



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization




# COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH TO MUSEUM DEVELOPMENT IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC FOR CULTURE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT





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# **Community-Based Approach to Museum Development in Asia and the Pacific for Culture and Sustainable Development**



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Editor: Nao Hayashi Denis (UNESCO Section of Museums and Cultural Objects)

Editorial Coordination:

**SEAMEO SPAFA** Kevin Charles Kettle, Somlak Charoenpot, Girard Philip E. Bonotan

**UNESCO Bangkok Office** Montira Horayangura

Design: Ratchaporn Tesjeeb

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**Francesco Bandarin**  
**UNESCO Assistant Director-General for**  
**Culture's preface to the publication**

## **“Community-Based Approach to Museum Development in Asia and the Pacific for Culture and Sustainable Development”**

The inclusion of the concept of cultural identity in global cultural policies was strongly recommended on the occasion of the World Conference on Cultural Policies (1982), which stated that *“the equality and dignity of all cultures must be recognized, as must the right of each people and community to affirm and preserve its cultural identity and have it respected by others.”*

Over recent decades, there have been many innovations in cultural institutions worldwide, leading to a higher degree of community involvement in their creation, planning and in determining their long-term missions. New institutional models in the post-colonial and globalization period have led to a variety of approaches by which nations, communities or individuals seek to adhere to new or revisited identities and very often to plural identities.

The community-based approach to museum development can thus be understood as part of a quest for identity, or identities, on the part of the peoples of the post-colonial world, as well as on the part of emerging nations and the various communities within them, many of whom are engaged in an on-going process of nation or community building. This process is part of the creation of an imagined, though not wholly subjective, sense of common destiny among the peoples concerned. From this point of view, it is important to try to understand the ways in which museum collections, and the peoples represented within them, have been viewed by the authorities that in the past have had the responsibility for collecting, presenting and interpreting them.

The new cultural institutions, though they share common features with what have traditionally been called museums in terms of their mission to collect artifacts and to preserve them for public benefit, naturally tend to go beyond the conventional organization of museums. Very often, they use a participatory approach that views the community and its members as active



stakeholders, and even as having authority over the interpretation of the collections presented, rather than as passive subjects of study. In doing so, they aim to create a genuine interface for the public that advocates community welfare and social cohesion by highlighting heritage that is recognized as such by members of the communities concerned. These constitute the bearers of that heritage, as well as of the forms of knowledge linked to it.

Members of such communities, often marginalized in previously dominant museum practice or in society as a whole, are given greater opportunities to negotiate the representation of their memory or heritage in ways they deem appropriate in such institutions. Clearly, such attempts trigger dialogue both within different groups of stakeholders and members of a given community, and between such stakeholders and community members and those outside them. Taken as a whole, the community-based approach to museum development represents an attempt to rethink the role and mission of museums, as well as the role and mission of museum curators and the communities that museums represent.

Museums using a community-based approach aim to invite members of the communities they represent to contribute to the process of collecting artefacts and exhibiting them to the public, with a view to building and reinforcing their specific sense of history and identity. Such museums bear witness to people's aspirations, not only in terms of preserving artifacts that have particular meanings for the communities from which they come, but also in terms of safeguarding and putting on public display hitherto overlooked or unrepresented elements of a people's heritage, or elements that are threatened by extinction.

These museums endeavour to preserve the cultural or religious objects and indigenous knowledge and traditional skills of the communities they serve, along with the environments in which such objects were used, and this enables community



members to function as the primary keepers of a community's history and collective memory. This memory, the sum total of individual members of the community's ideas and feelings towards the past and the present, is perpetually validated as part of a process of on-going exchange among community members. It is through this process, taken together with a shared interpretation of artefacts, visual elements and indigenous creativity, that communities reaffirm and defend their identities.

A further feature common to most community-based museums and cultural institutions is the importance they attach to transmitting and perpetuating living cultural traditions. For this reason, such institutions have tended to abandon the term "museum" in favour of cultural centres or heritage centres, this being in line with their employment of cultural heritage and identity as tools to maintain living cultural traditions and creativity and to help tackle economic and social marginalization.

Community-based museums of this sort have sometimes attracted criticism from traditional museologists, for whom their allegedly limited scientific ambitions, driven by a community agenda, suffer in comparison with more traditional museology that prioritizes an academic collection and research focus. Proponents of community-based museums have in turn questioned the mission of traditional museums, as exemplified in such museums' assumption of scientific authority. Indeed, there are questions that have been raised about community-based museums that deserve careful attention. Which groups or individuals are represented in community-based museums? Whose voices do they make heard? Do such museums risk presenting communities as static and homogenous groups without internal differences or divergences of views? Do they deny or minimize the universality of a scientific approach to museum organization and management? Do they question the very idea of scientific objectivity?



Clearly, the activities promoted by community-based museums will need to be reviewed in the light of their achievements, and they will also need to be investigated with a view to understanding better identity transformation and the changes in power relationships among the different components of a given society.

While the importance of such questions should not be denied, the community-based approach to museum development has the advantage of explicitly aiming to realize common goals for more balanced and equitable development. They echo principles stated in the UNESCO 2001 *Declaration on Cultural Diversity*, which proclaims that "cultural diversity widens the range of options open to everyone; it is one of the roots of development, understood not simply in terms of economic growth, but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence."

Representing everyday lives and values and placing collections on public display, community-based museums have proven their success in transmitting cultural knowledge to younger generations through reviving traditional rituals and festivities. They have also contributed to preserving the conditions that allow living traditions to remain alive as a result of the authentic participation of the communities concerned. Moreover, they have grown into their role of serving as a civic space for community self-knowledge and as a place where learning and the practice of traditional skills can take place, making them ideal platforms for community problem-solving.

The growing educational facilities offered by such institutions give voice to personal experiences and under-represented histories and facilitate public participation and cross-disciplinary collaboration. Many community-based museums encourage life-long learning programmes, seeking to put in place





conditions that enable communities to learn about themselves and their needs and to reflect on what is important to them and act upon that knowledge, all with a view to preparing better for the future. Just as importantly, they also strongly advocate the central role played by culture in adjusting to rapid changes, thereby establishing a role for museums as mediators in the process of cultural transition.

It is to be hoped that the case studies included in this publication will provide food for thought for heritage practitioners in their promotion of what UNESCO in the 2001 *Declaration* called the "harmonious interaction among people and groups with plural, varied and dynamic cultural identities as well as their willingness to live together." These case studies show ways in which museums can demonstrate care, humility and respect in exhibiting cultural property, while at the same time fully involving members of the communities concerned. In this way, they embody the idea of cultural pluralism and give expression to the reality of cultural diversity. When practiced in a democratic framework, such projects are conducive to promoting cultural exchange and the flourishing of the creative capacities that sustain civic life.



A handwritten signature in white ink that reads "F Bandarin".

**Francesco Bandarin**



# INTRODUCTION

**T**his collection of ten articles from community-based museums in the Asia Pacific region outlines different approaches made to enhance the role of museums in the service of community development. Their successes and the challenges that are ever present are described in these examples, in addition to the activities of the community-based museums that provide further insight into their development and various management styles that have been applied since their inception.

The motivation behind the establishment of the museums is varied and interesting: the vision of a researcher as is the case of Arna-Jharna, India; to the palpable need for cultural preservation as described in the Lahu paper; or the fear of losing their own cultural identity, as with the Tharu in Nepal.

Many authors of the collection consider the evolution of ethnological or ethnographical museums. Although at first, such museums may be conceived as a collection of cultural objects put together by an “outsider”, it is maintained that the interpretation and management of the collection are eventually supported and sustained by the “owners” of the culture - the community. This has been particularly the case for museums presenting materials originating from indigenous peoples who are actively reminding the world of their existence.

Because community museums emerge from local communities that often have little expertise in museum management, the authors also show the many support mechanisms that have been used in setting up or providing on-going assistance to the museums. These include initiatives taken by donors and foundations in Lao People’s Democratic Republic; by the national government in cooperation with a foreign government in Guizhou, People’s Republic of China, for example; as well as by individuals in Hong Kong. In some cases there was even initial opposition to a museum being established, as described in the paper from Indonesia.

The museums reviewed all share one thing in common in that they are relatively new. Yet, they vary immensely in size, scope, and function. For example, compare the physical space run by the national government described in the case of Vietnam to that of the temple museum in Thailand; or indeed the museums initiated by the Catholic clergy reviewed in the Philippines.

Further, the fact that the museums and their activities are recent indicates that the concept of community-based museums is also a relatively new development, and is constantly shifting. What constitutes a community-based museum, or an eco-museum, seems to be largely determined by the context of the museum and is also determined by the original intention of the founders. The papers suggest that *who* the founders are is an important factor in moving a community museum to become a community-based museum. Yet, it is also apparent that the management of community-based museums becomes more participatory over time, especially when drawing from local expertise, knowledge, and when members of the community engage with the museum's objectives in cultural preservation. It is only after this that the management style and evolution of museum activities are able to dictate the outcome.

