

From Silent Objects To Memory Agents: Cultural Memory In Digitized Colonial-Era Collections

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Abstract. Cultural artifacts rarely remain fixed in meaning or function; they are continually reinterpreted as societies change. The Hindu-Buddhist sculptures of Indonesia, produced between the eighth and fifteenth centuries, illustrate this shift. Initially embedded in ritual contexts, they are now reclassified as cultural heritage and employed to articulate identity and historical continuity. The process of digitization adds another layer to this trajectory. It does more than reproduce visual form: it creates conditions in which artifacts become part of cultural memory. The memories that arise from digital mediation are not recoveries of an original past but reconstructions shaped by present-day representational practices and narrative frameworks. When considered in relation to colonial-era collections, digitization alters how museum objects operate. No longer confined to the role of static exhibits, they acquire a more active position as agents in processes of remembrance. Digital representation also opens space for reinterpretation, bringing multiple perspectives into view and enabling communities with different backgrounds to engage with the same heritage. In this way, digitization unsettles singular narratives and encourages more plural understandings of the past. The case of Hindu-Buddhist sculpture demonstrates how digital technologies transform heritage work. Instead of functioning only as preservation, digitization provides a medium through which the cultural significance of artifacts can be renegotiated in the present. It makes memory more dynamic and dialogical, extending the relevance of the past across generations and cultural contexts. This article therefore, treats digitization as a social practice that produces memory as much as it preserves material culture, situating it within the broader debates on heritage, identity, and cultural continuity in the digital age.

Keywords: Cultural memory, digitization, colonial-era collections, social role, Indonesian heritage

1 Introduction

Cultural heritage often shifts from its original function to new interpretations in modern contexts. Religious objects, once used in rituals, are now displayed as symbols of collective identity and cultural memory. This shift shows that cultural heritage is dynamic and constantly shaped by changing social and political needs. In cultural memory studies, artifacts connect historical periods with the identity needs of the present society[1]. Each change in an artifact reflects the interplay between past memory, current experience, and hopes for the future.

Colonialism redefined the significance of artifacts relocated from their regions of origin to European museums. Hindu-Buddhist collections from Southeast Asia served not only as material culture but also as symbols of colonial authority. Within postcolonial analysis, indigenous narratives associated with these artifacts are frequently supplanted by dominant Western perspectives[2]. As a result, colonial collections function as infrastructures of memory that are administered unilaterally and reflect hegemonic control. The presence of such artifacts in colonial museums therefore prompts critical inquiry into the authority over historical interpretation.

Cultural memory research asserts that memory is not an isolated reflection of the past but is continually mediated by specific forms. Artifacts relocated to colonial contexts operate as media of memory, transmitting complex narratives and power structures. The memories associated with these artifacts are perpetuated through catalogs, exhibition practices, and official documentation, which frequently represent the perspectives of those in authority[3]. Thus, artifacts serve as material archives that encapsulate multiple layers of memory, ranging from sacred to political meanings. This evolution in significance demonstrates that cultural heritage emerges through processes of selection, exclusion, and representational construction.

The transformation of artifacts from sacred objects to secular symbols underscores their relevance to contemporary political contexts. Statues formerly situated in religious environments are now relocated to public spaces, where they serve as emblems of national identity, collective memory, or tourism promotion. This transition indicates that artifacts are interpreted not solely through spiritual frameworks but also as forms of cultural capital that reinforce political legitimacy[4]. Religious artifacts have thus become secular markers instrumental in constructing modern identities. This process further highlights the performative aspects of cultural heritage within current socio-political settings.

Digitization has introduced a significant advancement in the transformation of cultural heritage. Technological developments enable artifacts to be represented in widely accessible virtual formats. Digital representations replicate physical forms and create new experiential opportunities for audiences[5]. As a result, artifacts previously confined to museum environments are now accessible across geographic boundaries. This development demonstrates how digital media contribute an additional dimension to global collective memory.

