases has also been recognised as an important part of the national heritage.

While looking back to the history of museums through the lens of museum entanglements, it became evident that there actually had been a variety of links and interactions between national museums and local museums especially through direct experiences of museum practitioners (e.g. encounters or interactions in community villages, or historical and archaeological sites in local areas). These included several concrete programmes and initiatives, which are the results of the government's cultural policies. These programmes were sometimes linked with international agencies, such as UNESCO and associated organisations.

In addition, concrete modernity was another key factor relating to the establishment of local museums in the countryside and provincial areas of Thailand. There were massive and rapid changes from rural life to modern life. The decline and change of natural environments and cultural landscapes, which highly affected the everyday life of local

people, led some to decide to preserve vanishing things and record these significant changes in local areas.

In relation to sacred things, several museum founders and practitioners often mentioned outsiders – especially the foreigners, who came to villages and asked about buying old things, particularly religious artefacts. Moreover, there were stories about illegal excavations and smuggling of ancient collections founded in local areas, which were spotted in daily newspapers and other media. Those spectacles were well-known as valuable collections and included highly sought acquisitions such as Ban Chiang's prehistoric pottery, Dvaravati standing stones, and Khmer statues. This kind of story had been heard frequently and cited as the main reason why museum amateurs or local curators have collected things and set up their own museums.

Since the early stages of the colonial period in Southeast Asia around a century ago, Siam had been modernised, and increasingly adopted and cultivated modern knowledge and technologies. In the field of museums, and especially in the case of royal museums, which later became Thai national museums, history, archaeology and art history have been established alongside and played a major role in the museum field. Until recent decades, anthropology, particularly social and cultural anthropology, proposes different perspectives and alternative meanings to local museums and material things found locally.

Ethnographic approaches and long-term intensive fieldwork fulfilled crucial aspects that had been overlooked by prior disciplines. In particular, considerable attention was paid to ordinary people and their experiences, social memories, locality, cultural diversity, and so on. In Thailand, local museums and anthropology, particularly based at the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (SAC), have been actively involved in engagements and have worked together for more than a couple of decades. The SAC researchers have continually and substantially contributed to an empathetic understanding of local museums and museum amateurs.

Furthermore, museum entanglements can also be seen in the Isan region as presented in the fourth chapter – which illustrated the dynamics and diversity of museums in Northeast

Thailand and explored interactions and entanglements of different kinds of museums in the region. These diversities particularly have been influenced by the structural conditions or national factors such as cultural policies, developmental planning and governance, and other factors on a larger scale, especially globalisation and mass tourism.

Although Northeast Thailand has been affected by the same national policy as other regions of the country, the region also possessed specific characteristics, particularly related to the cultural diversity and colonial politics of the middle Mekong region. Several pioneering local museums developed in the Isan region in addition to the new museum movements in Thailand. They raised further concerns about the sense of belonging to locality and cultivating a strong intention to preserve material things along with the land, for the next generations. These collections were not only assembled and preserved as examples of national heritage but have also been recognised as forms of local heritage presenting local identities and the dignity of local people. There are several pioneering local museums located in this area such as Wat Mahachai Museum, Wat Phrathat Phanom Museum and Ku Santarat Local Museum. Another related case is Mahaweravong National Museum, which was initially a monastery museum and then donated to the government where it became a branch of the Thai national museums.

As illustrated, local museums have not been isolated but have interacted and become entangled with national museums and several academic disciplines, particularly in the process of museum formation and research. The situations of museum entanglements, therefore, led local museums to be entangled museums rather than exclusively indigenous museums. Basically, this argument did not overlook the existence of indigenous curation and local knowledge but attempted to concentrate on epistemic co-existence and dialogues between different kinds of knowledge and cultural differences from both inside and outside the local area.

