Monika Arnez

Afterwards

The Anthropologist as Curator between ‘Do No Harm’ and Immersion

Prelude

Imagine an empty hallway of a Czech university building. I am standing in front of two neatly packaged keris, double-edged daggers with wavy blades, widespread across the Malay world, waiting to be analysed in a material culture lab as part of a research project I was involved in. The next steps would be to find out more about these two artefacts, including their estimated age, and to complement the information that the Museum of Religion already had about them.

How to decide? Should I open the package and hand the keris over to Michal, a colleague working in the department’s material culture laboratory, for further analysis? My hesitation: Keris are considered possessing magical powers; their ‘spiritual chargedness’ must harmonise with the wearer’s aura. According to popular belief, if the ‘wrong’ person touches the weapon, the energy of the dagger can cause misfortune or illness. So, what to do? My hands do not touch them, but I leave them partly wrapped instead, carrying them over to the lab together with Michal.

As I am writing this thought-piece, I am still wondering about what the professional ethical tradition of anthropology, ‘Do No Harm’, means in this experience. My considerations had to do with the fact that I respected the artefacts and the human-non-human relations surrounding them. How can objects such as the two keris, spiritually charged objects that receive special treatment in Indonesia,[i] travel and be handled with care in locations that differ from the original cultural context? Inspired by de Witte and Meyer (2025) it is important to consider how non-human agents can be involved in research and museum contexts. What happens if anthropologists

become curators, and what challenges does the role as anthropologist-as-curator entail? In this contribution, I will engage with two core principles of anthropology, 'Do No Harm', and immersion, in addressing this question.

Do No Harm

'Do No Harm' is at the core of anthropologists' ethical obligations; it is key to engaging with people, archaeological sites, animals and the non-human. Before entering the field, researchers should thoughtfully consider and do their best to avert possible harm that may result from the research. In other words, the researchers' reflexivity is key: it is their responsibility to think about and prevent potential detrimental consequences of their work.

Of course, 'Do No Harm' cannot be simply 'copied' to a museum context. Instead, it must be translated and interpreted in the respective context in which this crucial ethical obligation is put into practice. In contrast to working in the field, in the museum context, the need for reflexivity becomes entangled in a complex ethics of visibility. What should an exhibition include, how should artefacts be part of its overall rationale, who should be involved as experts, and why? This reflexivity has permeated the contributions in this *Debate*, from Valentina Gamberi's discussion of a hollowed Buddha figure to Susanne Rodemeier's deliberations on the role of human skulls in an exhibition.

Many objects in museum collections have a spiritual vulnerability in their culture of origin. For example, many were never intended for the profane eye or mass media exploitation. When a museum exhibits these objects, it risks disrupting the relationships surrounding the respective artefact. One argument for the restitution of artefacts – apart from addressing colonial injustices – is that these items are often deeply integrated into lived relationships that do not exist in a museum context. For instance, they may be treated with specific oils for preservation, and they may be prayed for. On the other hand, when considering whether artefacts should be

returned to their communities of origin, several important questions arise. For instance, to whom exactly should these artefacts be returned, what are the power relations involved, and who benefits from that return in the end?

Let us return to Valentina Gamberi's introduction, which emphasized the curator's positionality as a researcher and author as a key challenge identified in the workshop that served as groundwork for this *Debate*. As she indicated, based on her and Katerine Sabernig's contributions, curators today increasingly act as researcher-authors who not only exhibit but also actively intervene. This involves producing '(...) exhibition artefacts for illustrating their research's evolution and as a response to the research artefacts' spiritual charges – usually, as a way through which taboos related to the latter are mitigated' (Gamberi, Introduction to the *Debate*).

Responsible anthropologists serving as curators must be ready to make difficult decisions while genuinely upholding the ethical principle of 'Do No Harm.' Importantly, they usually do not make such decisions on their own: Their work is not an isolated one but entangled in negotiations with others, both in the field and beyond, including participants, anthropologists, curators, students, and exhibition visitors. One such decision may involve restricting visibility. Curators of 'religious matters' (Meyer 2021, 1) – a term borrowed from Birgit Meyer's discussion of legba figures, originating in what is now South Togo and South-East Ghana, which encapsulates the colonial and post-colonial entanglements of people, objects, and ideas in Africa and Europe – are mediators of complex relationships. If, after thorough reflection and consultation, an object can be classified as harmful – whether in the context of the communities of origin and their beliefs or in terms of its potential impact on visitors or other reasons – the anthropologist-as-curator should refrain from displaying it. Instead, various artefacts (considered harmless) could be assembled that explain the context of the object deemed harmful. Susanne Rodemeier's point in her contribution about the exhibition on Oceania as a 'research laboratory', open to new findings and potential redesign based on new research, is

important. Anthropologists-as-curators should take an open and flexible approach to exhibitions, seeing them as 'snapshots' of a continuous journey towards engaging with spiritually charged objects.