Digital space makes artifacts “memory objects” that actively shape meaning. The public is no longer just passive viewers, but also participates in providing interpretations and negotiating memories[6]. This participation shifts authority from museums or formal institutions to a broader and more open public space. However, digitization also presents challenges because the visualization of artifacts often obscures their socio-historical context. The risk of curatorial bias, homogenization of interpretation, and loss of local diversity of meaning are part of epistemological problems in the construction of digital memory.

All of these dynamics show that cultural heritage is an ever-changing arena of negotiation. From its early phase as a religious artifact, through the colonial experience, to the digital era, artifacts continue to be reinterpreted in light of their social context. Each transformation is not only a matter of representation, but also the creation of new layers of memory that shape the collective identity of a community[7]. Therefore, the study of cultural heritage in the digital age requires an interdisciplinary approach that combines cultural memory, postcolonial, and digital heritage theories. With this framework, an understanding of the role of artifacts.

2 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework in cultural heritage studies departs from the view that artifacts are never static, but rather constantly undergo shifts in meaning. Arjun Appadurai (1986) introduced a new approach in material culture studies known as the “social life of things” perspective. This perspective emphasizes that objects are not merely material entities, but rather entities that possess a “social life” of their own[8]. Religious objects that once functioned in spiritual practices are now reinterpreted as part of collective identity and cultural memory. The concept of cultural memory emphasizes that every artifact is a meeting point between the past and the social needs of the present[9]. Therefore, changes in the function of artifacts are understood as the result of ongoing social, political, and cultural negotiations[10].

Appadurai’s approach places greater emphasis on “returning attention to the things themselves” (Appadurai, 1986). This means that while humans can ascribe meaning to objects, it is the objects themselves that, in turn, illuminate the social and human contexts in which they exist. In his concept, objects are not significant merely for their utility or physical form, but rather for their social trajectories. Their journeys through production, exchange, consumption, preservation, and transformation. Thus, objects possess a “social biography,” wherein their meanings and values change according to the cultural, social, economic, spatial, and temporal contexts that surround them. The social life of things approach also highlights the importance of examining the involvement of various actors, individuals, communities, and institutions, in shaping the narratives and legitimacies surrounding an object[8].

The process of colonization gave a new dimension to the meaning of artifacts, especially when cultural objects were transferred to colonial museums. The Hindu-Buddhist collections from Southeast Asia, for example, not only functioned as material objects,

but also became symbols of colonial knowledge and power. From a postcolonial perspective, the transfer of these artifacts shows how local narratives are often replaced by Western discourse[11]. As a result, artifacts displayed in colonial spaces function as “media of memory” that carry layers of power and hegemonic narratives[12].

A key concept in the social life of things theory is the regimes of value, which refers to the idea that social and cultural systems determine the value of an object within a specific context. The meanings and values attached to an object are not fixed; they can shift as the object moves from one social domain to another. This condition is described as a process of commodification, in which an object enters the circuit of economic exchange. However, an object can also exit the sphere of commodification when it acquires the status of a sacred heirloom or relic[8]. The dynamics of this process reveal that objects possess the capacity to shape power, identity, and social symbolism.

The transformation of artifacts is also evident in their change from sacred to secular. Statues that were once the center of religious rituals are now displayed in public spaces as markers of national identity or tourism promotion. This shift shows how artifacts are used as cultural capital that provides political and symbolic legitimacy[13]. Thus, cultural heritage is no longer only related to spiritual values, but also concerns the performative dimension in the modern social and political sphere[14].

Digitization presents a new chapter in the construction of cultural memory. Technology allows artifacts to be accessed in virtual formats that transcend the physical limitations of museums. Digital representations not only replicate form but also reconstruct public experiences and open up broader spaces for participation[15]. However, this practice also poses challenges because digital narratives have the potential to obscure the socio-historical context of artifacts, while also giving rise to homogenization of interpretation[16].

