



SPAFACON2021

**Papers from the SEAMEO SPAFA International Conference on
SOUTHEAST ASIAN ARCHAEOLOGY AND FINE ARTS**

13 - 17 December 2021

Editor: Noel Hidalgo Tan

SPAFACON2021 is published by SEAMEO SPAFA, the Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts established by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization. SEAMEO SPAFA focusses on archaeology and fine arts in Southeast Asia, and promotes awareness and appreciation of the cultural heritage of the region. Its member-countries are Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam; and its associate member-countries are Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain and the United Kingdom.



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2021 SEAMEO SPAFA

ISBN: 978-616-7961-55-2

ISBN (e-book): 978-616-7961-54-5

DOI 10.26721/spafa.pqcnu8815a

Publisher

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INTRODUCTION

This volume contains the extended abstracts from the papers presented at the SEAMEO SPAFA International Conference on Southeast Asian Archaeology and Fine Arts, which was held online from 13 to 17 December 2021. Also known as the SPAFACON2021, this conference was organised online due to the pandemic. Despite the disruption brought about by Covid-19 to our in-person events, training programmes and field research, it is heartening to see that archaeology and cultural heritage has continued under new modes of communication and collaboration.

This fourth iteration of the SPAFACON is also scheduled a year earlier than our usual triennial cycle to commemorate the 50th anniversary of SEAMEO initiating a centre dedicated towards archaeology and the fine arts. Over the past year, SPAFA has also been highlighting this legacy of international cooperation and capacity-building by sharing our photographic archives on our social media.

I am delighted by the high level of enthusiasm and intellectual curiosity brought by the participants to the conference. During our call for papers we received close to 90 submissions, but owing to the pressures of time and the online format, we were only able to accept 34 papers for the conference. The variety of papers present here, although a small set compared with our usual proceedings, reflects the breadth of the centre's ambit – covering not just archaeology, but also performing arts, visual arts, museum studies, and other aspects of Southeast Asian cultural heritage.

I would like to thank all the participants, without whom this conference would not be possible in its present form, in particular, our Governing Board members who represent every country in Southeast Asia, and to the Ministry of Culture, Thailand and the Ministry of Education, Thailand for their long-standing support of SEAMEO SPAFA and its activities.



Mrs Somlak Charoenpot

Centre Director

SEAMEO SPAFA

Religious Object” Exhibition in the Context of Cultural Change and Covid-19 Social Distancing (Case studies of Khmer’s Nagar boat in the South of Vietnam)

Trưng bày hiện vật tôn giáo trong bối cảnh biến đổi văn hóa và giãn cách xã hội do Covid-19 (Trường hợp ghe ngo của người Khmer ở Nam Bộ, Việt Nam)

10.26721/spafa.pqcnu8815a-30

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Abstract

The museums, nowadays, facing to many challenges in religious objects exhibition. Especially, in the current context of Covid-19 pandemic and cultural change, regular methods of the museum exhibition expose many limitations. Through a case study of *ghe ngo* (the Khmer’s Nagar boat) exhibition at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (VME), this paper discusses some principles dealing with the religious objects in the museum, and outline some modern display methods that can contribute to improving the display efficiency of *ghe ngo* exhibition towards the museum sustainable development.

Trưng bày hiện vật tôn giáo vốn đặt ra nhiều thách thức đối với các bảo tàng. Đặc biệt, trong bối cảnh Covid-19 và biến đổi văn hóa hiện nay, các phương thức trưng bày truyền thống thể hiện nhiều mặt hạn chế. Qua trường hợp ghe ngo của người Khmer đang được trưng bày tại Bảo tàng Dân tộc học Việt Nam, bài viết này thảo luận về việc ứng xử với hiện vật tôn giáo, tín ngưỡng trong bảo tàng, và một số phương pháp trưng bày hiện đại nhằm góp phần nâng cao hiệu quả trưng bày ghe ngo của người Khmer hướng tới mục tiêu phát triển bền vững bảo tàng.