Most tellingly, the papers show us many valuable achievements of being 'community-based'; many questions are raised, not least of all being 'what does it mean to be community-based'? From individuals up to the level of national government, the papers show a broad range of initiators who reveal that the scope is indeed wide in relation to the 'by the community', or 'for the community' question that is asked in trying to define 'community-based'. One thing that is certain is that all the cases from the Asia Pacific presented here demonstrate commitment *to* and *of* the community which must be congratulated.





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# ARNA-JHARNA: THE DESERT MUSEUM OF RAJASTHAN



Rustom Bharucha

# LOCATION

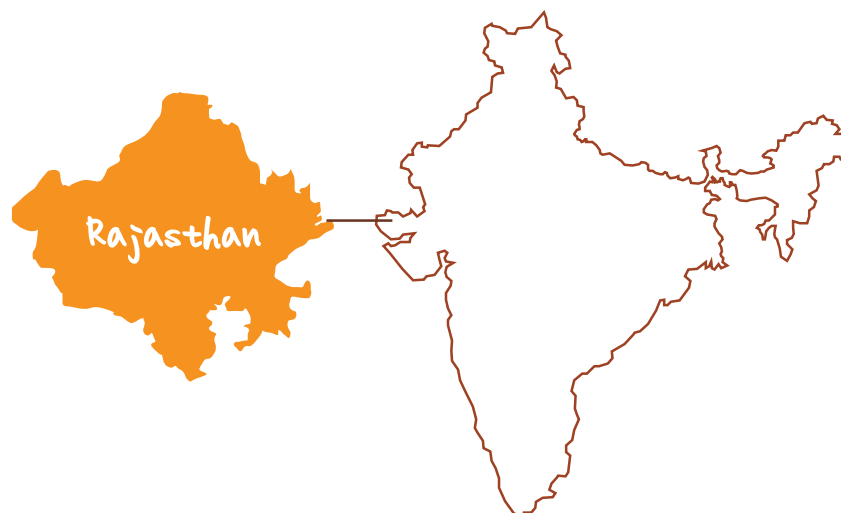
The words Arna-Jharna literally mean 'forest spring'. On one hand, it would seem to be an appropriate name for a museum devoted to the study of traditional knowledge systems within a larger ecology. On the other hand, Arna-Jharna also happens to be the local name of the region surrounding the museum, which is located 23 kilometres outside Jodhpur city in the semi-arid zone of the north-western state of Rajasthan in India.

If you visit Arna-Jharna, however, you would not necessarily see anything quite so idyllic as a 'forest spring'. Instead, you would find a harsh and stony landscape marked by cavernous sandstone mines and waste deposits. The attempt to create a museum closely linked with the preservation of natural resources in the heart of the countryside is, therefore, a direct

response to the larger neglect, if not violation, of the environment.

In this regard, one of the 'permanent displays' of the museum is a large man-made lake on the 10-acre rocky site of the museum, which was created by run-off monsoon rainwater and collected in the cavity of an abandoned mine. Yet another 'treasure' of the museum is the solitary *khejri* tree, which grows very slowly but is regarded as the life-line of the desert, deeply valued for its medicinal and other nurturing properties.

Given these ecological affinities to the lake and trees, not to mention the birds which have found a sanctuary in the lake, it would be possible to describe Arna-Jharna as an eco-museum. However, this would be somewhat misleading.



# E T H O S

As an experimental venture, whose infrastructure was first initiated around 2002, the museum can be more accurately viewed as an extension of a large body of grassroots research on traditional knowledge going back to the early 1960s. The founder-visionary of the museum, Komal Kothari (1929-2004), had a prodigious grasp of people's knowledge which he sifted, questioned, and collated over the years across a wide spectrum of practices and systems, ranging from the material (land, water, irrigation, livestock, geology) through the symbolic (folk rituals, customs, ceremonies), to the artistic (musical and singing traditions of the desert, oral epics, genealogy).

For Kothari, there was no primary source of knowledge; what mattered was the *interconnectedness of different knowledge systems*. It is around this principle that the museum attempts to coordinate and consolidate its multiple activities. Operating under the umbrella organization of Rupayan Sansthan (a folklore research institute that Kothari had co-founded with the foremost Rajasthani fiction writer, Vijay Dan Detha, in 1960), the museum attempts to interlink activities on multiple fronts – curatorial, educational, musical, and ecological.

It was Kothari's idea to establish the museum based initially on an interdisciplinary research of the *broom*, an object that is so ordinary, if not inconspicuous, that it is hard to imagine that it could catalyze the museum's growth. Over the years, the research and curatorial teams of Arna-Jharna have realized that the broom is not just an object, but a repository of relationships. This insight has inspired the team to study the biodiversity of the desert, from whose grasses and shrubs a multitude of brooms are made. This biodiversity in turn gets linked to indigenous modes of broom-production, and inevitably to the socio-economic realities of the lives of broom-makers and their potential for social development. Today, the Arna-Jharna Museum can also be described as the Broom Museum because it is the broom that inaugurated its establishment and will continue to shape its future directions.

# QUESTIONING 'COMMUNITY'

It is through its vast collection of almost 200 brooms from Rajasthan itself that the museum came into contact with diverse communities—notably, professional broom-making communities like the Banjara, the Koli and the Harijan, in addition to many other rural communities that make brooms for their own use from whatever material is available in their environments. Along with broom-makers, both professional and non-professional, the research on brooms has also necessitated close dialogue with multiple users of brooms, both from urban and rural areas, who have alerted the museum staff about the myriad values, beliefs, and customs surrounding brooms.

For instance, for a larger number of communities, the horizontal placement of a broom is auspicious, while the vertical is inauspicious; brooms are never used after sunset because it is assumed that the fortune of the household will be swept away in the process. Underlying this belief is the association of the broom with Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth. This deification co-exists with more earthy significations of the broom as a weapon of protest and as a

dispeller of evil spirits and diseases through the practice of *jhada*.

Because all the knowledge surrounding the broom was drawn through interactions with rural communities, the Arna-Jharna Museum can be identified as a 'community museum'. However, one needs to qualify this category by emphasizing that there is no single or specific community around which the museum has shaped its *raison d'être*. It is not structured in the same way that some community museums define their identities around Native American or purely indigenous concerns.

Second, there is no community that initiated the creation of the museum, as for instance was the case with the District Six Museum in Cape Town, South Africa, which evolved out of a social movement that brought together a larger number of people living in District Six, who were displaced by the apartheid regime. In contrast, the few families living in hutments surrounding the Arna-Jharna museum from the Bhil and Mehghwal communities are itinerant and are linked to the temporary labour market of the local mining industry. Fragmented and divided,





they do not constitute a singularized community even as the museum has attempted to reach out to individual families.

Third, the curatorial conceptualization and display of the brooms in the Arna-Jharna Museum are the product of a small group of professionals employed by the museum. In this regard, it is different from the community museums of, say, Oaxaca, Mexico, which are curated and managed by individuals from specific families in a village community, who donate their time and labour on a voluntary basis as part of a larger allegiance to the ethos of 'community service'. There is no such social structure that exists in India at a village level which authorizes individual families to assume responsibilities for civic institutions like museums. Certainly, *panchayats* or councils of elders do

play a critical role in the arbitration of disputes and property, but their authority does not yet extend to the legislation of community service.

Fourth, while some community museums have a directly political agenda linked to the displacement of people or the abolition of private property, the Arna-Jharna Museum can claim no such radical agenda. It is, as yet, a nascent intervention in the field of grass-roots museology in the Indian context, which is attempting to respect social codes and frameworks of everyday life through direct interactions with rural communities.

The Arna-Jharna Museum acknowledges the diversity of communities and the viability of communitarian structures and forms of knowledge; to this extent, it can be described as a 'community



Process of broom-making

museum'. Perhaps, in the years to come, it will be in a position to actually build a community around the museum—a process which is already at work through its long-term association with folk musicians from the Langa and Manganiar communities, who are regular performers on the site of Arna-Jharna. There are also a growing number of professionals like botanists, geologists, scientists, and development workers who are interested in engaging with traditional knowledge systems.

# THE DYNAMICS OF CASTE

While the idea of 'community' often suggests social cohesiveness, which is more often than not idealized rather than real, it cannot be separated from a larger spectrum of problems relating to patriarchy and gender which tend to be glossed over by communitarian thinkers. Inevitably, the Arna-Jharna museum faced the realities of *caste*, which continue to deeply define communities in rural India.