All of these dynamics show that cultural heritage is an ever-changing arena of negotiation. From religious artifacts to digital phases, artifacts are constantly being reinterpreted and presenting new layers of memory. A theoretical framework that combines the perspectives of cultural memory, postcolonialism, and digital heritage provides a basis for understanding how artifacts function as agents of memory[17]. With this interdisciplinary approach, cultural heritage studies can explain the close relationship between memory, identity, and social change in a contemporary context[18]. Appadurai (1986: 6) explains that objects become part of the politics of value, in which actors or social agents seek to interpret meanings and use these objects as instruments for legitimizing their power[8].

3 Result and Discussion

The social life of things approach integrates various types of exchangeable objects—commodities, gifts, and barter goods—into what is termed the “commodity situation.” This concept implies that the exchangeability of an object becomes a relevant social feature. An object can move in and out of the commodity phase throughout its social

life, depending on the cultural, political, and cognitive processes referred to as commodity candidacy. The social environment that defines the temporal and symbolic conditions of the commodity situation—that is, the act of exchange itself—is known as the commodity context[8].

The discussion of Hindu-Buddhist statues is important to see how the function and meaning of an artifact undergoes transformation from time to time. Initially, statues were made for religious purposes, becoming an integral part of worship practices and religious rituals (Figure 1). Statues functioned as a medium between humans and the transcendent world, bringing the presence of gods into sacred spaces. This initial function reveals a strong spiritual dimension, in which artifacts were not only viewed as works of art but also as the center of religious life for the communities that supported them[19].



Fig. 1. The Bodhisattva statue at Candi Palosan serves a religious function as a medium of worship (Source: Research Team Documentation, 2025).

During the colonial period, the function and position of statues underwent a significant shift in meaning. Statues that were previously placed in a ritual context were moved to colonial museums as ethnographic collections (Figure 2). This change was not merely a change of location, but also a change in the way statues were viewed. Objects that were once sacred became material evidence of “past cultures” that were studied from a Western perspective. This process created an asymmetry of knowledge, as local narratives about the statues were often overshadowed by colonial discourse[20].

Entering the digital age, the representation of Hindu-Buddhist statues underwent another transformation through digitization. Statues that were previously only accessible in museums can now be viewed globally in a virtual format. These digital representations not only document the physical form of the statues but also open up space for new interpretations. The digital era thus presents another dimension of cultural heritage, namely making artifacts part of a collective memory that can be exchanged across cultural boundaries[21].



Fig. 2. The Bodhisattva statue of Candi Plaosan at the Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands serves as an exhibition object (Source: Research Team Documentation, 2025)

In this framework, digitization is an agent of memory. Digital technology does not merely store data, but also creates new ways of remembering, understanding, and interpreting artifacts (Figure 3). Digitization allows the public to interact with statues without being bound by space and time. This makes artifacts not just passive objects displayed in museums, but active agents that present a new dialogue about cultural heritage (Figure 4)[21].



Fig. 3. The digitalization process of Indonesian statue objects in the Netherlands (Source: Research Team Documentation).

The transformation from silent objects to memory objects is one of the most important shifts in cultural heritage studies. Artifacts that were once just silent objects now function as a medium of communication across generations. Digital representation gives statues the space to “speak” again, not only through curatorial narratives, but also

through diverse interpretations from the community. This change confirms that digital artifacts are no longer seen as copies, but as drivers of new memories[21].



Fig. 4. The digitalization results of statue objects from museum collections in the Netherlands are intended to enhance public accessibility (Source: Research Team Documentation, 2025) .