The fifth chapter illustrates that since sacred things were found in local areas, they have been collected and exhibited in different museum-scapes and chronotopic frames. The chapter concentrates on aspects of time and the past and examines problematic

relationships between historical narratives and colonialism. It traces three case studies of Ban Chiang's prehistoric pottery, Fa Daed Song Yang's Dvaravati standing stones, and Ku Santarat's Khmer statues, which have been exhibited in the Thai national museum-scape and also the global museum-scape. Although the colonial empires in the Mekong region and Southeast Asia are in the past, its influences and legacies still remain in knowledge and curatorial practices in several institutional museums in Thailand. The influences of colonialism and nationalism can be seen through the conventional identifications and classifications of local collections, such as those of prehistoric Thailand, Dvaravati culture and Lopburi art.

Ban Chiang's painted potteries were known as spectacular evidence of the earliest sites of the prehistoric settlements found in Thailand and mainland Southeast Asia. At the initial stage when the site was found in the mid-70s, the collections had been scientifically dated with a stunning number at around 5,600 years BE. This spectacular discovery dramatically raised tremendous interest in and concerns about material collections and research on prehistoric archaeology in this area. Moreover, the archaeological discovery at Ban Ching is also significant for Thai evolutionary history as it pushes the edge of Thai history to the prehistoric period. At the same time, it is also significant for Isan history – a region which had once been underestimated as the land without such a long history and civilisation.

In the case of the Dvaravati standing stone or *Sema* (เสมา in Thai), these collections have been linked with Buddhism and the Dvaravati culture found in Central and southern Thailand. However, there is recent archaeological research addressing both the uniqueness and differences of Isan Dvaravati and Dvaravati collections found in other areas of Thailand. Moreover, the standing stone is the figure that is different from other regions. It can be imagined relationally from the prehistoric megalith and linked with other prehistoric sites in Isan areas.

From a different angle, Dvaravati *Sema* perhaps can be seen as entanglements of the prehistoric culture and Buddhism, especially Mahayana Buddhism. Likewise, the styles of pictures from Buddha Jatakas crafted on the stone also reflect entanglements between

Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism, which are generally known as the most influential and widely held forms of Buddhism in the land.

Ethnicity is another problematic issue relating to colonialism and its legacies in Northeast Thailand. For instance, Mon, as an ethnic group, has not been recognised explicitly in the Thai national museum-scape nor has their influence or strong relationships with Dvaravati culture. Another example is the word 'Lopburi', which has often been used as the equivalent to the word 'Khmer' in Thai national museums. Some literature addressed the term 'Lopburi Art' with a blanket gloss that this means the 'Khmer Art' found in Thailand. One example is the Khmer statues found at Ku Santarat, Mahasarakham Province. In the Thai national museum-scape, the statues have been classified as belonging to the Lopburi period. They were found in the area of Arokaya Sala, which was the shelter and hospital built for travellers in the ancient Khmer Kingdom.

To some extent, a possible reason why the term 'Lopburi' would seem more applicable than 'Khmer' for the Thai national museums may link to colonial politics, especially between Siam and France, and then between Thailand and Cambodia after the Second World War. They had been in conflict and negotiations took place about the land on both sides of the Mekong River, especially over the Isan area. In fact, several historical sites and archaeological evidence found in the Isan region are very similar and connected to those found on the opposite side of the river. Politically, this can be a sensitive issue and a matter of legitimacy for the French empire to claim land on the right side of Mekong River, including the Isan area.

Nowadays, the Isan area has been a part of Thailand for a century and the land on the left riverside that had been French colonies is independently governed as Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. However, to some extent, colonialism and tension, especially about the national boundary and cultural heritage in relation to the colonial period, are also inherited by Thailand and neighbouring countries in the name of nationalism.

In the museum field, the establishment of royal museums in Siam, which later became the Thai national museums, can be seen in part as a civilising project and the presentation of

the ancient past and civilisations of the new nation in order to negotiate with European colonial power and colonialism. In the national museum-scape, a number of material things from Northeast Thailand and other areas of Thailand have been collected and kept as national treasures and heritage. Whether in the central National Museum, Bangkok, or the provincial branches, those collections have been exhibited in common through the chronotopic frame of Thai history, which seems to be an evolutionary or linear, single, progressive history. In the formative years of the central National Museum in Bangkok, the museum classified and exhibited collections into the following major periods: Prehistoric, Dvaravati, Srivichai, Lopburi, Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, and Rattanakosin. This conventional frame still remains and is used and cited, although there are criticisms and questions about its appropriateness from the non-governmental academia and intellectual media.