The state of Rajasthan, in particular, is known for its dense affirmation of specific caste identities and hierarchies, which are not easily negotiable. For this reason the widespread Harijan community in the state, whose members are employed by local municipalities as sweepers, are still identified as Harijans, and not as *dalits*. *Dalit* is the political category which has been mobilized and politicized around the so-called 'untouchables' in many states of India. In contrast, the *dalit* movement has yet to challenge the feudal social structures of Rajasthan, even as the politics around reservations (quotas) for low-caste groups has gained momentum.

Such is the discriminatory power of caste that it extends to the actual selection and organization of

material in the broom industry. The erstwhile nomadic trading community of the Banjara, now dispersed and impoverished, works primarily with different components of grass (*panni, munjh, sarkanda, sirki*); the Koli community works almost exclusively with date-palm (*khejur*); and the Harijan community monopolizes the use of bamboo (*baans*).

With new economic pressures, the growing non-availability of time-tested materials, and the monopolistic all-India demand for the *phul-jhadu* (brooms made out of a particular reed which grows exclusively in Northeast India), there are some changes in the processes of broom production in Rajasthan. However, by and large, the communities do not 'collaborate' or 'fuse' their practices; they have almost no social interactions with one another and work almost exclusively among themselves within the social norms and taboos of their specific caste groups.

Apart from the inner tensions within local hierarchies, there are contradictions found in the larger relationship of economics and social status among broom-makers. For instance, the Harijans, who are the most socially stigmatized as



Rocky terrain of the museum with lake created through water-harvesting

'untouchables', produce the most expensive brooms in the market made of bamboo. In contrast, the Banjara community, which comes from a relatively higher caste group, produces 'the poor man's broom' of grass. From such examples, we learn that economic mobility does not get translated into social status. The schisms remain across traditional divides despite contradictory economic realities.

## DIMENSIONS OF DEVELOPMENT

Inevitably, in addressing issues of stigmatization through caste and poverty, the Museum acknowledged that it has a larger 'developmental' role to play. However, it does not see itself as an activist organization, preferring to work from within the social dynamics of specific communities instead of attempting to rally them on more militant lines. Health hazards resulting from broom production, the relative absence of education among the children of broom-making communities, and widespread alcoholism are among some of the issues identified in the dialogues with broom-makers.

Some attempts at introducing governmental schemes of micro-credit were introduced by the staff of the Arna-Jharna Museum to the more entrepreneurial broom-making families of the Koli community. However, after an initial positive response, obstacles were placed by traditional money-lenders in the community who stand to lose from the new developments. It is clear from such setbacks that the road to development is a long and arduous one, and that it necessitates ceaseless dialogue and interaction with the communities concerned.

# THE CHALLENGE OF INNOVATION

To identify appropriate modes of creative intervention, expert broom-makers with multiple skills can assist in designing new products. The Banjara community, for instance, has tremendous expertise in different weaving techniques, which have remained unexplored. The twine needs to be woven by hand and is time-intensive; thus, the broom-makers have not pursued their weaving skills. If there could be a substitute for this twine, there could be savings on labour and new products like mats and wall hangings, which could be sold in the museum shop, may be developed.

In such interventions, there is always the risk of 'interfering' with traditional expertise. However, the museum has come to realize that innovation is not the prerogative of urban entrepreneurs or NGOs alone. Rather, it is a constant source of experimentation by the broom-makers themselves, who 'innovate' when the need arises, regardless of fixed norms.

It is regrettable that plastic strings, for instance, are now widely used

for fastening brooms because they are cheaper and more easily available than strings made of natural fibre. This is a practical choice that is directly related to the economy of broom-makers. On the other hand, one cannot deny that plastic poses a threat to the larger ecology. Even as flexibility is needed in accepting the functionality of plastic, its menace on a mass scale in obstructing drains and contributing to non-biodegradable waste has been identified by the museum as a critical problem.

While the museum realizes that it does not have the capacity to 'change the lives' of broom-makers, it is beginning to realize that it can mediate in discussions between broom-makers and municipal sweepers and the civic authorities. As yet, there is no structured dialogue across these sectors. The museum hopes to initiate such dialogues in open forums with the hope that constructive criticism, mediation, and dialogue can lead to possible solutions for all concerned.



# THE AUDIENCE

If there is one social achievement of the museum to date, it has made some dent in making the invisible visible, the inaudible audible. This has been achieved primarily through the exhibition of the broom itself, which occupies all three mud-and-thatched modules of the museum, representing Brooms in Inner Spaces, Brooms in Outer Spaces, and The Third Space, which focuses on the socio-economic realities of broom-makers through video documentation and photography.

The response of the audience to this exhibition has been strong ever since the museum was formally opened in July 2009. While the vast majority of the spectators are school children from Jodhpur itself, the museum has also been visited by NGO workers, local scientists and botanists, participants in folklore workshops, researchers, and students from other parts of India. The museum is also interested in tapping the vast number of pilgrims who visit the neighbouring Arneshwara Mahadeva Temple dedicated to Siva. This audience of pilgrims is an ideal constituency for tapping into the large cross-section of rural spectators, whose participation needs to be prioritized.

Given the location of the museum in a fairly remote rural area, which is not easily accessible to urban audiences, it becomes clear that Arna-Jharna cannot function like another government or crafts museum located in the city centre. Visiting Arna-Jharna does require a certain degree of planning, which makes the visit all the more memorable. As the museum staff begins to hone its skills in guiding the audiences, it becomes clear that at least two hours are needed for a satisfying tour of the museum.

In addition to the broom exhibition, there is the terrain of the museum itself which needs to be explored, including two rock etchings which go back centuries and narrate the mythical history of Arna-Jharna (linked to a brother and sister who died in a feud). In addition, of course, there are the trees, the shrubs, the lake, and the birds, which cumulatively contribute to 'the Arna-Jharna experience': combining the material and the symbolic, nature and culture, art and practice, in addition to their interdependencies.



Gopal Banjara, a broom-maker at work in Jodhpur by Navroze Contractor

## FUNDING

In terms of its economic support, the museum is part of an educational trust, Rupayan Sansthan, which received its primary funding from the Ford Foundation out of which a corpus fund was created. The actual mounting of the Broom exhibition and the infrastructure supporting it, including a comprehensive website ([www.arnajharna.org](http://www.arnajharna.org)), was made possible by an additional two-year grant from Ford between 2007 and 2009. While this funding has been indispensable for the growth of the museum, it has been supplemented by a great deal of voluntary labour and donations from the network of Komal Kothari's family, friends, and associates.

Smaller grants from the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development (The Netherlands) and the Asian Cultural Council (United States) have also contributed to the curatorship and critical discourse of the museum through visits by international experts from South Africa, the Philippines, the United States, and Mexico. The Museum believes strongly that the 'local' needs to be sustained through such 'international' collaborations and interlocutions.

At present, the Museum is attempting to be self-sufficient by expanding its audience. While the priority lies in developing long-term sustainable associations with educational institutions, there is also some thought given to tapping the considerable tourist market that converges around Rajasthan. As yet, models for developing 'educational tourism' or 'eco-tourism' have not been formulated, though they are likely to be mobilized in the near future.



# THE FUTURE

In terms of designing new curatorial projects, the Arna-Jharna Museum would like to prioritize the building of a new structure for its collection of 130 folk music instruments. The musical traditions of rural Rajasthan lie at the very heart of Komal Kothari's legacy. Without his initiative from the early 1960s in researching, collating, and organizing the vast musical repertoire of traditional musicians from the Langa, Manganiar, and Kalbelia communities, among others, there would have been no resurgence in 'Rajasthani folk music', both at the national and international levels. While this exposure to the outside world has not been free of its contradictions, a large number of musicians have benefited from this international recognition by building

their own resources of self-respect and economic stability.

A temperature-controlled and acoustically-sound building for the collection of folk musical instruments would be an ideal addition to the Arna-Jharna Museum. Not only would it highlight the rich archival material of these traditions, which has been collated over five decades by Rupayan Sansthan, it would also be an organic link with the ideational premises of what already exists on the museum site. Hopefully, this music room will be ready in the near future, thereby enhancing both the aesthetics and the interactive social dynamics of Arna-Jharna—a desert museum of Rajasthan, which attempts to relate the material components of everyday life to the dynamics of struggle, sustenance, and creative transformation.



Brooms on display in the museum.

## END-NOTES

For a comprehensive perspective on the multiple components of the museum, check out the website at [www.arnajharna.org](http://www.arnajharna.org).

