Plural Provenance: Legal but Relational

Pictured: Brooms for indoor spaces on display at the Arna Jharna museum in Jodhpur
Image Source: Victoria Memorial Hall and Rustom Bharucha

Neha Khetrapal

The *Arna Jharna Museum* or The Desert Museum of Rajasthan in Jodhpur hosts a variety of brooms — tools for sweeping dust — that are highly likely to be interpreted as ethnographic artefacts in the conventional sense of the term. After all, why would brooms be placed inside a museum? Adopting a museological gaze, precipitated by the museum context, visitors — familiar with the conventional provenance stance that museums embrace — are likely to look for information that is useful in explaining the brooms' chain of ownership. This is because provenance for ethnographic artefacts entails information about their origin and source coupled with a trail of their ownership akin to walking into a museum and trying to understand who donated a precious piece of artwork or an antiquity; information that, in other words, helps in establishing an artefact's authenticity and legal title. Contrary to this most conventional expectation, the display of brooms at *Arna Jharna* is not associated with tags that display information that one expects to find within museum spaces, such as the following:

Object: Ethnographic Object
Origin: "Naga Hills," ca. 1905
Collector: E. ABC, Assistant Political Officer
Acquired: Donated to the Museum of Ethnology, City, 1908
Additional Notes: Displayed in Case 14 with Southeast Asian Ethnographic Objects

The displayed brooms narrate different stories or narratives that extend beyond ownership records and archival documentation — a story of the local materials that were used in their making, their use or functionality and the people that they represent. "Rather than focusing on numbers, the collection invites visitors to reflect on how objects of everyday use connect people to the environment — how resourcefulness, labour, and tradition come together in the act of making" (*Arna Jharna* Museum). For instance, some brooms have been created for indoor use and are — accordingly — made from the tender grasses of the area. These brooms could also be associated with the Goddess of Prosperity or *Goddess Lakshmi* and, hence, prepared in accordance with established ritualistic practices. Other brooms have been designed for outdoor labour and — hence — fashioned from coarser natural materials. Many of these brooms are also paired with their local names. Importantly, the display of these brooms presents an intimate connection between the local people and the very act of broom-making. As displayed, the finished products serve as a visual reminder of the social and economic realities of their makers.

The brooms — on display — are not portrayed as static ethnographic artefacts but the museum embeds these within the ecology of the region, livelihood, and socio-economic histories of their makers. In other words, they are heritage objects; they are relational. For the visitors, the brooms are not interpreted as mere artefacts but as subjects and as embodiments of relationships (human–material–land–history-society). The brooms and their materiality, in this regard, are inalienable from the desert landscape, from the skill of their makers, and from the dignity of sanitation workers whose work sustains society yet their voices remain marginalised. A mundane broom, in this way, is transformed into a relational heritage object. Its provenance enacted through entanglements with local practices and social relations rather than through a detached system of classification — characteristic of conventional museum displays.

Similar deliberations arise if one were to see heritage objects like *Pithora* paintings — a sacred and visual ritual art of the *Rathwa* tribes (along with the other tribes located in the central parts

of India), located in the Western Indian State of Gujarat — in a museum fashioned after the *Arna Jharna Museum*. Whilst no such museum currently is in existence, imagining the original housing sites of *Pithora* paintings as museum spaces allows us to see how different forms of provenance could emerge.

Pithora paintings are not created as artworks in the conventional sense of the term. They are painted on the inner walls of homes as part of a ritual undertaken to honour a local deity — *Pithora Dev*. The paintings are commissioned collectively, executed by trained ritual painters and accompanied by ceremonial enactments. Thereafter, these are permitted to fade — as part of the cycle of ritual obligation.

If such paintings were to be removed from their original sites and placed within conventional museum spaces then legal provenance would give way questions like 'Who owns the painting?', 'Who commissioned it?', 'In which year was it made?' and 'How was it acquired?'. These questions, crucial for governance and collection, would tell us very little about why the paintings exists at all. *Pithora* paintings, just like the brooms of the *Arna Jharna* museum, resist compression into ethnographic artefacts. It's of import to underline that the significance of these paintings do not lie in their title of ownership. Instead, they draw their significance from their participation in communal life. Once severed from their communal and relational life, their provenance is compressed into a thin legal trace — dominated by a linear chain of ownership.