In the global museum-scape, these collections have been described or labelled as sacred; however, practically, they have not been a part of sacred ritual nor have they been interacted with as sacred things. In institutional museums, they have often been identified as religious objects, but they are mainly interacted with and handled as scientific or artistic objects. These conventional identifications, in general, can be seen when they are categorised and exhibited in institutional or professional museums in Europe and elsewhere.

Some examples are the Ban Chiang's pottery and Dvaravati Sema at the British Museum; Ban Chiang's pottery at the Museum of Asian Art, Dahlem; and repatriations of Narai Lintel from the Chicago Art Museum to the Phanomrung Temple, Buriram province. Although those Isan things were described for their sacredness, in practice, they have never been interacted with as sacred things. The sacredness described seems to be a past sacredness or created through historical narratives rather than a present sacredness.

As well as the academic mission of collecting, keeping and preserving, museum collections are necessary for the production of knowledge. Participation and collaboration with source communities are necessary and required in practice. For some local people, encounters and interactions with national museums and collectors, especially foreigners, cultivated a

sense of loss and concerns about their local heritage. They then started to collect things and set up their local museum. At the same time, interactions and dialogues with national museums and modern knowledge also affect those local museums and lead them to become entangled museums instead of exclusively indigenous museums.

As *entangled museums*, there are several kinds of knowledge associated with local museums. To understand this complexity in relation to the sacred, I found the ideas of Gaia and presentness to be insightful. One of the significant differences between institutional museums and local museums in relation to sacred things concerns the past or the present sacredness, and the concrete practices of curation. Museum entanglements between local museums and prior museums, especially national museums, in fact, led local museums to become entangled museums that are composed of and touched by both indigenous and modern curatorial practices. These issues have been discussed in the sixth chapter about the sacred, museum Gaia and dialogical practices.

Based on Isan case studies, local museums can be seen in at least two different ways. They can be understood as part of a museum movement and entanglements with institutional museums. Moreover, they can be understood as dialogical practices that ordinary people use to reply to and negotiate difficult situations and critical changes in their lives, especially in local contexts. These situations can be seen through material things, particularly the striking religious artefacts.

The academic and artistic values of spectacular things frequently made them highly attractive to, and in demand from, museums and collectors. The high demand for these prestigious collections caused trading or even trafficking them outside of their original locations. On the entangled side, local people, especially cultural leaders and the older generation, were also unable to ignore this unpleasant situation and attempted to protect these collections and keep them with the land.

Analytically, the sixth chapter examines the aspect of space in relation to time and things. Space can be seen in different way, that is, as Gaia (Latour, 2016) or a complex network of differences. This chapter attempted to illustrate how the ideas of Gaia and presentness

are useful for understanding sacredness in the museum space. This chronotopic aspect would be one of the differences between curating the sacred in the museum space of institutional museums and local museums.

In the case of Buddha relics, which are constantly deserving of respect by Buddhists, the relics have not been kept in the museum but in the stupa. Local museums located in the monastery function as the place for keeping and displaying the material things that people worship or offer to the Buddha relics. Phrathat Phanom Museum is one specific example. Collections and stories in the museum mainly relate to relics of the Buddha and the stupa. These are not only things that people donated as a form of merit-making and worshipping; there are also some pieces of rock or objects that people returned to the monastery for an unusual reason. Those people brought those things from the site after the stupa collapsed in 1975. Since then, they had encountered bad fortune and illness and could no longer keep those things. Finally, they returned them to the monastery where they were kept and displayed at the monastery museum.

Muang Champasri Museum is another local museum located in the area where Buddha relics were found and, sooner or later, a stupa would be constructed for housing the relics. In this case, the museum mainly presents stories about the Buddha relics found here in relation to the relics found in India, particularly those kept at the Sanchi stupa. In addition, the museum also presents the story of the astonishing discovery of Buddha relics in Nadun District in the mid-1970s. There is a significant discussion of the persistent efforts of local people to construct the stupa and keep the Buddha relics within this area's provenance.