Keywords

Religious object; ghe ngo/Khmer’s Naga boat; cultural change.

The Naga boat exhibition at Vietnam Museum of Ethnology

Ghe ngo, the Naga boat was originally a dugout canoe, a boat carved from a large tree trunk. Gradually, in order to meet the requirements of a racing boat, the boat craftsmen made creative changes in technique and the Naga boat was shaped like it is today. In terms of shape, when compared to other types of boats in Vietnam, the Naga boat has a superior length. Normally, the width of a Naga boat is about 1.4m, just enough for two people sitting in parallel, but its length can be from 25 to more than 30m. Each boat can carry 50-60 swimmers. With such an oversized shape, it is required a high level of technique to build the Naga boat which not all the boat craftsmen can respond to.

In Vietnam, while all other boats are used to serve economic or daily activities, the Khmer's Naga boat is only used once a year, on the occasion of the Ook Om Bok festival, in the boat race and associated with a solemn ritual series organized by the temple and the community people. In Khmer culture, the Naga boat is considered a sacred symbol of protecting peace and prosperity and embodies the collective strength of the community. The legends of the Naga boat formation, the Naga boat racing custom and the history of the Ook Om Bok festival are told by the local Khmer community in various ways based on the cultural interference and the movement of the people. Among them, it highlighted the heritage of Buddhism, Hinduism, Angkor culture and agricultural beliefs. Based on the factors of time, the composition of the offerings and the gods associated with the Naga boat, it can be said that the Naga boat race is a form of facsimile for the ritual of water procession in the ancient agricultural festival to express Khmer community's gratitude to the gods of earth, water, and land for bringing them a "harmonious raining and wind" crop and bountiful harvest.

In 2008, VME collected and organized the display of the Khmer Naga boat in the open exhibit space. This is the 3rd generation boat of Tum Pok Sok temple (My Thuan commune, My Tu district, Soc Trang province). This Naga boat is also called by the local people as the "Champion of Indochina" boat based on its victory in a contest consisting of three countries (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia). Up to now, this boat is still mentioned by the local people as a legend with a history of competition and outstanding achievements that no other boat has surpassed. There are two remarkable features of this boat, first, it is a "super-long, super-heavy" boat in size, and secondly, it is a religious object and even though it has left the community, the people still believe in its sacredness.

Challenges of displaying the Naga boat as a religious object

The change of cultural spaces: From temple to museum

Conception of religious objects in museums are various. It can be divided into three main groups of ideas as follows: First, because the museum is a secular space, the objects brought into the museum are no longer sacred, therefore, the concept of sacred objects does not exist. Secondly, religious objects always possess the sacredness no matter in any space, including museum space. Third, the *sacred* and *secular* forms of religious objects are variable, depending on the changes in space, time, and religious experiences of particular individuals/communities. Such different interpretations lead to different behaviours in which museums treat religious objects. In fact, there have been cases that have caused profound emotional trauma to community people who practise the belief¹.

In the region of Tum Pok Sok temple, Khmer people believe that the Naga boat is a symbol of peace and prosperity of the community, a means for people to send messages of gratitude to the gods. There are several sacred symbols associated with the Naga boat. First of all, it is the image of the Naga (snake god), the god who governs the water source in Khmer culture. The shape of the boat is said to facsimile Naga's body, especially when swimming on the water, the boat is just like a giant lightsome snake. Second symbol is goddess Neang Khmau who is considered as the goddess of the land, taking care of the rain and sun, the crops and the lives of people. Neang Khmau is also the goddess who gives the Naga boat strength, patronizing the boat during the race. This is the most important goddess who is worshiped and prayed by the community in *hạ thủy* (launching into water) rituals of Naga boat. Another god that clearly shows the cultural characteristics of each temple is the god of Naga boats. The image of this god can be a statue attached to the top of the boat or painted on both sides of the boat. At Tum Pok Sok temple, the god of the Naga boat named Mharman appeared as a monkey god with a fish tail. Mharman is said to have extraordinary power both on land and in the water. Besides the gods, the boat is also associated with a number of other symbols such as *cần câu* (wooden cranes or levers) and *ngũ âm* (the five-element music).