One way to navigate ambiguities regarding their treatment is to examine traces, as highlighted by Valentina Gamberi: those related to charged artefacts in museums and in texts by missionaries in Italy or in temples in Taiwan. In field research, this discomfort is often a catalyst for self-awareness; in museums, however, it becomes an institutional challenge. This discomfort is not an obstacle, but it can serve as an ethical compass.

Immersion in the field, Immersion in the museum – reflections on 'A journey on wealth across Asia'

The second principle of social and cultural anthropology is immersion. It is based on the anthropologists' long-term relationships in the field site – be it with people, objects, spiritual presences or the digital sphere – but how can we translate this into a curatorial context? Let me address this question by engaging with an exhibition that members of the Anthropology (ANTH) research cluster and I curated in September 2026.[ii] The exhibition took place on the Researchers' Night, an annual event in which Czech universities open their doors to the public. The theme of this year was 'wealth' – our cluster engaged with this theme through an anthropological lens.

We did not discuss immersion as a key principle in the exhibition. However, it mattered in different ways. We engaged with our respective 'immersions' in the field by arranging a combination of photographs, artefacts – including an ancestral altar, amulets, and masks – and natural materials: tree bark, sand and water. As the exhibition took place in our department building, we relied on the existing resources: tables and display walls. Wealth was narrated as a network of religious traditions, ancestral ties and natural resources. As indicated by Iuliia Koreshkova,

who contributed an exhibit to the Siberian Taiga, for example, a tree in the taiga may be valuable timber in cubic metres for a timber company, but for local families it may be food, warmth, and identity. Iuliia included samples of timber, dried herbs, mushrooms, blueberries, and pine nuts to immerse visitors in the exhibit, having them smell, touch and taste the berries and pine nuts.

The 'awkwardness' of field research, as Ipek Sur puts it in her commentary – what I refer to as productive discomfort, thus emphasizing the positive spinoffs of awkwardness – was part of the exhibition in different ways. For example, it featured in Mai Thi Thu's exhibit about Vietnamese ancestor worship (*thờ cúng tổ tiên*), which was prompted by her reflections about the fast-paced life of many Vietnamese people, making it difficult for them to devote sufficient time to their ancestors. In the exhibition, visitors were invited to participate in a ritual at the altar, which included burning incense. In keeping with the exhibition's interactive nature, visitors also participated in a guided meditation and spoke with researchers and a student assistant studying Vietnamese about rituals related to ancestor worship in Vietnam – thereby opting for a sensory, relational 'immersion' of the audience in the exhibition's theme. In Valentina's exhibition – presented by Nela, a student in our study programme, as Valentina was conducting field research at the time – the productive discomfort was mainly related to planning. We finally agreed that the talisman, which had been made for Valentina in Taiwan, should be handled with gloves to navigating its connections to the beliefs and rituals of the local culture.



Fig. 1 Valentina Gamberi's exhibit "Chinese Folk Religion: Wealth through Supernatural Protection, arranged by Nela Kultová, Researchers' Night, 26 September 2025. ©Monika Arnez

Productive discomfort also featured in the handling of sand from land reclamation projects I included in my part of the exhibition, related to my research on land reclamation in Melaka, Malaysia. The sand was emotionally charged matter for some residents, having been dredged from the seabed and dumped in front of their settlement. For others, it was the prospect of facilitating a '365-days economy' (Arnez 2020). Sand was not only displayed; visitors were invited to touch it, to feel its texture and talk to me about it. On the one hand, the shallow bowl of sand

symbolises unfinished large-scale economic projects. However, for the local population, it has different, sometimes painful meanings: the loss of homeland and ecological change. The exhibit invited the audience to engage with the sand and the people's relationship to the sea, disrupted by land reclamation activities.



Fig. 2 Monika Arnez's exhibit "Wealth in Malaysia – Water and Sand", Researchers' Night, 26 September 2025. ©Monika Arnez

When anthropologists are curators, this can be useful for a variety of reasons. Their skills in reflexivity, translation of practices across contexts, negotiation, and readiness to navigate productive discomfort and uncertainty are important in this regard. Last but not least: What is my lesson about 'Do No Harm' in my keris

experience? It was constructive for me to consider the various problems involved in 'translation' – institutional requirements, knowledge gains and risks, including for myself.

References

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[i] For example, there may be offerings or ritual bathings with incense and flowers and polishing the blade with oil and citrus juice. See: Kreps 2003, van Duuren 1998.

[ii] I co-curated this exhibition with Iuliia Koreshkova, Valentina Gamberi, Azim Malikov, Musokhib Musokhib, and Mai Thi Thu, who, at the time of writing, are part of the Anthropology (ANTH) research cluster I am in charge of.

Monika Arnez is an Extraordinary Professor of Asian Studies and head of the

Anthropology Research Cluster, Department of Asian Studies, Palacký University Olomouc. She was the leader of the work package “Material Culture Industrialization and Modernization” in the Sinophone Borderlands project. She is the supervisor of Dr Valentina Gamberi’s MSCA-CZ project Processual Decay Paradigm.