Legal vs. Relational Provenance

The brooms of *Arna Jharna* coupled with the imagined placement of *Pithora* paintings in conventional museum spaces reveal a divide between two different ways of 'knowing' about heritage objects:

Legal / Conventional Provenance	Relational Provenance
Ownership, acquisition, and transfer	Focuses on ritual, uses, communal knowledge, ecological relations and other communal relationships
Establishes authenticity with the help of documentation	Establishes meaning through practice and collective participation
Treats objects as static and collectible	Treats objects as living
Privileges archival records and donors	Privileges community memory and oral history
Enables legal governance and market circulation	Enables ethical engagement and cultural and even religious continuity

This table reveals what may be labelled as *provenance compression* — a process through which complex relational histories are compressed into minimal legal descriptors. Yet when assembled together, relational and conventional provenance have the potential to unearth complementary forms of knowledge. In other words, evidentiary clarity paired with relational depth. Such complementarity or *plural provenance* permits scope for a more ethically robust understanding of heritage objects and even ethnographic artefacts within museum spaces.

Plural provenance, in this regard, proposes a coupled framework —a framework that permits legal records to exist alongside relational narratives. Within such a coupled framework, the emphasis is not tilted in one direction — construing heritage objects merely as legally defined objects, supported by documents, receipts, certificates and other kinds of evidentiary materials, or focused on addressing sociocultural and socioreligious contextual details. Rather, there is an equivalent emphasis on both. At the *Arna Jharna*, a broom does not assume significance because it is hosted. It is significant and merits display because it remains connected. Along similar lines, a *Pithora* painting is also significant because it is ritualistically performed and collectively remembered.

Conclusion

Contemporary deliberations about cultural heritage are increasingly inspired by the lingual currency of legal transfer and restitution. Thoughts about the acquisition of a (heritage) object and its legal claim dominate restitution efforts and museum governance. Along these lines, justice is deciphered as a corrective transaction — when an object moves back from one holder to another. Yet, this logic of transfer is not in line with how communities may imagine the embedded-ness of their objects — as discussed with the help of brooms and *Pithora* paintings. For these and other similar communities, their heritage objects are inalienable from their ritual, social, ecological and their religious worlds. A *Pithora* painting can fade with time but these cannot be separated from the originating socioreligious worlds and, as such, cannot be transferred like an artwork or an archeological find. In a similar fashion, a broom at the *Arna Jharna* does not undergo changes in significance through ownership but its importance lies in its sociocultural and ecological embedded-ness.

Legal provenance, essentially, translates objects into transferable units but relational provenance — on the other hand — unsettles this assumption. Engagement with relational provenance reveals that displacement of heritage objects is simply not a historical wrong but a conceptual misfit. Plural provenance offers a way forward, here. By coupling legal and relational understandings together, the plural provenance framework opens space to deliberate why justice may not always lie in transfer but in recognising the embedded-ness of heritage objects. In this manner, plural provenance does not weaken legal frameworks — rather — it exposes their limits but supplements them with alternate forms of knowledge. If museums are to ethically engage with people's heritage in a global context then they must confront comparatively complex deliberations than individual ownership. For several communities, heritage objects do not exist as detachable property but as participants in ongoing social, ritual, and ecological relationships. And there are many more examples like that: *Naga skulls* that embody clan, lineage, and territorial meanings, a deity's sculpture that is blessed, worshipped, and feared, and *Māori taonga* that encode genealogies (amongst other examples). Recognising relational provenance, therefore, propels museums to re-think what justice might look like when heritage objects are involved.

Neha Khetrapal is an Associate Professor at the Jindal Institute of Behavioural Sciences, OP Jindal Global University. She earned her PhD at Macquarie University (Australia) in 2016. Her research lies at the intersection of museum historiography, art and sensory history with a particular focus on South and Southeast Asian contexts.