Besides the sacred symbols, there are a number of rituals associated with important milestones in the cultural life of the Naga boat. After the wood has been brought to the temple and cut into large slabs, then dried, on a good day, the community will hold a ritual

¹ In this paper, the term "sacred object" is not used for museum objects, but "religious object" instead with implication of the one has been used in religious practice of communities, which may have been "desacralized" or not. Besides, this paper also argues that, when studying the sacredness of an object, it is necessary to mention the time period, cultural space and specific relationships, rather than consider it as an inherent nature of that object.

to begin the process of building the Naga boat. When the boat is completed, about a week before the race, the “launching into water” ritual (the most important ritual for the Naga boat) is held. On the day of the race, the whole swimming team will gather at the temple to be blessed by the monks and achars², this is also considered as the ritual of departure. These are the most important rituals and are still practiced by the Khmer communities today in the South of Vietnam. In addition, there are some other small rituals that are no longer maintained due to many changes in natural, economic and social conditions.

After the Ook Om Bok festival, the Naga boat is protected in a house called “Rong Tuk” which has the roof but without walls. Under the roof, there are some incense bowls (made of coconut, called *sla thor* in Khmer language) and Khmer people keep the sacredness of the Naga boat by practicing some particular taboos including women are not allowed to come in this house or touch the Naga boat.



Fig 1. The symbolic god of the Naga boat at Tum Pok Sok Temple. Source: Pham Thi Thuy Chung.

² The most knowledgeable elderly men in Khmer community

While the “Champion of Indochina” boat leaves Tum Pok Sok temple, many people shed tears as if sending a loved one away. The next boat race and many more seasons after that, the “descendant Naga boats” of Tum Pok Sok temple were no longer honoured in the high prizes, even once overturned on the racing river. The “Champion of Indochina” boat became a legend of the local Khmer community.

Although the Naga boat had such a rich and unique cultural and religious life, when it was put on display at VME, it seemed to be alone in the display space. The boat is located in the corner of the garden, where not many visitors pass by. There is no *sla thor*, no wooden crane and all the stories about the legendary Naga boat are encapsulated in one panel with a text of 176 words.



Fig 2. The Khmer Naga boat at VME. Source: Pham Thi Thuy Chung.

In 2019, I conducted a survey of visitors. The results showed that 62,5% of the respondents only stopped at the Naga boat for less than 3 minutes. 75,2% of the respondents stated their impression of this Naga boat is its size, then it is 59,2% for the beauty of decorative patterns. Most of the visitors do not perceive the sacredness of the Naga boat and wish to be provided more stories and images about the Naga boat in the life of the Khmer community. It can be said that this is a large object for which the collection required much effort and expense, but the display is not really effective and doesn't meet the needs of visitors. While the material manifestations of religion are emphasized by the Museum, it seems to neglect the intangible cultural elements including religious beliefs and practices.

Moving the sacred objects from the temple to the museum is a journey from the sacred space to the secular space. The question is, what should the museum do to understand, describe, display and treat these objects appropriately? Are they still considered sacred objects? Or were they once sacred objects, but now they have become the artworks? Or do they have both religious and artistic meanings at the same time? The answers depend on the faith of the cultural stakeholders and the visitor's perception. How to recognize the identity of these objects as well as properly understand the cultural and religious traditions that they represent? This also requires the cooperation of cultural and religious scholars and museum curators in studying the "life" of the religious objects.

Unlike the worship space, museums act as the medium space for the public to admire or interact with cultural objects. However, cultural differences make the ideas and goals of the display be various. Some museums may have spaces dedicated to manifesting the sacredness or performing rituals. However, unlike in worship space, the religious objects in the museum have social function, which is emphasized by the social role of the museum. When being displayed in the museum, for the visitors, the religious objects must perform the function of a museum object that is representing cultural tradition of a community; At the same time, for the members of cultural stakeholders, the object still functions as a sacred symbol and is always respected by the community wherever they are.