The collection of palm-leaf manuscripts is a case study that significantly reflected the character of entangled museums. The collection of palm-leaf manuscripts at Wat Tha Muang, Roi et Province has been catalogued, digitised and preserved by local practitioners in collaboration with a working group of researchers and archivists from the Institute for Isan Art and Culture, Mahasarasham University. This case is only one of several cases in Isan areas where this academic institution is working with local museums and

communities. The institution works continually to set up an online database of palm-leaf manuscripts found in Northeast Thailand. These manuscripts do not function as they did in the pre-modern past and are currently suffering from decay and neglect. Modern techniques and scientific treatments, in this case, help local communities and Buddhist monasteries to preserve and maintain their manuscripts collections in better conditions for longer.

In the case of religious statues, such as the Khmer statues, these have been collected and exhibited in several institutional museums as archaeological and artistic collections. In the case of local museums, they certainly have been engaged with in different ways. For local people, the statues are most likely worthy of respect and worship not only as sacred things but as sacred persons and even relatives. As a sacred person, a dialogue or communication can be held with those sacred things. Local people sometimes ask them for good fortune, help and support both emotional and practical. This includes asking for permission to do something or interact with them, and also apologies for unpleasant manners and so on. Curating the sacred therefore not only involves scientific practices, which are mainly concentrated on materiality and iconography, but also dialogical practices with the sacred as a person or a communicative being.

In social science, religion has often been defined in terms of belief that is essentially different and often stands in opposition to knowledge, especially scientific knowledge. According to case studies of Isan museums, this situation seems to be different. The co-existence of several religions and related knowledge, notably indigenous knowledge, seem to be a fact of local life. To some extent, this thesis, therefore, attempts to see religion as a kind of knowledge or a way of seeing and thinking that is closely related with people's experiences and practices, especially dialogic practices with the sacred. The museum space of local museums, therefore, looks like Gaia or a rhizome of differences where different knowledge and agencies co-existed, dialogued and became entangled as a part of museum practices.

The seventh chapter, which is the last part of the research findings looked at the ordinary things that sometimes became enchanted things. This chapter is concerned with relational things and the ontologies of sacredness. In addition, it also discussed issues about uncertain beings and ontological entanglements between the sacred and the ordinary.

Things, similar to time and space, can be seen as a kind of frame and something also entangled with time and space. In practice, seeing space and time as a kind of frame seems much easier than seeing things in the same way. This is particularly the case for someone who has an orientation to seeing things as material and placing a high emphasis on materiality or materialism. This analytical limitation is still influential as a colonial legacy in modern knowledge, especially relating to museum collections so far. In relation to science, this is possible because pre-quantum science primarily examined things as intrinsic and absolutely measurable beings. This fundamental understanding may have become a major reason why ontological debates matter in the academic world today. In this case, the basic ideas of quantum physics, such as the quantum state, uncertain beings and entanglements, are useful and applicable as a relevant science for sensitively dealing with complexity and uncertainty.

In relation to sacred things, this thesis argues that sacredness, in fact, is not intrinsic and permanent but relational and uncertain. With some kinds of enchantment and sacred power (e.g. magic, spirits and rituals), some ordinary things can possibly be enchanted and transformed to be sacred things. For instance, the daily objects that belonged to the charismatic monks; palaeontological fossils which are associated with stories about sacred power and danger; and the mannequins displayed in an open-air museum, which perhaps involve some spirits.

In the Isan context, it seems to me that sacred things and their sacredness actually are not only defined by 'what they are' but also by 'what they do' or 'can do'. In this sense, things are sacred because they potentially can bring good or bad fortune into human life. Fear of the sacred power and its negative effects, therefore, leads to several kinds of practices to care and deal with the sacred. In particular, these are dialogical practices to

communicate with the sacred – which possibly did not exist in the past but do in the present, in the Gaia that we live in.