Additional background material on the primary concepts of Komal Kothari can be read in Rustom Bharucha's book *Rajasthan: An Oral History—Conversations with Komal Kothari* (Penguin India, 2003). A more theoretical positioning of the museum *vis-a-vis* contemporary art practice can be read in Bharucha's essay 'On Bones and Brooms: Re-Materialising the Imaginary of the Future', *Third Text*, vol. 23, issue 5, September 2009.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Rustom Bharucha** is the former Project Director of Arna-Jharna: The Desert Museum of Rajasthan. Author of several books including *In the Name of the Secular*, *The Politics of Cultural Practice*, and *Another Asia*, he is presently the director of an inter-Asian Ramayana performance festival at Adishakti, Pondicherry.



# WORKING WITH SOURCE COMMUNITIES IN A DEVELOPING COUNTRY CONTEXT – THE TRADITIONAL ARTS AND ETHNOLOGY CENTRE



Tara Gujadhur  
Lauren Ellis  
Thongkhoun Souththivilay

# TRADITIONAL ARTS AND ETHNOLOGY CENTRE



Exhibition including recreation of ordination ceremony

Recognising the dearth of accessible and accurate information on Laos’ ethnic diversity, the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre (TAEC) was established in July 2007 to promote understanding of Laos’ ethnic diversity and to ensure the survival and transmission of the cultural heritage of ethnic groups. Located in Luang Prabang, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Centre houses permanent and special exhibitions, a museum shop of handicrafts made by ethnic communities, and a small library and cafe. The Centre has received over 15,000 foreign (fee-paying) visitors and more than 1,700 Lao visitors to date. TAEC has a staff of 12 people

and a Board of Advisors consisting of eight anthropologists and experts who provide references and guidance to the staff.

The Centre’s activities include:

■ **Exhibitions** The permanent exhibition contains text, photographs, and objects from villages in the north of Laos. Artefacts are rotated regularly and archival lighting, mounting, and display techniques are employed.

■ **Research** TAEC conducts primary research in ethnic communities and develop relationships to localise and enrich the information collected.

### ■ Preservation and documentation

The TAEC permanent collection consists of over 300 objects from 20 ethnic groups and are documented and preserved using locally appropriate archival methods.

### ■ Education and outreach

TAEC has a small library of books, articles, CDs, and DVDs, and acts as a repository of researches on ethnology in Laos. TAEC is free of charge for all Lao citizens and it also runs school outreach activities and guides training.

### ■ Advocacy and livelihoods

TAEC recognises the need to support livelihood development in ethnic minority communities, which represent a disproportionate percentage of the poor in Laos, as well as foster the more long-term goal of cultural pride and identity-building. The Museum Shop sells crafts sourced directly from artisan communities, which promoted handicraft skills and livelihoods based on traditional arts, and reduces the need to sell antiques. Most of these communities have



TAEC exhibits.

been visited by TAEC on research trips, and with whom TAEC maintains close relationships. On average, 50% of the shop's income goes directly to the handicraft producers themselves.

As a private museum, TAEC receives no funding from the government. The Centre was started with seed money from private donors and two foundations. Currently, the Centre's admission fees (about US\$2.40 for foreigners; Lao citizens enter free of charge), tourist-related services, and income from the cafe and shop cover day-to-day operating costs. Although salaries are low, the Directors work on a part-time basis and volunteers help fill the gap. However, any activity related to research, new exhibits, expanding the collection, or advocacy requires sourcing of grants or private donations. Thus, the Centre needs to market itself and cater to tourists in order to stay afloat, while also maintaining its integrity and responsibility as an educational institution and seeking to expand its outreach and advocacy programmes.



A guided tour of the TAEC

# TAEC'S COMMUNITIES

**T**AEC has three main target “communities” or stakeholders, with vastly different interests and needs. The attempt to meet the needs of its three target groups starts with a cultural museum’s most basic goal: to provide an enjoyable and rewarding experience for its visitors. From there it faces its most complex mission: to foster cultural revitalization and pride among source communities.

## 1. Tourists

It could be said that the main target of the TAEC exhibits are foreign tourists, as without them the Centre and its activities would not be financially viable. They also have the highest expectations among visitors, having experienced museums and exhibitions overseas, but are likewise overwhelmingly appreciative of the museum.

## 2. Locals (Lao)

On the other hand, few locals visit the Centre on their own initiative. Most Lao visitors are tour guides doing research, children from the nearby Children’s Cultural Centre, local business-people, friends of staff members, or students from Souphanouvong University. Many locals, including residents of the area where TAEC is located, are reluctant

to enter as they see it as a site for tourists or foreigners.

Meanwhile, TAEC organises visits for children from local schools and the Children’s Cultural Centre, combining guided tours and educational activities (colouring sheets and quizzes) to enhance their learning. However, it has become clear that almost all Lao visitors, and not just children, need to be guided through the exhibits. Many Lao are simply not familiar with the format of a museum, thus, to be properly engaged in the material, they need some facilitation. Therefore, TAEC staff must be more proactive in leading Lao visitors around the exhibits such as giving verbal information and facilitating discussions.

## 3. Ethnic minority communities

TAEC’s source communities are the ethnic groups represented in TAEC’s exhibits, and with one of the founders’ background being community development, the welfare of the target beneficiaries has received strong focus in TAEC’s work. Communities were engaged right from the beginning of developing the exhibitions, and to date, most of the exhibits are a result of an informal community-based cultural-mapping process.



Community member and previous TAEC intern Laila interviews Lanten girl

However, the communities' understanding of the purpose of the research and the role of the museum is limited, thus, TAEC very much drives the process. Appreciation is expressed, especially by elders, for the Centre's work of documenting cultural artefacts and raising awareness and pride in minority cultures, however, the results are somewhat abstract. The most concrete benefit to most of the villagers is still the income from selling their handicrafts in the Museum Shop. The Centre also provides books and supplies to

schools in the communities that it visits.

TAEC has been able to collaborate effectively with ethnic minority communities through various interactions that take place when the staff conducts research, handicraft development, cultural awareness-building, and philanthropy. These relationships with source communities are some of the Centre's strengths and distinguishing characteristics. The challenges and opportunities in its work with the communities are discussed below.

# WORKING WITH SOURCE COMMUNITIES



Handicrafts training

**T**AEC engages the source communities in almost every aspect of its work. Exhibition content is based heavily on primary research conducted in ethnic minority villages; most collection objects are acquired from the communities; and the Museum Shop's merchandise are all made by village artisans.

## **Engaging Communities and Applied Research**

In a developing economy with a complex ethnic makeup and remote geography, the first challenge is locating, reaching, and establishing communication with minority

communities. TAEC has to 'explain itself' to communities that generally have little or no understanding of what a museum is and what TAEC's objectives are. TAEC always meets with the *naiban* (village chief) and the *neohom* (village elders) to introduce its interest to work with the community. From then on, interviews are conducted to document village history, identify development issues, and come up with basic demographic data that help provide context. Community cultural mapping is a tool often used to identify cultural resources and issues. Using gender and age-



disaggregated groups help to capture varying types of knowledge, and the exercise promotes recognition amongst residents of their own community's cultural wealth. The research process is organic and informal, and may happen over a period of a few days or a few visits.

Given that TAEC represents living cultures, establishing an appropriate relationship with a community is also a deliberate process. In particular, it poses ethical questions, such as: "who should speak for a community?". TAEC must balance the perspectives of different ethnic groups, of the government, and of foreign interpretation when handling politically sensitive issues, both historical and contemporary. Though TAEC engages with formal village leaders when performing research, it eventually branches out to speak with a variety of informants in the community in a less structured manner. Through this, "community knowledge persons" emerge, usually as locally respected elders, priests, accomplished female handicrafts producers, and educated youth. Their most common denominator is an interest in interpreting their own culture.

Forging strong partnerships with these knowledgeable persons greatly enrich the quality of TAEC research. Exhibits are enhanced by personal



stories, contemporary objects, and quotes. They can be called upon to fill gaps in the Centre's information, to answer questions as they come up, and to provide advice and knowledge on an ongoing basis. Particularly in the highly bureaucratic context of Laos, this friendly network of contacts is invaluable when formal research activities require permits and government approval. The most productive relationships with source communities are invariably those which become more informal, familiar, and regular.

From the community's perspective, they have a stake in ensuring that their knowledge and stories are recorded, especially during this period of rapid cultural change. Some individuals have the opportunity to travel to Luang Prabang to see the exhibits. TAEC has supported 12 community "knowledge persons" to visit the Centre and see the results of their work. Communities stand to benefit from a greater sense of the true value of their material culture, and can make a more informed decision on how to manage

it. When there is a need, TAEC provides emergency financial support or contributes to the cost of ceremonies and festivals.

