About Debate 4 | Museum Charges: Curating Spiritual Presences

The DCNtR Debate No. 4 *Museum Charges: Curating Spiritual Presences* focuses on the ethical, methodological, and epistemological challenges in exhibiting and curating sacred or spiritually charged artefacts. We define the latter as artefacts used in religious rituals, possessing a sacred aura, but also epitomizing key historical events, cultural memory, and identity claims (Stengs 2014) for a certain collectivity. The transition or the "changes that occur in the perceived value or meaning" (Svašek 2012: 3) of these artefacts when they spatially transit from their ritual and commemorative contexts to museum collections and temporary exhibitions often stirs tensions, misunderstandings, or ethical conundrums between museum practitioners, scholars, and the collectivity that claims the artefacts' spiritual charges. What does it mean working with highly charged artefacts, interpreting their meaning and making it accessible to an audience whilst accounting for their agency and respecting or collaborating with their stakeholders?

In line with other scholars (Bielo and Hayes 2024; Wijnia and Bielo 2025; Gillson, 2024), this *Debate* series thematizes how curatorial work enables a more nuanced and reflexive approach to ethnographic research conducted in both the anthropology of religion and the anthropology of heritage and museums. Curatorial work sharpens self-reflexivity about researchers' positionalities and ethical engagement with their research collaborators. Curating spiritually charged artifacts means also curating the intersubjective relationships established during fieldwork. It reviews considerations and assumptions about museums and spiritually charged artifacts that are often "disincarnated" and "abstract" in response to academic scientific requirements. As Emma Martin (2025: 268) provocatively suggests in her review of the edited book by Yunci Cai, *The Museum in Asia*, what could happen if museum and heritage scholars dialogue with museum practitioners—who are at "the

coal face" with developing and negotiating curatorial practices?

This series of *Dialogues* responds to this provocation by offering a platform for reciprocal support between academics and museum and heritage practitioners in their common efforts to work with spiritually charged artefacts. While museum practitioners might further refine their practices based on critical aspects that emerged from ethnographic research, academic anthropologists can be enriched by museum practitioners' reflexivity, creative processes, and practical limitations. Stemming from a series of online workshops hosted by the Cluster Anthropology Advancements at Palacký University Olomouc at the end of October 2025, the eight contributions from anthropologists, museum curators, heritage sector workers, independent curators, and visual artists, who have recently finalised a curatorial project or are designing a preliminary curatorial idea with spiritually charged artefacts, collectively reflect on the challenges faced.

The debate is edited by Valentina Gamberi (former MSCA-CZ Fellow, Palacký University Olomouc)