In 2014, when the Naga boat has been on display at the VME for six years, the Khmer community sent a delegation including some monks, achars and craftsmen to the Museum to repair the Naga boat, and then they implemented *giải thiêng* (the desacralization) ritual with the hope that the gods would allow this boat to settle in the VME in a new role and function. This is an unprecedented event at VME, it has been done in collaboration of the Museum and the community representatives in order to relieve obsession about inappropriate conduct to the Naga boat in the past. During the desacralization ritual, the exhibit space

became a sacred space where the communication between humans and the gods takes place.

When the Naga boat was moved from the cultural space of the community to the exhibition space in the museum, the changes of its functions led to the changes in people's awareness of its sacredness and secularity. In the cultural space of the community, the Naga boat is a revered symbol. The sacredness of the Naga boat is most clearly expressed in the ritual space and time. When becoming an object displayed in the museum, the Naga boat functions have been changed from an instrument for practicing ritual to the evidence for representing Khmer culture in the colorful picture of the diverse cultures in VME. The visitors may recognize the sacredness of the Naga boat or not but for the Khmer people, especially the community in the region of Tum Pok Sok temple, the Naga boat is always a sacred symbol in the community's memory and pride.

Exhibition in the context of Covid-19 social distancing

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic led to a major global crisis. Museums are among institutions that are heavily affected by this epidemic as countries practice social distancing and limit person-to-person contacts. According to a statistical report by UNESCO in May 2020, 90% of museums in the world have had to temporarily close and 10% of museums are permanently closed.

In this context, traditional methods of exhibiting with material objects play a central role in the exhibition and visitors must physically approach the exhibits, etc. are impossible to conduct. Museums need the movement to propose innovative ideas for diverse solutions in order to maintain social function and secure certain financial resources for the collection preservation. Unfortunately, until now, VME has not been able to overcome those challenges. What this paper mentions in the following section are not the practical experience of the VME but the suggested solutions.

Some solutions to display the Naga boat as a religious object

In the context of changing cultural space (frequent challenges) and Covid-19 social distancing (immediate challenges), it is extremely necessary to find proper display solutions for religious objects. To continue operating the museum, besides using social networks, many museums have provided virtual tours online and built mobile applications to support visitors. Maintaining the museum's operation during the pandemic is not only to improve financial issues, ensure jobs and income for the staffs but more importantly it is to avoid breaking the connection between the museum and the social communities and

prepare the basis for the reconstruction and develop the museum's program of activities in the future.

Although the Naga boat stands out for its unique shape, length and decorative motifs, its religious characters mainly belong to intangible cultural elements including symbolic meanings in the conception of the Khmer community and the sacredness of the ritual. These factors are being obscured in the current exhibit of the Naga boat at VME. This paper will mention below some methods with the aim of improving the effectiveness of displaying intangible culture, especially enhancing the religious elements of the objects.

Currently, the display space of the Khmer Naga boat at the VME is not equipped with a video screen. The audio guide system has also been built and operated initially, but the information provided by the audio guide system has not been exploited more deeply than the information system available in the text. To meet the needs of visitors in finding information and discovering the cultural life of the object, VME needs to build and provide an online video and audio system. In fact, video screens are always the highlight of the display when visitors are always attracted by the vivid images of which objects are a part, especially with cultural elements such as festivals and rituals. Showing a film or video about a process of cultural practice is an effective form of supporting the transmission of intangible cultural elements, because the intangible culture is always moving and changing. Audio guide is a form of automatic interpretation in which the information data of each object will be recorded in one or multiple languages, with the almost unlimited depth of information and not depend on the limitation of texts.

Another solution is building virtual museums or virtual exhibits with the visiting routes based on digital technology. Virtual exhibits may be the copy of actual exhibits or independently built from collections. With high-quality 3DR data, visitors can fully access the objects from all views, zoom in to the smallest details without physical contact. Besides, virtual exhibits allow visitors to access and make the tour from anywhere in the world with the internet.

