



5-1-2009

# All the King's Horses and all the King's Men: Issues of Cultural Heritage Surrounding the Destruction and Possible Rebuilding of the Bamiyan Buddhas

Jennifer Berk  
*University of Pennsylvania*

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When the Taliban completed demolition of the Bamiyan Buddhas on Monday, March 12, 2001, Taliban Information Minister Qudratullah Jamal summarized the destruction as “not as easy as people would think”<sup>1</sup>. While he meant this assessment in regards to the actual physical removal process, it also speaks to issues surrounding the monumental statues. Carved into the side of a cliff in the Hazarajat region of central Afghanistan, the once-standing Buddhas have turned into a hotbed of international debate and have forced the global community to decide the most appropriate response. Because no single right answer exists to the questions of what to do next and who decides, we must consider the situation from various vantage points, allowing for a plurality of voices to enter the discussion. In particular, thinking about the motivation behind the destruction of the Buddhas and applying ideas of both universalism and cultural relativity will show why multiple conflicting viewpoints each proves relevant in its own right, depending on which interpretation of the event prevails.

Regardless of the interpretation or the theoretical framework used for analysis, some facts about the incident remain incontrovertible. In 1997, UNESCO and the international community successfully combated the initial threat to destroy the 125-foot and 174-foot sandstone statues, which were carved into the cliffs of Bamiyan in the third century A.D. and constituted the tallest standing Buddhas in the world<sup>2</sup>. Despite surviving this threat and centuries of invaders ranging from Genghis Khan and the Emperor Aurangzeb to the British and the Soviets, on February 26, 2001, Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar issued an edict that the statues “should be destroyed so that they are not worshipped now or in the future.” He expressed this concern in spite of the fact that no Buddhists had lived in the Bamiyan valley since the 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>. This edict similarly said that the Taliban would destroy any images deemed “insulting to Islam” or which “idolize infidel gods.” The new ruling reversed an earlier decree preventing the destruction of Afghanistan's many archeological sites, which then-Minister of Culture Mullah Muttaki pushed through the Shuria council in 1999<sup>4</sup>. While controversial even within the Taliban itself, the group stood strong against the 55-nation Organization of Islamic Conference and the U.N., who urged the Taliban to stop their campaign against the relics. At the Islamic Conference, Minister Jamal repeated what he had told other delegations: the Taliban will not “back away from the edict, and no statues in Afghanistan will be spared”<sup>5</sup>.

Staying true to his word, the fanatical Islamic group used dynamite to destroy the Bamiyan Buddhas over several weeks and in multiple stages. They first used anti-aircraft guns and artillery with the help of anti-tank mines to damage the statues and later obliterated them by lowering local Hazara men down the cliff face to place explosives into holes in the Buddhas, whose huge outlines still “appear as ghostly shadows on the cliff face”<sup>6</sup>. In an effort to fill in these shadows and as part of the international effort to rebuild Afghanistan after the Taliban war, the Japanese government and several other organizations, such as the Afghanistan Institute in

Bubendorf, Switzerland and the ETH (a science and technology university in Zurich), have committed themselves to rebuilding the two Buddhas. One restoration approach considered acceptable by UNESCO and other experts involves anastylosis, often used for Greek and Roman temples, in which the original pieces are reassembled and held together with a minimum of new material. The Afghan government has joined the charge to recreate the statues and has even commissioned Japanese artist Hiro Yamagata for the job. Yamagata would use a different technique than anastylosis and employ fourteen solar and wind-powered laser systems not only to project the images of the Buddhas onto the cliff where they once stood, but also to supply electricity to surrounding residents. The project would cost an estimated \$9 million, and if UNESCO approves it, would begin in 2009 and take until June 2012 to complete<sup>7</sup>. While waiting for the Afghan government and international community to decide whether or not to restore the Buddhas, a \$1.3 million project funded by UNESCO will sort out the chunks of clay and plaster in the region, a World Heritage Site (a little late) as of 2003, in order to protect them from the elements. The 2008 World Monuments Watch List of the 100 Most Endangered Sites included these remnants in the hopes that the listing will put continued national and international attention on the site and ensure its long-term preservation, to make certain that future restoration efforts maintain the authenticity of the site, and to make sure those working in the area carry out proper preservation practices<sup>8</sup>.