**Handicrafts and Livelihood Development**

The next phase in the relationship between TAEC and a village is often commercial as TAEC purchases handicraft products for sale in the Museum Shop. This part of the Centre’s work presents yet another set of issues. Identifying a reliable contact person, who has a phone and access to banking, can be extremely difficult. Training the community in ‘foreign business ideas’, such as product standardization and consistency, timeliness of delivery, foreign aesthetics or quality control can be a time-consuming and costly process. Encouraging artisans to apply their traditional skills to an object that is more oriented towards aesthetic purposes rather than utilitarian (i.e. a woven purse instead

of a woven rice basket) is challenging. Offering unique items in the Museum Shop is essential to generating revenue, but also important is providing visitors with access to traditional but quality crafts.

TAEC has established and is expanding a distinctive range of ‘authentic’ high quality items, and is assisting villages to earn income while preserving their traditional skills. This is crucial in ethnic minority communities that are feeling the pressure of resettlement, changes in access to land, and poor crop yields due to weather conditions, which all drastically affect livelihood security. Ethnic minority populations in Laos have less access to arable land, cash, assets, infrastructure and education and are thus much more economically vulnerable (Epprecht *et. al.*, 2008). TAEC’s research with source communities has indicated that the



Bokeo handicrafts at TAEC

primary reason for sale of antiques in communities has been the acute need for cash, either for healthcare or to purchase assets (such as motorbikes or housing materials). Drought years in particular result in the sale of valuable religious and cultural objects. Traders and antique dealers have successfully purchased scores of iconic cultural artefacts, many of which cannot be reproduced.

TAEC has built relationships with ten communities from ten distinct ethnic minority groups from whom it regularly buys handicrafts, with similar arrangements with other groups being started. TAEC has visited almost all these villages on research trips, and has gone through a long process of trial and error on product development, price determination, and order/payment systems. Operating under fair-trade principles, TAEC extends loans and prepayments to producers, offers market information and design guidance, and fair prices. As noted earlier in the paper, an average of 50% of the Museum Shop's income goes directly back to the communities. TAEC's handicraft producers are overwhelmingly ethnic minority women, providing supplemental income to more than 80 families.

### **Cultural Representation and Identity-Building**



Interviewing a Priest

As TAEC moves out of the start-up period of revenue security and exhibition and collection development, a more complex and enduring phase of community engagement begins TAEC is more actively partnering with ethnic minority communities to strengthen recognition of the peoples own cultural identities.

The Centre's exhibits constantly reiterate how contemporary, evolving, and enduring these cultures are. However, interviews in many villages reveal great changes in community cohesion, religion, and social norms. With urban migration, road access, village resettlement, and exposure to media, the overall trend is towards a homogenisation and "Lao-ification" of the country's many ethnic groups.

Being mindful of the nostalgia and paternalism that is often rife in historical or ethnological museums, the Centre does have a responsibility to document objects, practices, and beliefs of ethnic groups that may not



Interviewing Kmhmu weavers

retain these cultural markers for much longer. However, perhaps even more importantly, it is the Centre's responsibility to find ways to build the capability of the ethnic communities to recognise the changes they are undergoing and make decisions on how to manage the changes. Fostering pride of an ethnic minority community in its skills, indigenous knowledge, local resources, and identity would be an outcome far beyond what a museum can achieve through exhibits and documentation.

In one effort, TAEC recently piloted an ethnic youth internship program – an expanded version of the more informal visits from community knowledge persons. This was coupled with the launch of a special exhibit on the Taoist rituals of the Yao of northern Laos, the result of three years of research in two

communities. TAEC worked with the village leadership to identify one young man and one young woman from each community to participate in the opening of the exhibit and then intern at the Centre for three weeks. The objective was to introduce youth from these communities to the work of the museum, show them how the research in their communities was used, and raise their awareness on other people's interest in their history and culture. The four young people who participated ranged from 15 to 26 years old.

Over the three weeks, they visited sites of interest in Luang Prabang, helped the staff at the museum, and performed small research assignments. One weekend, the interns visited the Children's Cultural Centre to give a small presentation about their villages, cultures, and lifestyles, participate in a question

and answer session with the children, and other activities. They also conducted interviews with people who worked in local NGOs, to hear about different types of work, as well as build their confidence and to practice their interviewing skills. The TAEC staff, many of whom have not been on research trips, had the opportunity to exchange knowledge with some ethnic youth their age, providing them with real-life context to the exhibits and the information they had been reading in books.

Overall the experience was positive and many lessons were learned. However, because of their lack of

English language skills, the interns could only assist TAEC staff, and could not use many of the reading materials available. A shorter time frame and more structured activities would be improvements in the future. To what extent the interns will carry and share their experiences back to their villages remains to be seen. They were given small assignments to conduct interviews in their community and document their own culture. It is hoped that through these youth internships, TAEC will continue building relationships with young people who will become future community leaders and catalysts for cultural pride.



Ethnic Resource persons set up exhibits

## CONCLUSION

The Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre is an independent and private organisation, small in size, and non-profit. The roles and responsibilities it assumes are likely representative of most independent cultural institutions in the developing countries of Southeast Asia.

TAEC's stakeholders and responsibilities to source communities are just as complex. Tourists are vital to the financial feasibility of TAEC, as such, marketing activities and fee-charging services have taken up a large part of the Centre's activities thus far. To educate visitors to Laos on the country's cultural heritage is an important role of the Centre, as well as to encourage purchase of local handicrafts, and to promote ethnic plurality. However, it is important that the Centre does not become exclusive to foreigners, but is seen as a public resource of the Lao people as well. Educational activities and awareness-building for local residents is challenging and requires more creativity for these initiatives to do well. Finally, when engaging with ethnic cultures, it is vital to encourage them to participate in managing their culture. Working effectively with these source communities is time-consuming and costly due to their remoteness, cultural distance, language barriers, and economic situation. However, an organic process of informal relationship-building, cultural mapping and applied research, and handicraft and livelihoods development can result in strong partnerships with communities. This is arguably one of the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre's most valuable assets.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Tara Gujadhur** founded the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre with Thongkhoun Souththivilay (now Co-Directors) and has been based in Luang Prabang for almost 6 years. Tara has a BA in Anthropology and an MSc in Tourism, Environment, and Development, and 11 years' experience in sustainable tourism development, indigenous knowledge management, and community development throughout Southeast Asia and Southern Africa.

**Lauren Ellis** came to TAEC from Museum Victoria as a one year volunteer through the Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development program. She has an MA in Art Curatorship; her studies focused on museum practice and cultural heritage management. Lauren has six years' experience in cultural programming for and with marginalised and vulnerable communities, working in museums and a philanthropic development organisation.

**Thongkhoun Souththivilay** is one of the Founder/Directors of the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre, and is from Luang Prabang. She worked at the Luang Prabang National Museum for 10 years, where she was the Collections Manager. She has studied and attended trainings in Thailand, the Netherlands, Japan, and Laos, including Museum Management, Conservation and Exhibition of Southeast Asian Collections, and Conservation of Textiles.



# NIAS HERITAGE MUSEUM: BETWEEN COMMUNITY AND CULTURE PRESERVATION



Nata'alui Duha

# INTRODUCTION

The island of Nias is called *Tan Niha* or the land of man and the Niasan people call themselves *Ono Niha*, which literally means 'the child of man'. Historically the island is touted as *hulo solayalaya* or "the dancing island" because it is often shaken by earthquakes and hit by tsunamis. It sits 125 kilometers southwest of the coastal city of Sibolga and is the largest among a chain of islands parallel to the western island of Sumatra, Indonesia.

The Museum Pusaka Nias (MPN), or Nias Heritage Museum, is located in the town of Gunungsitoli on the island of Nias, North Sumatra. Established in 1991, the museum is managed by the Nias Heritage Foundation, or Yayasan Pusaka Nias (YPN). The main objective of YPN is to establish a museum that will serve as a cultural centre and manage the cultural preservation of both the tangible and intangible heritage of Nias. This institution does not only pursue educational goals but it also seeks to strengthen and maintain the identity of the people of Nias as they confront social change.

In its early days, the MPN was mainly an ethnographic museum, with about 6,000 rare objects. Stone and wooden

sculptures made up its early collections, as well as baskets and woven items, pots, weapons, traditional art, architecture, etc.

The museum currently consists of several buildings surrounded by a park along the beach. A mini zoo is located on the grounds, as well as a garden for plants used in traditional medicine. Four main pavilions display selected artefacts and one room is reserved for temporary exhibits. An open room in the middle of the fourth pavilion is set aside for old stone sculptures and various megalithic stones. A storage space that was built through financial aid from The Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development of the Netherlands is dedicated to the proper management of a large number of items. Another open-air structure called *omo bale*, resembling the traditional Nias house, serves as a meeting place for special activities and events, e.g. seminar, training, workshop, lecture, etc. The museum also has four fine traditional houses, *omo hada*, that are used as guesthouses for researchers.