For "super-long and super-heavy" objects such as the Khmer Naga boat, the construction of a 3DR video will bring special effects to visitors when exploring this object. In particular, these will be tools that can vividly reproduce the process of building and decorating the Naga boat. The 3DR videos of the boat making process are described step by step with details and technical parameters that will be an important part of the "Naga boat heritage" preservation profile. With this profile, the transmission of boat building knowledge or the

reconstruction of the Naga boat in the future can be carried out with the highest precision, even when the craftsmen are gradually passing away. Videos of technical postures and racing tactics can also be detailed through 3DR tools.

Thus, in order to improve the effectiveness of Naga boat exhibition and preservation, VME needs to conduct the following targets: First, documenting as much as possible the narratives on the cultural life of the Naga boat by digital technique and allowing access via the museum's website. Secondly, constructing digital exhibitions including vivid and realistic images and sounds of the rituals such as start-building ritual, launching-into-water ritual, departure ritual, Moon worshiping ritual and all the activities of the Ook Om Bok festival including the boat racing.

The main advantages of virtual exhibitions and the use of digital technology can be listed through the following points:

First, the challenges of cultural space change (from community to museum) and Covid-19 social distancing can be overcome by increasing the stories of cultural life of Naga boat as well as other religious objects, especially the intangible cultural elements and sharing experiences about the sacredness of objects in community life.

Second, we can meet the increasing needs of museum visitors and cultural beneficiaries. The 4.0 technology revolution has led to a major change in the public's need for access to cultural heritages following the trend of requiring fast, rich, diverse information and increasing interactive effectiveness through technological means such as: smartphones, tablets and other internet-using devices.

Third, we can make practical contributions to the preservation of Naga boat as a cultural heritage. In the face of the situation that the objects are degraded over time, there are heritages that only exist in the museum's collection but no longer in the community space. The research and construction of the virtual reality database of Naga boats will allow us to develop the *maximum and sustainable* preservation. In addition, the 3DR video of the making boat process also provides technical parameters in high accuracies which can be applied to the restoration and reproduction of the Naga boat in the future.

Fourth, we can improve the education of Naga boat preservation. If the Khmer community at Tum Pok Sok region also contributes to preserving their own cultural heritage and takes part in the documentation and digitization work, this would give them an opportunity

to look back, promote their memories, and nurture their pride. Moreover, when brought back to serve the community, the 3DR videos of heritage with their vivid and detailed nature will act as an effective educational medium to transmit to the young generation the knowledge and sense of respect for their own cultural heritage. It can be said that heritage preservation right from the community is the most effective way. Besides the community owner of the heritage, the museum can also link up with some schools to include these 3DR videos in their curriculum. Thereby, students have the opportunity to learn about folk techniques, cultural values, cultural life of the Naga boat, and cultivating a sense of preserving and promoting cultural heritage. More broadly, these models will be disseminated on the internet, and their educational impact will be spread out.

Fifth, online virtual exhibits and videos of the Naga boat based on digital technology will have an active role in developing tourism, contributing to the sustainable development of community livelihoods as well as promoting conditions for cultural heritage to continue to be associated with community life. When the digital display of the Naga boat is shared over the internet, its cultural values are widely promoted.

Conclusion

Cultural changes and diversity have put museums in front of challenges and difficulties when implementing the traditional concept and approach: Considering physical objects have the central and essential role which make decisions to the success of the exhibition. In fact, collecting and organizing the display of a religious object in a “giant” size such as the Naga boat at the VME is an increasingly difficult task due to effects of time and weather that may change physical nature of objects more rapidly than the smaller objects are preserved in storage or displayed indoors. But the great investment in finance and effort may be wasted if the museum is distracted in displaying intangible cultural elements, especially the sacredness of religious objects. This can turn religious objects into mere works of art. More importantly, the museum needs to pay more attention to the research and maximally displaying of the intangible cultural values of the objects, which is also an effective solution in sustainable preservation and development of the museum.

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