At first glance, this background information appears almost transparently uncomplicated. The Taliban, a regime that has controlled Afghanistan since 1996 but remains unrecognized by the majority of the international community, could not bear these tangible symbols of diversity and destroyed them based on an extremely strict adherence to the tenants of their religion, to the outrage of a more democratic West. The destruction represented a militant act of cultural terrorism, whereas efforts to rebuild the statues represent hope in the face of intolerance and violent barbarity. But does rebuilding the statues not also display intolerance of the Taliban's beliefs? If, in fact, their motives involve the unholy nature of the Buddhas, then claims of religious freedom on their part may require a reassessment of the idols' reconstruction. In addition, whether considered a legitimate government or not, the Taliban did have control of the land at the time of the demolition, lending support to the argument that they had a right to use their property as they wished.

The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, an international treaty adopted at The Hague in 1954, stipulates that the "primary responsibility for the protection of cultural objects rests with the Party controlling that property"<sup>9</sup>. This post-World War II convention has set the tone worldwide and attempts to do precisely what its title suggests and minimize destruction to culturally relevant objects at risk during times of armed conflict (Lynn Meskell will later discuss how the Taliban fought its opposition for control of the Bamiyan province shortly before the destruction). Under the provision mentioned, the Taliban, having gained control of the Bamiyan Valley, may not have overstepped their legal rights when they destroyed the Buddha statues in cliffs that stood on their land. Notice, it does not state "the government as recognized by the U.N. and international community at large," but "the Party controlling that property." Still, only ratified in the U.S. as of this year, Afghanistan has yet to acknowledge the treaty, and therefore it may not actually apply in this case<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, the ambiguous convention has multiple interpretations and someone must still decide what constitutes

“cultural property,” as no concrete, universal definition exists for the term. Would we indisputably consider the Bamiyan Buddhas objects of cultural heritage? Americans in power destroy buildings all the time, as in the notable burial of the President’s house in Philadelphia, because they do not view them as culturally significant or do not believe the story they tell fits in with the past they wish to remember. Still, other groups may disagree and lose a part of their identity upon this demolition (perhaps African Americans in the case of the President’s house, because slave quarters existed there and served as a tangible testament to the mistreatment of African Americans even by those in power). While we cannot save everything, why do certain people get a say while others’ voices get muted in the process? The Taliban, for instance, may not have viewed the Buddhas as a part of cultural heritage worthy of preservation, and they certainly did not support the narrative these Buddhas helped to construct.

The reason why these fundamentalists did not see the Buddhas as objects of cultural heritage becomes relevant here. According to anthropologist Lynn Meskell, in the eyes of the Taliban, “the Buddhist statues represented a site of negative memory, one that necessitated jettisoning from the nation's construction of contemporary identity, and the act of erasure was...about religious difference.” Meskell, however, also acknowledges the fact that the Afghan Shiite minority lives in the Bamiyan province, and that control of this unstable region wavered between the Taliban and their opposition just before the release of the edict. Furthermore, she blames the Taliban's inability to achieve international recognition and the implementation of economic sanctions in Afghanistan by the U.N. Security Council for the annihilation of the Buddhas<sup>11</sup>.

Clearly viewing the action as solely motivated by religion proves controversial. The Taliban could easily justify this position--the invocation of worship, Islam, and “infidel gods” in the declaration that resulted in the statues’ ruin does seem to indicate an inherently religious component to the destruction. In contrast, then-ambassador-at-large for the Taliban, Sayed Rahmatullah Hashimi, explained the decision as a manifestation of the Islamic government’s anger after a Swedish monuments delegation offered money to preserve the ancient works while a million Afghans faced starvation. In a New York Times interview, Hashimi made the point that, “When your children are dying in front of you, then you don't care about a piece of art.” He failed to mention, though, that the Metropolitan Museum of Art offered to purchase the “piece of art,” which could have provided funding for food. If the Taliban did not care about the statues as he claimed, then why did they have to destroy them instead of just moving them away to avoid the possibility of their worship? While the article featured anger and a kind of political revolution as possible motives, the same report also cited other accounts which argued that religious leaders debated the decision for months, and ultimately deemed the statues idolatrous. During a later interview for Japan's Mainichi Shimbun, Afghan Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawakel likewise called the destruction “anything but retaliation against the international community for economic sanctions.” Moreover, he said their decision is in accordance with Islamic law and “is purely a religious issue.”<sup>12</sup>

No one can seem to unequivocally determine the motivation behind the Taliban’s decision to wage war on the stones. If, in a fit of rage, they meant to assert their power as the governing body in Afghanistan and proclaim to the rest of the world that they will destroy anything which does not closely align with their principles, then this radical intolerance may very

well represent a form of cultural terrorism that other nations should in no way support. Perhaps these other nations should even rectify this use of political violence and make a clear statement against coercive tactics used to force others into submission by helping to rebuild the statues. We must not tolerate the use of might to intimidate people (both Afghans themselves and other nations) into recognizing authority or to subordinate a group. Not only is this a weak form of power when compared to fighting with ideas because it does not change basic ideologies, but acts of violent rage thwart any attempt to establish a sustainable global community. Without the possibility of open dialogue and acceptance of cultural diversity, we will never adapt to a post-colonial world.