Both the YPN and MPN were founded by a German Catholic missionary, Father Johannes M. Hammerle, who is currently the director of the



Preserving megalith and traditional architecture Omo Niha with community in Bitaha-Olayama

museum. He has been working on the island for nearly forty years. Johannes has been conducting research since arriving in Nias in 1971 and has published his work on the island's history and culture, in addition to collecting samples of Nias' material culture. The Director of the MPN is backed by a Vice Director, Nata'alui Duha, who focuses on collection management, exhibition, and the education programmes of the museum. The curator, Oktoberlina Telaumbanua, is assisted by an assistant curator and conservator, Faozis khi La'ia. There

are also personnel assigned in general administration, accounting, cashier, park manager, librarian, IT personnel, and other staff members.

Through the years, the museum has been supported by individual and private donations, as well as grants from international government and non-government agencies and foundations.<sup>1</sup> Until now, however, the museum has no permanent and long-term funding, and it is foreseen that operational costs of the museum will be a future problem.

<sup>1</sup> Recently, some of the museum's programmes were funded by the Nias and North Sumatra provincial government, the Prince Claus Fund (the Netherlands) and World Bank - Jakarta through the Government of the Republic of Indonesia, Ministry of Home Affairs, Directorate General of Community and Village Empowerment.



# THE MUSEUM AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

## 1. Challenges

The initial idea of establishing the museum on the island of Nias was strongly challenged by many parties. Opposition came from members of the Capuchin Congregation itself. The debate among them centred on the rationale of protecting material culture, especially such “unused things” that may hinder people from moving on to modern life. It was also argued that the museum might promote the aspects of local culture related to polytheism and animism, which are against Christian teaching. Some members also reasoned that culture is not part of the scope of work of a missionary. However, the members of the congregation eventually recognized that the museum will enhance the church’s service.

A stronger challenge came from the Nias leaders at that time. The Bupati, or the Regent of Nias, did not give permission to the congregation to establish the museum because the local government wanted to build its own museum. Furthermore, the community suspected the effort of a

member of a Catholic missionary in collecting the material culture of Nias as merely a strategy to ship these objects to Europe.

Some community members also associated caring for indigenous culture with idol-worship. This view came from Christian missionaries who taught the people of Nias to abandon their indigenous culture and instead worship the Christian god.

## 2. Creating an inviting museum

While facing the challenges mentioned, the museum initiated activities that involved the community members. In 1991, young people participated in a six-month training on culture, art, and tourism, followed by a two-week festival of art competitions and an auction of traditional crafts. Through these activities, the broader community gradually appreciated the role of the museum. Even the local government opened a permanent access road to the site. As mentioned above, the location of the museum and its surrounding are very inviting to visitors, especially the residents of



With the local community in Dekha.

the community. It is located by the sea side and is surrounded by a green park. On Sundays, around a thousand people troop to the museum to enjoy the beach and mini zoo, harvest medicinal herbs, visit the permanent exhibitions, appreciate the traditional architecture, read in the library, etc. A newsletter called *Media Warisan* was also published to communicate the museum's programmes. The community gradually felt the positive impact of

the museum, particularly as a cultural and educational centre.

The activities on cultural awareness (discussed in detail below) shaped a more positive view of the community towards the museum: that is from suspicion to trust, and from perceiving traditional knowledge and artefacts as archaic cultural expressions to something of far greater valuable.

# BACKGROUND ON TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE AND MEGALITHIC SCULPTURES

In addition to protecting, preserving, and developing the tangible cultural heritage of the museum, the Nias Heritage Museum was recently developed into a living museum promoting heritage-related activities.

## 1. Traditional architecture *Omo Niha* or *Omo hada*

As one of the main activities of the museum, the staff has been working with local communities across the island to help reconstruct and renovate the traditional house, *Omo Niha*, or the house of man ('man' refers to the people of Nias and *Omo Niha* is literally translated as 'the child of man'). When the descendants of the *Omo Niha* constructed their houses on the island, a new period began in Nias. Each community built and occupied a territory called *banua*, which is a reflection of the micro cosmos of the Nias people. *Banua* also means sky or outer space where, as traditional myths say, the *Omo Niha* originated. As a political territory, the *banua* is

a space for social organization, governance, and hierarchy through laws and religion.

Meanwhile, according to the name of traditional house, *omo hada*, the structure is not only seen as a dwelling place. The traditional house, especially the house of the chief, is also seen as a place to maintain customs and promulgate the law.

The many *banua* in Nias are renowned for their extraordinary traditional architecture and megalithic monuments, which have been the subject of much scholarly attention and are one of the island's main tourist attractions. The *omo hada* embodies the core features of Nias traditional culture since they are linked to nearly every aspect of traditional life, such as social organization and political structure; art and aesthetics; religious beliefs and values; and technology. As such, the *omo hada* are the source of great pride and cultural identity of the people.

Linked inextricably with the *omo hada* is the *osali*. *Osali* refers to a large wooden chest in which the village's valuables and precious goods are stored for safekeeping. The *osali* is kept in the chief's house and is positioned in front of a wall from which figures of the ancestors hang, constantly reminding the household of the ancestors' spiritual presence and powers. In some areas of the island, such as in the north, the museum could not acquire old houses or artefacts. Their owners refused to part with these heirlooms for fear of retribution, in the form of a curse, from the spirit of their ancestors (Hammerle, 2009).

Paid with such respect, the *omo hada* has long served as a repository of a community's history and culture as well as a space in which such knowledge is transmitted. Hence, the museum puts full attention to the *omo hada* because it can be a living museum for the family and the community (see Christina Kreps, 2006). The house of the Nias people, *omo niha* or *omo hada*, cannot be separated from the life of the *Ono Niha*. The Nias Heritage Museum

presents all kinds and style of traditional houses of the island both inside the exhibit room (as miniature models) and on the museum grounds in their actual size.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Care for the megalith sites

Aside from the *omo hada*, the other stand-out pieces of the traditional villages are the megaliths. The megaliths are stones set in front of houses all over the village, especially in villages in the southern part of Nias. Some of the anthropomorphic stone sculptures are monuments as well as religious figures inhabited by the spirit of ancestors. The megaliths also immortalize the most important event in a person's life, namely the merit ceremony that declares and confirms its owner's wealth and social status (see (Bonatz, 2009).

The Nias Heritage Museum, with strong collaboration with local communities, had been doing conservation work in the megalith site in the village of Bitaha-Olayama, central Nias, since 2007.

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<sup>2</sup> To further promote traditional architecture, the museum collaborated with both individual and institutional partners. Among them are the Public Affairs Section the US Embassy in Jakarta, The Johanniter, Caritas Italy, the Münster and Konstantz Community – Germany, Muslim Aid in London, and the recent and ongoing project with PT. Han Awal & Partners Architects – Jakarta and the Tirto Foundation.





Omo Niha with the community in Bitaha-Olayama

### 3. Preserving and transmitting indigenous knowledge

#### 3.1. Traditional medicine

Traditional healing is also promoted by the museum. In 2002 and 2004, workshops and trainings for herbal medicine practitioners were organized. These activities were directed by Professor Dr. Aznan Lelo (North Sumatra University, Department of Pharmacology) and supported by the natural cosmetics company PT Martina Berto Martatilaar. More than forty local practitioners participated in the workshop.<sup>3</sup>

#### 3.2. Traditional skills

Promoting and reconstructing vernacular architecture went hand in hand with revitalizing and transmitting traditional techniques in carpentry and handicraft. A vernacular house is normally embellished with carvings and other artworks and ornaments – from the base to the top of the structure. The *Omo Hada* is therefore a storage of ideas on the one hand, and a expression of ideas on the other.

<sup>3</sup> The result of this training was documented and published in a book entitled *Traditional Medicine of Nias*. Recently the international organization HELP-Hilfe zur Selbsthilfe e.V from Germany translated and used this book as part of a community livelihood programme in Lahusa, South Nias.

### 3.3. Handicrafts, oral and musical traditions, and laws

In order to preserve the traditional skill in basketry, weaving, and carving, the museum carried out a two-week art festival and competition in 1999. Traditional music and rituals from the southern and northern parts of the island were also performed. The festival was a form of campaign to sustain craft skills as well as to develop handmade products for income.

Another way to preserve local skills is by recording the oral tradition of Nias, i.e. poetry (*hoho*), music, songs etc. The following have been recorded so far: *Hilinawal -Fau* (2006), *Orahili-Fau* (2007), *Hili'amaetaniha* (2008) and *Iraonogaila - West Nias* (2008).

Since 2007, in the village of Hili'amaetaniha, the museum has been implementing a special programme to revitalize tradition, art, handicrafts, and customary laws.



Community members were encouraged to preserve their tangible and intangible cultural heritage, including recipes of traditional food, which may complement tourism development. The communities in this village were also encouraged to perform traditional ceremonies associated with building and inaugurating houses, weddings, funerals, etc.

