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A museum concept facilitating multiple local developments in the ASPAC region

Consultation unlocks interdisciplinary resources: A community museum evolving in the Kelabit Highlands, Malaysian Borneo

Jonathan Sweet and Meghan Kelly

Community-based approaches to museum development in South East Asia have long been promoted by UNESCO as a way of contributing to sustainable development in diverse cultural and community contexts. This reflects the principles included in the 2001 UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which proclaims that development should not simply contribute to economic growth but also nourish a community’s intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence.[3]

It is also recognised that, while different communities may share a range of motivations for seeking out a museum concept to assist coordination of their cultural resources, in practice the process for realising each community’s vision of their desired future is variable and context-specific.[2] This means that each museum development project is shaped by specific challenges, including the one reported here, anchored in the Kelabit Highlands of Borneo, Malaysia, which is evolving through closely collaborative cross-cultural engagement.

Deakin University’s commitment to a community heritage project in Sarawak

Since 2010, a Deakin University team from the Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific has been assisting the Rurum Kelabit Sarawak (RKS) in the process of conceptualising and planning a community museum development project. The motivation for the project is underpinned by the Kelabit people’s strong sense of a shared destiny, as well as the evident need to preserve their cultural heritage.

In part the process is providing a framework for self-reflexive articulation of Kelabit identity. However the community at large also increasingly perceives the museum concept as providing an unusual development opportunity for multiple purposes. The museum framework offers a way of enhancing social cohesion, as well as assisting the local community to assert its authority over the representation and inevitable commodification of their heritage, and affirm the associated knowledge of their culture and region.

The initial stages of the Deakin project were reported in a 2012 issue of Museums Australia Magazine.[5] That article described the first phase of the project, which included a museological field school focused on community consultation in Bario. Realised in mid-2012, the field school facilitated cross-cultural engagement to deliver interactive learning outcomes simultaneously for Australian students and for the Kelabit participants from the host community. The previous article reported on the field school activities of discussion, participation and observation – which together provided a framework through which all participants were able to share different understandings and knowledge.

The present account provides further information about the concerns and aspirations that have emerged during the ongoing process of collaborative engagement, to provide further insights into the community museum development project unfolding in Malaysian Borneo.

Reviewing the Bario field school, June 2012

A crucial outcome of the 2012 field school was confirmation that the idea of establishing a museum in Bario had strong community support. Such support is essential to underpin both the viability and sustainability of the project. Consultation during the field school also reinforced the understanding that as Kelabit culture continues to adapt and change, a community museum concept is considered a useful means to engage succeeding generations of Kelabit people positively in the preservation of their heritage, and a vehicle for sharing this culture with visitors from the wider world.

Significantly, it was early apparent that the rurally dispersed members of the Kelabit community share similar aspirations to those expressed by their RKS leadership. All envisaged a community-owned facility that would create and nurture a range of programs in which they could meaningfully participate.

During discussions as they unfolded, the potential of the community museum to strengthen and enhance the relationships between heritage preservation, education and tourism also emerged as a key motivation for the project. This has the potential to build upon previous cultural development work that has occurred in the town.[4]

The community museum concept was therefore considered as an additional component that can align well with the desire to develop the town centre as a commercial and cultural precinct. It is anticipated that the museum component will enhance the existing building complex used for congregation and recreation, incorporating a town hall, specialist shops and cafés.

Conceivably the planned museum will become a symbolic representation of Kelabit identity while also acting as a reputable agent for the validation of local products, strengthening social cohesion and cultural identity within the community. Furthermore, the museum facility came to be seen as providing a key element supporting cultural tourism, reinforcing the locality as a destination to help orientate and

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shape the experiences of visitors, while also providing a centrally located gateway and relay-point to other cultural sites and related services in the town and surrounding longhouse villages in the Kelabit Highlands.

These interrelated facilities and their dynamic agency role, as planned, will complement existing advancements achieved in recent years towards the growth and sustainability of the Bario region, through increased tourism-focused infrastructure provided in the form of homestays and guesthouses. Additionally, these related developments could promote the market for locally made traditional craft objects and souvenirs, thereby also supporting the preservation of cultural heritage as evident in the work of specialist multi-lingual interpretation guides. In other words, there was a sense that these related initiatives would together invigorate the advances already in play in the region, as well as facilitating further opportunities for integrated development.