Digitization also opens up the possibility of reinterpreting Hindu-Buddhist statues. The public not only sees the form or artistic style, but can also connect the artifact with history, identity, and contemporary meaning. This process makes digitization a means of recontextualization, where statues can be understood not only as relics of the past but also as a source of reflection for the present (Figure 5). Thus, digitization contributes to enriching the layers of collective memory[21]

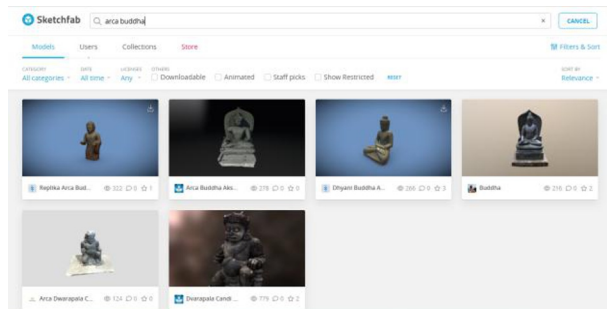


Fig. 5. Open-access platforms such as Sketchfab.com serve as examples of initiatives promoting the openness and accessibility of museum collection data (Source: Research Team Documentation, 2025).

The role of the public has become increasingly important in the digital age. With wider access, people can comment on, share, or even reproduce the meaning of artifacts. This open dialogue creates cross-generational and cross-cultural conversations, expanding the space for artifacts to be interpreted in various ways. Public participation makes cultural heritage more inclusive, although it also presents challenges in managing the diversity of interpretations[22].

The socio-cultural dimension in the digitization process cannot be ignored. Digitization is not only about technology, but also a social practice that reflects who has the authority to manage memory. The way artifacts are represented, the curation of accompanying narratives, and the choice of media used greatly determine the form of collective memory that is produced. Therefore, digitization must be viewed as a cultural process full of negotiation[22].

Digitized objects become more open to public participation. This access demonstrates the democratization of memory, as interpretation is no longer monopolized by formal institutions such as museums. However, this openness also has consequences in the form of narrative fragmentation. Interpretations that emerge from various parties can differ or even contradict, making collective memory more fluid and dynamic[23].

Although it offers opportunities, digitization also poses a number of challenges. Digital representation risks eliminating the historical context inherent in statues, as the focus on visuals often overlooks their social and religious dimensions. This limitation can lead to bias in representation, especially if the narrative presented emphasizes aesthetics over contextual meaning. Another risk is homogenization, where the diversity of local interpretations is sidelined by uniform global representation standards. These challenges show that digitization is not merely a technical endeavor, but also a political practice in determining how the past is remembered and passed on[21].

Ultimately, this discussion shows that Hindu-Buddhist statues have never been static objects, but have constantly undergone changes in function and meaning. From their original sacred function, through colonial shifts, to digital representation, statues continue to be a medium of negotiation between memories of the past and the needs of present-day identity. Digitization presents a great opportunity by making statues active agents of memory, while also opening up wider public participation. However, this openness also carries the risk of bias, narrative fragmentation, and the loss of the historical context inherent in the artifacts. Therefore, digitization must be understood not only as a technological innovation, but also as a social and political practice that shapes the direction of collective memory in the contemporary era[21].

4 Conclusion

The transformation of Hindu-Buddhist statues shows an important shift from silent objects to memory agents in the context of colonial collections that are now being digitized. Initially, the statues served a sacred function as religious media, then during the colonial period they were reduced to ethnographic objects placed within a Western discourse, and finally they underwent re-representation in a digital format that provides broad global access. This digitization process not only changes the position of statues from passive objects to active memory agents but also opens up space for public participation in interpreting, distributing, and recontextualizing this cultural heritage. Thus, Hindu-Buddhist statues are no longer seen merely as silent relics of the past, but as a medium of cross-generational communication that shapes, negotiates, and even debates cultural memory in the contemporary global space.

5 Authors' Contributions

Ashar Murdinastomo and Atina Winaya contributed to the development of the research design, conceptual framework, theory, and methodology. Harriyadi and Dewangga played key roles in the processes, techniques, and methods of digital data acquisition. Nova H. Lestiandoko, Luuk Spreeuwiers, and Džemila Šero contributed to the development of computer science application methods in archaeology.

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