The sacred power that sometimes involves spirit possession as in the case of the mannequin is one example. This female mannequin was displayed at an open-air museum and became an enchanted thing for some local people as someone gained good fortune from her after asking to win the lottery. It is unnecessary, therefore, to link sacredness with religion. Spirits, magic and other kinds of sacred power potentially may enchant or entangle some material things with the sacred.

The case studies of enchanted things can lead to greater understanding about the Gaia of differences and the epistemic co-existence of science, magic and religion in relation to local museums. Moreover, the uncertainty of sacredness also reflects greater understanding about the being or existence of things as they are relational and uncertain beings rather than intrinsic and permanent beings.

As relational things, sacredness involves at least four conditions: time, space, thing and observer, as I have noted in the research findings. The observer has often been overlooked because of their invisibility, and this issue could be the major contribution of quantum physics, which points out how observers and their measurements do affect the things they observe and measure (Barad, 2007). This significant finding reminds me to rethink identifications and chronotopic frames of things used in the institutional museums that were discussed in the fifth chapter.

In addition to sacredness, which can be relational and uncertain, the identifications and classifications of the sacred thing, in fact, can be relational and uncertain as well. The ontological debates and the idea of ontological entanglements are productive in this case and shed light in a different way on the analysis of those museum collections beyond the fixed box or mutually exclusive category. This is resonant with the key idea of re-assemblage and material semiotics (Law, 2008), which has been only infrequently implemented and experimented with, in practice, in Thailand.

Lastly, this chapter concluded with the problematic issue of the trilemma of science, magic and religion especially in the case of epistemic dogmatism whether in science, magic or religion. The limitations and troubles of epistemic dogmatism possibly reflect the significances of the dialogical approach and dialogues of differences.

Relational museography: a methodological reflection from Isan museums

In the beginning stage, this thesis was methodologically navigated by the idea of multi-sited museography, which in the end could be termed according to its outcome as 'relational museography'. In between both terms based on the case studies of Isan museums, there are some reflections and lessons to address in further discussions and experiments on research methodology in contemporary museum studies, and relational museology in particular.

Although this thesis focuses primarily on local museums in Northeast Thailand, it is also entangled and in dialogue with local museums in other regions of Thailand and in North Yorkshire, UK, in several ways. In this section, I would like to reflect on how museums from different sites link together and illuminate alternative ways or solutions for each other. How do those local museums guide me to a long term and unexpected journey through different times and places and various kinds of museums? How has this methodological experiment been made? And what lessons are learned through the research process, which is actually longer than my postgraduate years?

In 2000, I conducted qualitative research in two local museums in Central Thailand – Wat Muang Folk Museum, Rajaburi province and Ban Kao Yee San Museum, Samutsongkram province. Both museums at that time were well-known as pioneering examples of local museums in Thailand. This research examined the dynamics and meanings of local museums as place-based museums and people's cultural practices in contemporary Thailand. The research project finished in 2003 but raised several questions about the emergence and existence of local museums in other rural areas of Thailand, especially in relation to the consequences of modernity, globalisation and identity politics.

During 2003–2008, I worked as a full-time researcher with the Research and Development Project on Local Museums. The project was initiated and run by the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (SAC) in Bangkok. With the SAC team, I undertook field surveys of local museums throughout the country and visited about 300 museums. The museum surveys made strategic routes across all regions of the country and aimed to understand local museums in a panoramic context in order to network and set up an online database of local museums in Thailand.

I had also observed collaborative work between the SAC researchers and local museums in various activities such as museum ethnography, curating exhibitions, workshops, and training about basic knowledge for museum work and curatorial practices. Research experiences with this project illuminated several facts that were hidden in the shadow of major explanations about museums and local museums in Thailand. These local museums also generated several questions and my curiosity about museum diversity and differences in curatorial practices in museums, especially in other countries.

In my view, field surveys and setting up the museum database engaged substantially with a methodological debate in sociology at that time about the great divide between quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The key idea that I had in mind during that project had to do with conducting 'a qualitative survey' about the diversity of museums in Thailand and building a database of local museums, the number of which should have been countable but was then unknown.