Again, though, the acceptance of cultural diversity would include the Taliban, who worship differently than many other groups, if they interpreted the Quran to mandate the abolition of the Buddhas. It would prove hypocritical to admonish the group based on their religious beliefs, for just as we can follow the word of any god we choose, so too can they. Even the Old Testament condemns the behavior of the Jewish people who created a golden calf to worship when Moses climbed the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments. Who decided that this idol was sacrilegious while the Buddha statues constituted important symbols of cultural heritage? Western notions of acceptability and what should hold a place in history start to stand in for universal notions and risk falling prey to the kind of intolerance they set out to combat. In the case of the Buddhas, rebuilding the statues could easily translate into asserting the power of the West or the power of certain religions over others.

This final point shows that establishing motive would still not fully resolve the issue and would actually invite even more controversy. One could argue that even if the Taliban based their decision on religion and regardless of the fact that they had control of the land at the time of the destruction, they had a moral obligation to the rest of the world to preserve the Buddhas as objects of our universal cultural heritage. The previously mentioned 1954 Hague Convention sums up the idea of a global heritage when it states that "damage to cultural property belonging to any people whatsoever means damage to the cultural heritage of all mankind, since each people makes its own contribution to the culture of the world"<sup>13</sup>. This idea of global heritage has dominated the landscape in recent decades, but has actually relied on the ancient Greek ideal of cosmopolitanism to dictate how it will take shape in the new millennium. As we draw distinctions between democrats and republicans, between brand x and brand y, some scholars have tried to shed light on similarities and draw attention to connections among groups we initially consider highly diverse. They operate under the assumption that separate can never truly be equal, and even Buddha himself said that "in the sky, there is no distinction of east and west; people create distinctions out of their own minds and then believe them to be true"<sup>14</sup>. Following up on this idea centuries later, philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah similarly views boundaries between nations, states, cultures or societies as imaginary and morally irrelevant, or at the very least culturally constructed. He also notes that much of what people want to conserve as cultural patrimony came into existence long before the creation of modern nations and because of societies that have died out or completely transformed. Taking these ideas together, instead of seeing objects of cultural patrimony as only relevant to certain groups that claim to identify with them because they informed their past, Appiah believes all objects of cultural heritage have potential values for all human beings and "belong in the deepest sense to all of us"<sup>15</sup>.

A riff on this somewhat general idea of universalism more specifically places it in the context of nation-state claims to antiquities. Taking a cue from Appiah, archaeologist James Cuno focuses on the “imaginary” boundaries between nations and why their socially contingent nature makes them inadequate determinants of who owns antiquity. When a nation claims cultural patrimony over an object, these claims are inherently political and “serve the purpose of the modern, claiming nation”<sup>16</sup>. With a regime change comes a change in the parameters of the claim, as what one leader deems to have ongoing historical, traditional, or cultural importance may not include that which his or her successor believes to represent the instable culture. Those in power at a certain time make national, cultural identity claims that “reflect the interests of the powerful over those of the powerless”<sup>17</sup>. Again, because these claims do not prove absolute, Cuno would dismiss them as irrelevant when deciding in which museum an object should reside or which people technically own an antiquity. No single nation has the right to totally control an object’s destiny because it does not constitute any particular nation’s property.

Framing the controversy of the Bamiyan Buddhas in this way, “as an issue for all mankind,” helps explain why countries like Japan, Switzerland, and the U.S. think they have an obligation to reconstruct the statues and do not view them as ever belonging only to the citizens of Afghanistan or those ruling the country. According to this school of thought, when the Taliban placed dynamite into the rock, they did not just erase the cultural memory of those who adhere to Buddhism, rather they severed ties to the past that maintain the modern identities of every culture on Earth. In other words, people who the destruction does not initially appear to affect actually took it quite personally and want a say in how it plays out. If we view this desire through a universal lens and understand the statues as belonging to humankind in general, then we must take into account the opinions of the international community when deciding what to do with the destruction site. In theory, the idea of a universal culture that crosses national borders and provides an answer to the question “who owns antiquity” with a resounding “we all do,” seems like the ideal solution to this and just about any other conflict over cultural heritage. Still, in practice problems arise because we are talking about tangible objects that must reside somewhere. Additionally, since we do not have the means even as a universal culture to save everything, someone must ultimately decide what gets saved and what does not.

