

The Cannon and the Cranium: Towards a Wider Agenda for Reparatory Justice in Sri Lanka

Andi Schubert

Lara Wijesuriya's excellent recent essay is a wonderful invitation for further conversation about the politics of repatriation and the role of museums, archives, and the labour that underpins them in the national imaginaries.

Wijesuriya cites in passing Nira Wickramasinghe's essay on the return of Keppetipola's cranium.^[i] In that essay, Wickramasinghe makes an important argument for how the framing of "Kandyan things as authentic" by British colonial authorities was embedded in the grammar of the postcolonial nation-state. In the nearly 30 years since Wickramasinghe's essay, the argument about the relationship between Kandy and imaginations of authentic pasts and cultural practice has only grown.^[ii]

Wijesuriya's essay invites us to consider the complicated status of objects within the national imaginary. It made me wonder whether Keppetipola's cranium and Lewke's cannon now share the same status as holders of a nationalist imaginary. Both are after all 'relics' from the Kandyan Kingdom, and like the cranium, the cannon is also tied to lost struggles against European colonisers.^[iii] Located then in the grammar of loss and defeat, why, we might ask, do all 'Kandyan things' not get positioned as equally crucial to a postcolonial nationalist imaginary? Or, to put it pithily, what makes some 'things' more canonical than others?

Perhaps one answer could be to consider the bodily status of the 'things' themselves. Crania, as Wickramasinghe points out, are centrally positioned in the now widely disproved ethnological 'sciences' that sought to use physical measurements to make claims about the status of communities, and in particular their relation to European bodies. In contrast to the 'embodiedness' of the cranium, does the cannon's status as an object of either war or patronage make it more difficult to position it within the practices of colonial and/or postcolonial knowledge production? Or is it,

perhaps, the conjunctural moments that shape attitudes towards 'things', animating their epistemological status and shaping their reception and use? I find myself drawn to the latter provocation; and one I want to discuss briefly here as a means of furthering the conversation Wijesuriya has initiated.

The repatriation from the Rijksmuseum of the cannon, and other objects looted during colonial times, can and should be recognised as part of a larger conversation^[iv] that is currently gaining ground in Europe and elsewhere about the status of objects held by museums and galleries and the accountability of the institutions that hold them. In the United Kingdom (UK) for instance, the recent discovery that at least 1500 items in the British Museum's Collections had been quietly stolen and sold by staff^[v] has renewed calls for the repatriation of items in the collection.^[vi] More recently, this may also have caused a diplomatic spat between the UK and Greece.^[vii] In a related vein, a powerful exhibition^[viii] at the University of Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum focuses on how the University's collection of colonial objects contributed to furthering the enslavement of people in the Caribbean and Americas in particular, and the creative ways people then and today have sought to challenge these legacies of enslavement.

At the heart of these kinds of conversations in Europe, is an awareness that these 'things' highlight the interconnected webs of capital, colonialism, power, and knowledge that have deepened conversations about institutional and personal (particularly familial) responsibility for profiting off the enslavement and indenture of people around the world. This is one way to contextualise the repatriation of the items from the Rijksmuseum within the conjunctural moment that is shaping the priorities and actions of many European cultural institutions today.

But simply because this conversation is happening on these lines in Europe does not mean that the conversations in spaces like Sri Lanka need to follow the same pattern. Indeed, the conversations in Sri Lanka^[ix] around these objects have certainly begun. But there is always space for more. And maybe one of these threads is to contrast the reception of Keppetipola's cranium and Lewke's cannon; and ask if there is space for us to have a broader conversation about the continuing legacies of colonial rule in Sri Lanka, without falling prey to the suffocating grasp of nationalist imaginations.

One way to pursue this is to engage with a broader world of formerly colonised spaces that are raising new and important questions about how to contend with these legacies. One example of this might be the interesting work taking place around reparations in the Caribbean where CARICOM, the inter-governmental association of former British, Dutch, French, and Spanish colonies, has developed a comprehensive 10-point plan for reparative justice^[x] that recognises reparatory justice not simply as monetary reparation or debt cancellation but as a broader network of practices that address the layered legacies of colonial rule in the Caribbean. And given that Sri Lanka continues to look to South Africa as a model for transitional justice, it may be good to engage with the concept of *ubuntu* in a more holistic sense; not simply to include amnesty for perpetrators, but to engage in a more meaningful process of recognising, upholding, and promoting the personhood of those who have been wronged.