Furthermore, the SAC also aims to support and work collaboratively with local museums not only to produce a few case studies of museum ethnography but also to collaborate with a network and a community of museum practices. Field surveys and the museum database potentially can fulfil this mission and provide an epistemic infrastructure for further research and academic activities (e.g. local museum festivals, collaborative works with some local museums, research and publications on specific topics, and so on).

In 2003, although the keyword 'Big Data' was little known in Thailand, especially in the social sciences, this project also had been shared and was inspired by the same basic idea

that is currently widely known as data science. In the case of museums, this is not only about contemporary Big Data but also about the ancient Big Data that is recorded in the gigantic numbers of material things in museums worldwide; increasingly, it is becoming digital archives, available online.

Since 2012 my journey in museum studies had turned to 'the West' in my epistemic navigation of that time, when I started my postgraduate study at the University of York, UK. I started getting to know more than a dozen local museums in North Yorkshire and doing an MA by research on two case studies of local museums there: the Ryedale Folk Museum and the Beck Isle Museum of Rural Life. Both museums led me to substantially rethink the dichotomised concepts of 'indigenous museums' and 'non-Western museums' and reminded me that it may be unnecessary to restrict my focus on local curatorial models of museums to the 'the East' or to non-Western countries.

While in dialogue with local museums in North Yorkshire, especially about sacred objects or collections that related to religion, particularly Christianity, magic and witchcraft, I decided to focus my PhD thesis on sacred objects in local museums in Northeast Thailand in comparison with local museums in the northern countryside of England, as I had completed my MA thesis (by research) in this area ('Exhibiting the countryside: a post-colonial study of museums in North Yorkshire').

Similar to Isan, North Yorkshire is an entangled area, as the countryside in northern England is also known as an industrial area. Local museums are invisibly situated in the grey area of three disciplines: sociology, anthropology and museology, which could potentially capture or be concerned with this phenomenon but in fact, have largely overlooked it.

There are several gaps and significant stories hiding in the shadow of the conventional division of academic labours; local museums in North Yorkshire are good examples. In the UK, sociology had mainly focused on urban areas and urbanisation. In contrast, sociology and anthropology in Thailand had a strong intention to explore rural resistance as a response to modernity, development and industrialisation.

In the case of anthropology in the UK, the discipline primarily had strong interests and research traditions in other cultures and indigenous people outside Europe. This is in addition to museum anthropology, which has been mainly concerned with indigenous museums and local or community museums in non-Western countries. Thus, some significant differences between Western and non-Western museums seem precisely visible.

In the case of museology, until recently the discipline has mainly concentrated on institutional museums where people's participation and social engagements have become a critical agenda since the effective movement known as the new museology. This is one of the significant lessons that I learned from local museums in North Yorkshire and then became more concerned with the invisible things eclipsed in the shadow of major explanations or mainstream knowledge (Sassen, 2014).

Post-colonial museum studies and strong concerns about small-scale, local, and community museums are also resonant with increasing concerns in the academic field about folk museums, volunteer-run museums and micro museums in the UK (Yates, 2010; Candlin, 2013). According to my MA research at the University of York during 2012–2013, local museums were constructed earlier than the establishment of academic works concerning them for several decades. This is a surprising fact, and its explanation is to do with unintended consequences owing to the division of academic labour and the influence of colonialism in museum studies.

Although this thesis is mainly about local museums in Northeast Thailand, it has actually been written in the light of inspiration from various sources over several years of my study in Europe. Experiences with the diversity and differences of museums and their contexts were significant and influential for this thesis. Here I would like to briefly address how these experiences and contexts lead to possibilities for further research in museum studies, particularly those situated in the relational contexts of Southeast Asia and Europe.

In winter 2015, following my supervisor, I transferred my PhD study to Humboldt University, Berlin – the capital city of Germany. This location seemingly had no direct links to the local museums that I planned to study. However, this assumption was entirely undermined on the first day that I arrived in Berlin. While waiting for my supervisor at the ethnological museum, Dahlem, I walked around and unexpectedly met pottery, sculpture and manuscripts, familiar to me from Thailand, at the Museum of Asian Art and the Ethnological Museum. When I visited the ethnological museum again and saw an exhibition about the Golden Triangle, I realised that several exhibited collections had been collected and brought from Northern Thailand. Soon after, those museums were closed down and preparations were made to move and re-exhibit them as part of the Humboldt Forum in the city centre of Berlin.