Even a universal cultural heritage would prove necessarily culturally constructed, since we must always draw the line somewhere. While questions of “where?” and “who wields the pen?” remain, it seems that, upon application to real world events, nations with power, prestige, and money end up gaining control. The utopian concept of universality includes the caveat that it can easily divulge into Western colonialism. The Met offering to purchase the statues in the first place or the international community contemplating their reconstruction would result in a devastating loss of, or significant change in, original context. Even more, these alternatives exemplify how countries that currently have worldwide hegemony can maintain their authority and impose their ideals onto others. In either case, countries with a considerable amount of international influence, like the United States and Japan, would have control over how the story of the Bamiyan Buddhas ends, and they could subjectively create narratives which privilege their ideologies. These stories would likely leave out “specific cultural, political or religious positions that diverge from Western, secularist viewpoints,” such as the religious beliefs of the Taliban or their claims of governing legitimately. Given inequalities between groups, ranging from sheer size (the Taliban constitute

the minority in Afghanistan) to vast differences in education or media access to available finances, how can any particular nation or institution justifiably take the initiative to legislate for others?<sup>18</sup> Although the desire to preserve international heritage proves noble, we must also acknowledge the hypocrisy of specific organizations and countries who attempt to implement particular global policies. We might also try to embrace cultural diversity as productive instead of attempt to impose a single world order, which would prove hegemonic at best and ethnocentric at worst<sup>19</sup>. Cultural relativism developed in response to this fear of (Western) ethnocentrism, and while not directly in contradiction to ideas of universalism and the related cosmopolitanism, this notion moderates them and fills in many of their gaps. Generally, the idea of cultural relativism says that we can best understand an individual's beliefs and activities in terms of his or her own culture. The hope of this framework is that it might allow us to salvage "distinct cultural forms of life from a process of apparent global Westernization," as it forces us to resist homogenization toward a dominant Western model with its appreciation of cultural variation<sup>20</sup>. Even Cuno noted earlier in regards to nation-states that civilization does not prove absolute. If we interpret "civilization" as a relative construct, then a person's conception of the world must necessarily be contingent on his or her specific cultural experiences. Extrapolating this idea to value judgments, because no one can rid themselves of their own cultural baggage or prefab assumptions about how the world works, no ontological, objectively verifiable truth exists independent of one's own particular culture. So how can any individual or nation presume to know what standards should apply universally?

This question clearly relates back to the case of the Bamiyan Buddhas, as it forces us to reconsider if other nations should help decide what happens in the unique valley. It becomes important to note that cultural relativism in no way helps us reach an obvious solution because it too has its theoretical and practical flaws. One could argue that the risk of ethnocentrism remains, for instance, since understanding may become provincial, and we may come to dismiss modes of behavior that differ from our own as savage or "the wrong way." Just as the Supreme Court concluded that separate actually never proves equal, the ideals of cultural relativism could degenerate into segregation or the isolation of cultures we come to view as completely unrelated to ours. In the age of post-colonialism and attempts to build a global village, this threat may prove less dangerous, but we must still consider its possibility. We must similarly consider the associated risks involved with "Othering" cultures. The concept of "otherness" helps us construct our identity in relationship to another as part of a fluid process that does not necessarily have negative consequences<sup>21</sup>. Still, though, this process often ends up normalizing the "self" or one's own group while at the same time decreasing the "Other" to minority status. This practice has historically led to the exclusion of the "Other," such as women or Arabs, who more powerful, normalized groups can then subordinate and dehumanize in an attempt to civilize and control these lesser people.

Thinking about Taliban or Afghani culture in terms of relativism, then, does not exist free from risk, but it does add another layer to the problem of what to do next. If we respect the regime's individual (religious) beliefs and admit that we cannot put ourselves in their proverbial shoes because we always come to the table with our own cultural baggage, then perhaps we should follow a hands-off approach. Why do Americans or the Swiss or anyone else have the right to judge the Taliban's distinct actions or determine what is right for all humankind when no



absolute right actually exists? Rebuilding the statues might constitute more of a cultural coup d'état (let us recall who controlled the region at the time of the demolition) than an essential part of cultural healing. In the context of cultural relativism, it seems like the ultimate hypocrisy for the West to criticize the destruction, or even think it deserves a say, when a parallel action on behalf of the Taliban would be met with insurgency.

Hypothetically, what if the Taliban protested the burying of the President's house in Philadelphia? Even if the group brought forth legitimate claims of cultural heritage, American authorities would likely ignore or readily dismiss these opinions. This relatively analogous situation does not indicate an approval for the decision the Taliban made or a dismissal of the outrage on the part of other nations, it merely points out the hypocrisy on our part. (The Taliban exist as a unique terrorist regime, responsible for many deaths and human rights violations, so they clearly do not equate to the governments of most other nations, although even the U.S. put the Japanese in internment camps during WWII and stole the lives and land of many Native Americans. The distinction still proves important, but ultimately too complex to flesh out in this paper.) We preach tolerance and preservation as long as it fits in with our perception of what should constitute history.