Learning more about specific community concerns and aspirations

In June 2013, a Deakin team returned to Sarawak to participate in a further series of community meetings in Bario, Miri and Kuching, which were organised by the President of the RKS, Dato Isaac Lugun. The agenda included reporting on previous activities and discussing ideas for the future.

Each meeting included a screening of Simon Wilmot’s documentary film, *World within no more*, which documents the 2012 field school. The film presents the views of many Kelabit community members, and documents their concerns for the preservation of their cultural heritage as well as recording the research processes that were being conducted by the participants. To any doubters in the audiences, the film had the effect of demonstrating the serious intent of the museum development project; and this boosted the willingness of people to participate in the further consultation process that followed each screening.

The growing momentum of the project was also emphasised by the introduction of two new members of the Deakin University academic team, brought in to address the expanding complexity of ideas and possibilities envisioned. These academics have added special experience in cross-cultural communication and community-based design practice in South East Asia: Susan Ang is a lecturer in Architecture and the Built Environment, while Dr Meghan Kelly is a lecturer in Visual Communication Design. Both were active in the consultation process during the second field school in Sarawak.

It emerged during the community consultations in Miri, the city in which the largest urban Kelabit community is settled, that the museum concept was being visualised as involving both a traditional museum and a cultural centre designed to embrace both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. This fusion is not uncommon in the ways that community museums have evolved in South East Asia, and was possibly based to a degree on models and examples that the participants had observed elsewhere.

Specific questions were raised concerning aspects of interpretation and community engagement, policy and governance, and the availability of resources and infrastructure to support the project. Indicative concerns included understanding ways of managing the use of privately owned artifacts, and issues of human resources – including questions concerning who would maintain the programs when developed, and what kinds of associated employment opportunities might be available. Issues concerning the representation of Kelabit identity and appropriate authority in the heritage interpretation to determine
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activities in the museum were also discussed. Despite coming into contact with colonialism comparatively late in the region’s history, Kelabit experience since the mid-twentieth century has been profoundly shaped by external influences that have redirected the priorities and beliefs of the community. It was felt that this aspect of local history requires documentation and evidencing. Furthermore one participant explained that although he knew many stories, he did not fully understand the timeline of historical events that had occurred nor the reasons for the decisions made in the past by his ancestors. This was recognised as an important aspect of inter-generational solidarity that could be enhanced through the museum.

In addition to this attention to the past, the contemporary lifestyle of the Kelabit people was considered a further subject for interpretation programs. It was also suggested that programs should stem from the unique political, social and environmental conditions of Bario, which could act as an integrative framework for presenting Kelabit history. If the Bario museum is to have an active role in preserving regional culture, it was understood that it needs to engage successfully with the oncoming generations of Kelabits, to the extent that they will be stimulated to return and be actively involved in the programming of the facility. This topic was discussed with younger members of the community as well, who explained respectfully that they would also like to use the planned space in their own way, to create an annual event for their own peers and interests. This reaffirmed the possibility that the museum could be a place for multi-layered gatherings, performances, events and demonstrations, and that these various strands might be aligned with a current festival calendar.

Towards culturally informed design and communication

A recurring theme during the consultation processes of this project has highlighted issues associated with infrastructure. Indicative questions have included: How would the museum work in circumstances where the availability of electricity was inconsistent? This has formed a theme for the next part of the development process that is scheduled for 2014, when another capacity-building field school for Australian students and host community participants will take place, to address issues of architecture, design and sustainability in the Kelabit environmental and social context.

Meanwhile, a deepening understanding of the museum requirements has emerged through the consultation process, and is guiding the design brief for the ultimate form of a building to be located in Bario. For these reasons, Deakin University has expanded the team contributing to the museum development project, to include a unique combination of academics who possess both theoretical and practical, industry-based skills, and are well positioned to provide additional guidance for the RKS and to assist the community to see this innovative project through to completion.

The Kelabit Highlands Community Museum Development Project richly highlights the context-specific and unique processes required to realise a development of the complexity now mutually understood by all parties. The isolated nature of the location, the small population, and the need to document and preserve a changing culture, highlight only a small part of the interwoven issues that are being navigated by the community.

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Dr Jonathan Sweet is a member of the Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific, and Dr Meghan Kelly is a lecturer in Visual Communication Design, at Deakin University, Melbourne.

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