The unexpected encounter with things from Isan and other areas of Thailand at the Ethnological Museum and Museum of Asian Art at Dahlem raised several questions – not about 'where' they came from but how and why, as well as from whom they came. This experience pointedly reminded me about the similar setting of some collections from Northeast Thailand in the British Museum and some university museums in the UK, which I have discussed in earlier chapters. All of these are the contexts or locations that this research had been situated in and developed from.

Over almost three years, this thesis has been written in Berlin surrounded by a variety of striking museums and an active academic atmosphere, which certainly influenced this thesis in several ways, especially the inspiring dialogues and debates about post-colonial critiques in museum studies and curatorial practices particularly in Europe; cultural diversity and differences in relation to institutional museums, especially ethnographic and ethnological museums; and also concerning museums as future makers and change agents in the contemporary world.

In the last phase of my writing, I have been asking myself what differences I have seen in contemporary museum studies from the location of Isan museums. The problematic relationships between museums and colonialism, which is the departure point of this thesis,

still exist as critical and difficult debates in the museum field and it may be that they are unable to be sorted out easily. Particularly in the case of large-scale museums that collected and exhibited material collections from the former colonies, this is because those museums were rooted and grew upon the soil of colonialism and colonial politics and thereby deeply absorbed the influences of colonialism and its legacies.

I have often felt uncomfortable and deeply sad while looking closely into the chronotopic geometry of colonialism inside and outside the museums because of the fact of the large and deep impacts, which colonialism and colonial politics had on local or indigenous people. There are many concrete stories of suffering and traumatic memories, especially of ordinary people. Owing to this fact, I therefore highly appreciated the relentless efforts of pioneering local museums and museum amateurs, who were dedicated to museum works and attempted to resist the power of private and museum collectors who felt entitled to collect and possess material things from the local area. In different ways, several local museums tried to collect and preserve local collections in their homelands and communities, and attempted to present and speak about those things for themselves in their museums. The practices of local museums, both consciously and unconsciously, have contributed towards the decolonisation of museums and attempted to detach themselves from colonialism and colonial legacies.

To travel in this direction, it is necessary to continually decolonise museum practices and knowledge, especially ones which are the epistemic infrastructure of using/reusing and making/re-making in the process of producing and consuming knowledge. In the shadow of the mainstream knowledge that is influenced by colonialism and nationalism, there are several substantive things have been eclipsed and some lessons can be learned from the difficult times of the colonial period as the following examples show.

Deep colonialism and the limitations of knowledge, especially epistemic differences relating to time, space, and things, which I have discussed in this thesis, are still influential. These colonial limitations sometimes have been unconsciously reproduced through post-colonial exhibitions and curatorial practices. For this reason, the process of

decolonisation and effective practices to decolonise museums, collections and knowledge are necessary and require more sensitive attention.

These epistemic differences and their co-existence also lead to questions about the ontologies and entanglements of museums and things. At the same time, they also potentially connect the old collections with new possibilities and perspectives. In more concrete case studies and specific areas, in the shadow of colonialism and nationalism, including methodological nationalism, there are several invisible facts and visible myths to be examined and reconsidered.

Furthermore, local museums and the small-scale museums once known as 'non-Western museums' in the Western countries have also often been overlooked in museology and museum studies as well. There are limitations to dichotomising concepts of Western and non-Western museums such as indigenous and non-indigenous museums, and seeing the Western museums as non-indigenous museums and seeing non-Western museums exclusively as indigenous museums.

As an analytic tool, the dichotomised concept cannot reflect the diversity of museums and museum entanglements — especially after the colonial period, and in the case of the countries that had been involved with colonial relations, such as several Southeast Asian countries. Likewise, the institutional museums and large-scale museums in Southeast Asia were mainly the active players in the colonial context and were strongly influenced by colonialism and also nationalism.