So, according to ideas of cultural relativism, we should not rebuild the Buddhas. Based on ideas of universalism, however, perhaps we do have an obligation to not only preserve but to restore objects of cultural heritage, regardless of where they reside. Either way, the answer does not prove as simple as "all" or "some," and neither solution indisputably resolves the controversy over what to do next. Even if we officially decided to rebuild the Bamiyan Buddhas, how would we go about doing so?

Would we use the U.N.-approved method of anastylosis or project laser beams against the cliff as the Afghani and Japanese want to do? Dr. Zemaryalai Tarzi, a French-Afghan archeologist conducting a dig near the site would approve of neither method. Tarzi claims he became a "militant for Afghan culture" the day of the destruction, and believes the scars should remain untouched as an enduring monument to "the darkness that descended on Afghanistan under the Taliban"<sup>22</sup>. It seems for some the emptiness speaks just as loud as the statues' presence, although it admittedly may tell a different story. In order to tell a story which benefits many various cultures to the maximum extent, we must resign ourselves to confusion at the outset of the decision-making process. We must understand that no clear answer exists and instead acquire multiple perspectives because, if the remnants of the statues could talk, they would remind us that "nothing ever exists entirely alone; everything is in relation to everything else"<sup>23</sup>.<sup>1</sup>

***Jennifer Berk** is a senior in the College majoring in Communications. After graduation, Jennifer plans to attend law school to study intellectual property law.*

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- <sup>1</sup> Hannah Bloch and Ben Wedeman, “UNESCO confirms destruction of Bamiyan Buddhas,” CNN.com, March 12, 2001, <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/central/03/12/afghan.buddha.02/>.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Matthew Power, “Rebuilding the Bamiyan Buddhas,” Slate, July 23, 2004, <http://www.slate.com/id/2104119/entry/2104187/>
- <sup>4</sup> Nic Robertson, “Analysis: Buddhas’ fate signals Taliban division,” CNN.com, March 2, 2001, <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/central/03/02/taleban.analysis/index.html>
- <sup>5</sup> Bloch and Wedeman, “UNESCO confirms destruction of Bamiyan Buddhas.”
- <sup>6</sup> Power, “Rebuilding the Bamiyan Buddhas.”
- <sup>7</sup> Carlotta Gall, ““Afghans consider rebuilding Bamiyan Buddhas,” International Herald Tribune, December 5, 2006, <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/12/05/news/buddhas.php?page=3>.
- <sup>8</sup> World Monuments Watch, “2008 world monuments watch list of 100 most endangered sites,” World Monuments Fund, 2008, [http://www.wmf.org/pdf/Watch\\_2008\\_list.pdf](http://www.wmf.org/pdf/Watch_2008_list.pdf).
- <sup>9</sup> “The Hague Convention of 1954 for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict,” International Council on Monuments and Sites, May 18, 1994, <http://www.icomos.org/hague/>.
- <sup>10</sup> Richard Leventhal, class lecture on “Public Policy, Museums, and Cultural Heritage” at the University of Pennsylvania, PA, October 7, 2008.
- <sup>11</sup> Lynn Meskell, “Negative Heritage and Past Mastering in Archaeology,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (2002): 562-63.
- <sup>12</sup> Barbara Crossette, “Taliban Explains Buddha Demolition,” *The New York Times*, March 19, 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/19/world/19TALI.html?ex=1228626000&en=9c137fe6e90c6599&ei=5070>.
- <sup>13</sup> The Hague Convention.
- <sup>14</sup> Christopher Titmuss, *The Buddha’s Book of Daily Meditations: A Year of Wisdom, Compassion, and Happiness* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 34.
- <sup>15</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), 120.
- <sup>16</sup> James Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity? Museums and the Battle Over Our Ancient Heritage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 11.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., 12
- <sup>18</sup> Meskell, “Negative Heritage and Past Mastering in Archaeology,” 564.
- <sup>19</sup> Ulrich Beck, *The Cosmopolitan Vision* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 45.
- <sup>20</sup> George Marcus and Michael Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: The Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 1.
- <sup>21</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1998), 203-216.
- <sup>22</sup> Power, “Rebuilding the Bamiyan Buddhas.”
- <sup>23</sup> Titmuss, *The Buddha’s Book of Daily Meditations*, 187.