### 3.4. Opportunities for job creation

Promoting *omo hada* as a comfortable and appropriate dwelling in a seismically active and isolated island has given a chance for local carpenters and artists to develop and use their knowledge, and thus generate income from their craft.

The cultural heritage preservation activities of the museum are also inspiring communities to use local wisdom in their daily lives. Local wisdom may be perceived as a resource that drives the economy and promotes livelihood based on



community needs. With better awareness and pride of their culture, the people are motivated to use products that are crafted by local artists.

### 3.5. Establishing stakeholder ownership

To strengthen collaboration between the museum and the community, the Nias Heritage Museum and its partners initiated a forum called 'Friends of the Museum' (*forum masyarakat peduli museum*), which was started in 2004. This dialogue and partnership is important because the concept of a 'museum', introduced externally, was unfamiliar to the community and was initially understood by the people of Nias as solely a storage space for antiquities. The members and coordinators of the forum were composed mostly of public figures from government and non-government organizations who

had their own understanding of the museum's function. Their ideas often contrasted with how the management envisioned the museum. While the debates were heated, the forum members eventually acknowledged the importance of the museum in heritage preservation and education. In September 2009, a civil society organization, Nias Heritage Preservation Association or Perhimpunan Pelestari Pusaka Nias (P3N), was formed through the facilitation of the Nias Heritage Museum. The members consisted of representatives from villages all over Nias. A group of participants in a workshop on heritage inventory and cultural preservation agreed to form the organization, which was in line with the objective of building partnerships within the community and to develop their sense of ownership of the museum's vision.





### 3.6. *The museum as an educational tool*

To pursue the museum's mission on heritage education, the museum staff continuously invites participants from various school levels, especially students in elementary school. Recently, more than 250 school teachers and 1,000 school kids participated in a training and capacity-building programme that further enhanced the interest of the local people to visit the museum. The participants stayed for a night in the fine traditional houses on the museum grounds. They also watched video screenings, attended lectures on history, played traditional music, recounted oral legends and myths, used traditional household tools, identified the uses of plants

for traditional medicines, enjoyed the mini zoo, and explored the past of the *Ono Niha*.

School-teachers from other districts of Nias had the same experience but in addition they were challenged to explore the ideas behind a certain traditional object and find ways on how to teach about these objects to the students.<sup>4</sup>

### 3.7. *Documentation and publication*

In terms of collection management, over 6,000 objects need to be inventoried, registered, catalogued, conserved, and displayed by the museum staff.<sup>5</sup>

The first edition catalogue (for the first pavilion of the museum) had the

<sup>4</sup> This programme was supported by Word Bank-Jakarta through the Government of the Republic of Indonesia, Ministry of Home Affairs, Directorate General of Community and Village Empowerment.



support of the Prince Claus Fund. Today, the museum staff is working on a second catalogue (for the second pavilion), as well as the Nias cultural heritage encyclopaedia<sup>6</sup>. Previous publications by the foundation and the museum were about vernacular architecture entitled *The Big House (Omo Sebua)* and *The Story of 'Adu' Sculptures (Hikaya Nadu)*. Recordings of oral traditions (oral stories) and the history of some of the collections have also been undertaken. So far, the museum has published 13 books, namely:

- *Famato Harimao (Ritual of the Tiger)* in Nias version
- *Omo Sebua (The Big House)*
- *Ritus Patung Harimau (Tiger Ritual)* in Indonesian version
- *Hikaya Nadu (The Story of 'Adu' Sculptures)*
- *Dinudo-duno ba Nori Onolalu (Stories from the Onolalu Region)*
- *He'iwisa ba Dano Neho (What About in Neho Region)*
- *Nias eine-eigene Welt (German version)*
- *Daeli Sanau Talinga dan Tradisi lisan di Onowaembo Idanoi (The ancestor of Daeli and the Oral tradition from Onowaembo Idanoi)*
- *Traditional Herbs of Nias*
- *Religious movement Fa'awosakh Yesu (AFY) in Nias Island*
- *Asal usul Masyarakat Nias (The Origin of Nias Society)*
- *Tururan Tiga Sosok Nias (The Talk of the Three Nias Figures)*
- *The First Catalog Collection of Nias Heritage Museum in the 1<sup>st</sup> Pavilion*

<sup>5</sup> The inventory of more than fifty percent of the entire collection was made possible by the support of the Ford Foundation – Jakarta.

<sup>6</sup> This is done in collaboration with the World Bank through the Government of the Republic of Indonesia, Ministry of Home Affairs, Directorate General of Community and Village Empowerment.



Traditional dance by school kids in the museum.

# CONCLUSION

Community members are most encouraged to learn further about their culture through the exhibition of the museums. Moreover, the next generation has a lot to learn from the carefully-planned education programmes of the museum, such as the lessons on the techniques in traditional architecture and herbal medicine.

As a service to the public, the museum sees to it that it is run professionally and in a culturally-sensitive manner. This is done by combining local wisdom with the international code of ethics and standards in museum management. The museum keeps in mind that it has to serve the needs of the community by facilitating the preservation of the people's culture and identity. It works to promote culture as part of the identity of the people, thus, it cannot be separated from the local community who use the museum for education and inspiration. Ultimately, it is important for the museum to show the best characteristics of the community it wishes to represent.

To effectively make museum objects a source of inspiration, museum staff should have good skills in exhibition development. To achieve this objective, the museum personnel should have the opportunity to enhance their expertise through trainings in collection management and community development.

# LESSONS LEARNT AND FUTURE PLANS

Serving the needs of the community makes museum work quite complex. Identifying their needs alone is complicated because communities are heterogeneous, diverse, and multi-cultural. Moreover, culture has always been dynamic and ever-changing, hence, the paradigm of cultural conservation is likewise evolving. The heritage museum in Nias is therefore a process. It transforms and adjusts itself based on the changing social conditions over time. The work is never completed and will never be perfect. Ultimately, the Nias Heritage Museum has to be responsible to the local community and will strive to become an inspiration for self-reliance and social identity.

The long term plan of the museum is to encourage more access to its facilities and collections, strengthen

community participation, establish stakeholder ownership through site conservation, serve the cultural needs of the community, become an effective educational tool for its visitors, and spread the seeds of inspiration via its exhibitions and supporting activities. Moreover, it hopes to serve all kinds of people (children, people with disabilities, adults, elders, women, men, educated and uneducated, the poor and the rich, etc.).

It will also work towards enhancing its collection management and establishing a formal collection policy, taking into account a "bottom-up" management approach and community-based programming. The Nias Heritage Museum will strive further to confirm that the museum is a centre of community interaction in a cultural context.





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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Nata'alui Duha** was born in the village of Hilimondregeraya-Telukdalam, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March 1972. He is the Vice Director of the Nias Heritage Museum since 2003 up to the present. He was a participant in a training on Museum Studies at the Department of Anthropology, University of Denver, Colorado in 2004.



# VIETNAM MUSEUM OF ETHNOLOGY: COMMUNITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT



Nguyen Van Huy

# INTRODUCTION

The Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (VME) is both a research institute and a center of tangible and intangible culture. Among its functions are: to conduct scientific research on ethnic groups in Vietnam; to disseminate the outcomes of studies on the history and culture of the nation; and to provide ethnological material and training for the personnel of other museums of ethnology. For many years, these functions were under the Institute of Ethnology. In November 12, 1997, the VME was inaugurated in a 4.27 hectare land in Hanoi, eight kilometers from the city center. The total cost for the construction of the museum was VND 35 billion.

The museum building has exhibition rooms, a research centre, a library, and an auditorium, covering a total area of 2,480 square meters, including 750 square meters for storage. The outdoor exhibition area covers two hectares and has ten different types of traditional houses representing various ethnic groups (ground house, house-on-stilts, half-ground and half-stilt house, long house), communal houses (*Rong* of the Banah ethnic group), grave house, and water-powered rice mortars. The museum's pond is the

venue for monthly water puppet shows, and its garden is the site for demonstrations on handicraft production and artistic performances.

By 2009, there are some 20,000 artefacts, 50,000 photos, slides, video and audio tapes, and CD-ROMs owned by the museum. Its artifacts are not expensive antiques, but are mostly tools and everyday objects reflecting the different tangible and intangible cultural aspects of ethnic groups, their daily life, and cultural expressions.

The museum's objects reflect the everyday lives of the people of different ethnic groups. The exhibits are kept simple so that visitors can admire the beauty of each everyday item. In addition to objects, there are photos, texts, videos, and many reference materials for the various needs of researchers. Photos and videos are used to show the real lives of ethnic groups. There are also mannequins, maps, graphs, hardcover books, audio tapes, models, and 33 section panels. Dioramas also highlight certain customs or cultural features of ethnic groups.