Drawing on these developments, we might pursue Wijesuriya's point further and ask what reparatory justice for the *Malaiyaha* communities in Sri Lanka may look like over and beyond the mere presence or absence of their representation in the National Museum. For example, if we follow CARICOM's cue and keeping in mind the submissions made by members of the *Malaiyaha* community on transitional justice to the Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanisms,^[xii] would there be scope for demands that the United Kingdom and the Sri Lankan State both of whom profited and continue to profit from the labour of the community invest significantly in transforming their educational and health infrastructure?

And if so, how might this affect other communities in the island, particular in a context of an economic crisis and deep cuts to (and one could even suggest, deliberate sabotage of) meaningful State funding for education and health? These questions are raised as examples of why a concern for reparatory justice can and should have implications far beyond the glass cases of the National Museum. The point being that while

repatriation is not the same as reparation, thinking of these practices in conversation enables us to recognise and engage with the repatriation of objects as part of a wider reparatory agenda, one that has implications for all communities in Sri Lanka.

This is just one potential opening but one that foregrounds the possibilities of broader networks of solidarity, learning, engagement, and movement building for justice and accountability that is not only directed towards former European colonial powers but also at ourselves as the willing conscripts of coloniality and its ordering of communal relationships in our countries.

This approach would, I believe, open a range of options for thinking about the legacies of Sri Lanka's colonial encounters without being trapped into an endless loop of nationalistic nostalgia and anxiety. If Keppetipola's cranium represents the latter tendency, there may perhaps now be space to engage with this and other objects like Lewke's cannon on different terms, one that not only appreciates the value of its repatriation but also sheds light on the problematics of caste, exploitation, kinship, exclusion, and power, that like European colonialism, continue to be part and parcel of our realities today. The cannon and the cranium should then invite us to a broader conversation, one that Wijesuriya's essay has helpfully nudged us towards.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank Nigel Nugawela for his insightful comments on an early draft of this essay. All shortcomings, however, remain my own.

Andi Schubert is a PhD student at the Faculty of History at the University of Cambridge, England.

Notes

[i] Wickramasinghe, Nira. (1997). "The Return of Keppetipola's Cranium: Authenticity in a New Nation". *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32(30): PE85-PE92.

[ii] Mantillake, Sudesh. (2022). "Panibharata and the Invention of Sinhala Folk Dance Repertoires in Post-Colonial Sri Lanka". *Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities*, 43(2): 40-57.

[iii] Schrikker, Alicia and Doreen van den Boogaart. (2022). *Provenance report regarding Singalees kanon of Lewuke's kanon*. Available at RAP_PPROCE_ProvenanceReport_46_SingaleesKanonLewukesKanon_NG_NM_1015_v10_202203.pdf (knaw.nl)

[iv] Moses, Claire. (2020). "Return looted art to former colonies, Dutch committee tells government". *Artdaily*. Available at <https://artdaily.cc/news/129059/Return-looted-art-to-former-colonies--Dutch-committee-tells-government#.X4lzO5NKi8>

[v] Sherwood, Harriet. (2023). "British Museum told to keep better records after theft of 1,500 items". *The Guardian* (12 December). Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2023/dec/12/>

british-museum-told-to-keep-better-records-after-theft-of-1500-items

[vi] Gill, Martha. (2023). "Being a victim of theft might help the British Museum reflect on returning its own swag". *The Guardian* (2 September). Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/sep/02/british-museum-should-give-back-loot-benin-bronzes>

[vii] Smith, Helena. (2023). "Parthenon marbles row: Rishi Sunak cancels meeting with Greek PM". *The Guardian* (27 November). Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/nov/27/greek-pm-slams-rishi-sunak-for-cancelling-planned-meeting-at-no-10>

[viii] Walker, Barbara. (2023). "Black Atlantic: Power, People, Resistance". *The Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge*. Available at <https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/plan-your-visit/exhibitions/black-atlantic-power-people-resistance>

[ix] See, for instance, the event advertised at <https://www.facebook.com/NLambassadeColombo/posts/pfbid0mMpYQdRCyWHyqatQSCcAioVQhaydgYhSHFnzAGbUuuJG2F5dxm1rYQ6EVMsBECj8l>

[x] *Caricom*. (2020). "CARICOM TEN POINT PLAN FOR REPARATORY JUSTICE" (17 December). Available at https://adsdatabase.ohchr.org/IssueLibrary/CARICOM_Ten-Point%20Plan%20for%20Reparatory%20Justice.pdf

[xi] Chigumadzi, Panashe. (2023). "UBUNTU: A BLACK RADICAL DEMAND FOR REPARATIONS". *The Funambulist* (25 October). Available at <https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/redefining-our-terms/ubuntu-a-black-radical-demand-for-reparations>

[xii] *LST Review*, October 2016, 27(340). Available at <https://www.lstlanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Economic-And-Social-Rights-Justice-And-The-Law.pdf>