In the more specific case of Siam, or Thailand nowadays, there are strong feelings of pride that the country was not colonised by Europe. While looking closely into the global museum-scape, it is apparent that Siamese collections have not been handled differently from other colonial collections especially insofar as ordinary Siamese people, who were directly related to those collections, have been unknown, unrecognised and regarded as less concerned. Similar to collections from neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia, those collections have often been exhibited in the shadow of the great civilisations, especially Indian and Chinese civilisation. This is why museum diversity and issues of cultural

diversity and differences in relation to museum knowledge and curatorial practices are meaningful and relevant to contemporary museum studies.

Regarding practices to decolonise ethnographic museums and national museums since the beginning of the post-colonial period, there are significant differences between those museums in the countries that had been colonisers, and the colonised. In the case of Southeast Asia, there are several critical issues that would be of concern, especially about different contexts relating to nationalism and cultural diversity. Some of those museums have possibly been decolonised and have increasingly implemented new museology and the ethnographic approach as well as having initiated some constructive programmes and exhibitions concerning social engagements, cultural diversity and marginal people.

In relation to colonial knowledge and epistemic infrastructure, which appeared in the concrete forms of language, words and analytic tools, especially the conventional identifications and classifications, their potentials and limitations would be of concern and examined in their totality. In this case, relational museography and analytical museology would be relevant and useful for sorting out colonial legacies in knowledge and epistemic infrastructure.

Although post-colonial practices and the process of museums' decolonisation have been implemented for a long while, to achieve satisfactory results still requires relentless efforts and attention. Ordinary people and their stories are still often overlooked and silent in the museum space, especially in the grand museums or national museums. The post-colonial tasks may require not only critical museum studies, but also undertaking creative projects or innovative experiments and collaborative works on museum exhibitions and curatorial practices.

Returns – the possibilities for further research in museum studies

Museum studies seem to me a lively academic area in the contemporary world. As well as the high rate of growth and dynamics of critical museum studies, particularly those relating to post-colonial criticism, the dynamics and change in museums and curatorial practices have also reached a point of dramatic alteration and transformation. The

possibilities for future research, therefore, can be enormous, especially when realising what has been eclipsed in the shadow of colonialism and nationalism on both sides of colonial relations and in between. However, finally, I would like to leave this thesis with some possibilities for further research in relation to the debate about returns (Clifford, 2013), particularly those relating to Southeast Asia, which is my current location and research interest.

Colonialism, in fact, was not the universal situation in every part of the world, and even occurred in the same periods of time with different actors and localities marking differences in colonial relations and histories. For instance, case studies of Isan museums, reflected complex relationships between Isan and Thailand, and also those with Southeast Asia, Asia and Europe. In the case of Southeast Asia, colonialism and its impacts on museums have mainly been addressed and examined restrictively from the opposing sides of the coloniser and the colonised, or the European and indigenous people.

As Southeast Asian countries have been undergoing decolonisation for several decades, some of the national museums there, to some extent, have also been transformed, reassembled and re-interpreted in the new political contexts. The significant changes in national museums and the museum-scape in Southeast Asia require more research and understanding as well – particularly through the lens of museum entanglements and entangled museums. As a specific case, Thailand or Siam has often been proud of the fact that the country was not colonised by Europe. However, stories and things in museums have argued against this national pride in several ways. The strong influences of European colonialism, internal colonisation and colonial bias in relation to the neighbouring countries, therefore, could be critiqued, reflected upon and also changed in praxis.

Nowadays, the debate about returns and repatriations is immensely critical, especially while this difficult situation is increasingly involved with national and international politics. However, it seems to me that the current debates and concerns about repatriation sometimes are more likely limited to material returns. There are not only

material things to be considered in the case of potential returns, but also meanings, values, dignity, respect and so on. The intangible aspects, creative solutions, and differences in term of actors, stories, voices and dialogical practices require more attention and research in order to cultivate more empathetic understanding, shared lessons and constructive engagements with the source communities and persons.

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