Collections are displayed according to language groups and territories.



Gia-rai tomb house: Paintings on the roof of the tomb have become rare in the Central Highlands. The VME encourages Gia-rai peoples to use natural color for repainting the discolored one.

Each object is labeled according to its name and which ethnic group and locality it came from. Most of the exhibited objects are original. The current permanent exhibition of the museum only displays a limited number of artefacts. The museum's guideline is not to have many objects on display so the audience can focus on the exhibit.

At present, the museum has nearly one hundred staff members, many of whom are experts and researchers on ethnology, preservation, museum education, and exhibition.

Every year, the government allocates a budget of VND 4-5 billion to cover the museum's running cost,

exhibition, and other activities. The museum has also received assistance from different international organizations such as the Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, Solidarity Foundation of the French Government, SiDa Sweden, and UNESCO to improve the quality of its activities, particularly its educational programs and its links with the community.

The number of visitors to the museum has been increasing. In 1998, there were only 37,000 visitors. This rose to 56,000 in 2000, and in 2009 the figure reached 450,000. Domestic visitors, in particular, are increasingly interested in the museum.

# CASE STUDIES

## Case Study 1

The VME conducted research on the traditional production of fishing boats and tools by the villagers in Ha Nam Island, Yen Hung district, Quang Ninh province. The island has a large tidal area, making it an ideal location for fishing and aquaculture. For generations, many villagers have built their expertise in the traditional building of bamboo boats that are light, easy to transport, and suitable for fishing in rivers and off the shores of Ha Long Bay. These boats and fishing tools are sold around the area. In the vast bay area, people prefer to use boats built by Ha Nam islanders because the boats are very durable and easy to use.

During the long wartime years, the traditional production of fishing boats declined. People in agricultural cooperatives focused more on rice production within this period as well. After the war, people living in swampy areas started shrimp farming for the export market. This new livelihood brought substantial earnings for many families, particularly those who have capital to hire laborers and are involved in land trading. Moreover, as inshore marine resources declined and

modern fishing equipment became widely available, fishermen have to fish off-shore, requiring longer trips using bigger boats and ships.

The demand for bamboo fishing boats and other tools consequently declined. However, a number of people still earn from the occasional production and selling of bamboo boats. The shift towards a market economy thus poses many challenges to the Ha Nam islanders, particularly when they have to choose between various means of livelihood and the preservation of their traditional skills.

Using photos, objects, and texts, along with demonstration of artisans, the VME hosted an exhibition on the production of bamboo boats and fishing tools. A similar exhibition and demonstration was held at Bach Dang Museum, about five kilometers from Ha Nam Island. On both occasions, the artisans had the chance to directly introduce their expertise to museum visitors and journalists. The artisans were proud of their craft, which normally has been considered trivial.

When museum staff went back to the village several months after the exhibition, the artisans reported that the business of boat-making started to thrive again as indicated by the many orders they received from different places. This boost in boat-making as an economic activity helped households in the village to employ people from different age-groups (especially during the off-season in fishing), increase labor distribution, and augment family income.

This exhibition on fishing cultures demonstrates how the museum plays an active role in helping people discover the value of their cultures and promote their handicrafts, as well as forge bridges between producers and consumers, thereby increase the revenues of artisans. Through research, exhibition, and facilitating the interaction between the owners of cultures and the public, the museum helped the community discover their potentials, and turn them into a driving force for economic development. The museum helped enhance the community's pride in their culture and preserve their identity.

## Case Study 2

In Vietnam, the Mid-Autumn Festival is dedicated to children. Under the silvery light of the full moon, children



beat drums, play with toys, carry colorful lanterns, and enjoy moon cakes and other treats. In recent years, traditional children's toys have almost disappeared. Globalization has noticeably affected the Vietnamese toy market today. Plastic toys are now widely available. They have replaced handmade toys made of natural materials, such as star and fish lanterns. Many artisans have thus stopped making traditional toys because of the decline in demand, resulting in the loss of knowledge and skills in traditional toy-making.

Recognizing the importance of preserving and promoting traditional toys, VME organized various activities to promote the Mid-Autumn Festival's traditional values by:

- Organizing exhibitions of traditional and contemporary lanterns, with texts explaining the Mid-Autumn Festival, as well as background information on traditional toys and the challenges to traditional and contemporary toys, traditional crafts, and the expertise of artisans.

- Organizing traditional games and showcasing traditional toys of the majority Kinh, and those of other ethnic groups and countries in Southeast Asia.

- Interviewing people from different generations, both in urban and rural areas, on how they celebrate the Mid-Autumn festival; according to the past and present, on their experiences and traditions.

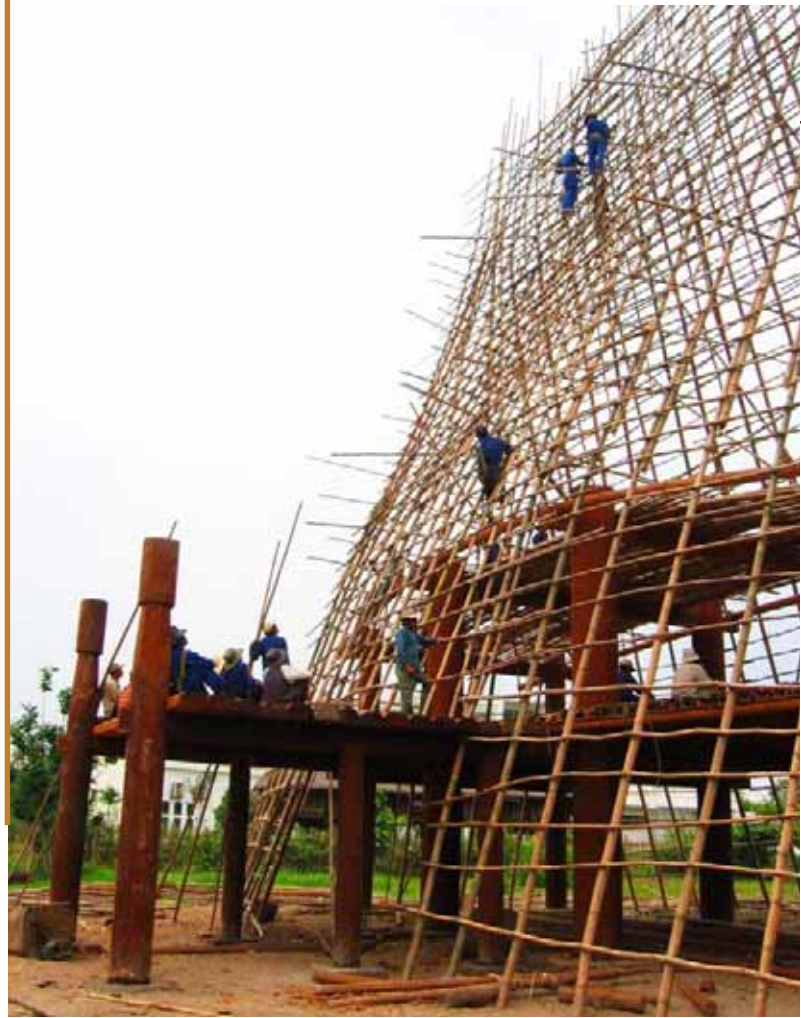
- Interviewing children on what they like about the Mid-Autumn Festival; working with schools to ask children to write essays on their memories of or wishes on this event. Their opinions and essays are then displayed in the exhibition.

- Organizing demonstrations of artisans on toy-making. Children are invited to participate in toy-making or finalizing certain parts of the toys such as wood-block prints, drums, wood frames, and a variety of toys, including lanterns, paper stick-fighter dolls, paper scholar dolls, and recycled tin steamboats.

These activities not only inspire artisans and children to make traditional toys but also stimulate the demand for traditional toys.

### **Case Study 3**

Water puppetry is a unique cultural heritage of the Viet/Kinh ethnic group in Vietnam. Traditionally, water puppet shows were staged in rural areas with ordinary farmers as puppeteers. There are now around fourteen traditional troupes that perform in the Red River's northern delta, the cradle of water puppetry. After a long period of decline, water puppet troupes had been revitalized. Still with farmers as puppeteers, they added to their ranks a number of retirees who have returned to their





Mid-Autumn Festival: Children are experiencing making traditional toys with parents or volunteers at the VME

home villages and practiced once again the traditional arts they left behind when they moved to the cities. Unfortunately, many priceless original puppets have been lost and troupes have difficulty finding the resources to recreate these. Some techniques distinctive to each water puppet troupe, such as string and stick puppetry, have fallen to oblivion as well. Today, they have to combine these two techniques.

Since the summer of 2002, the VME initiated a series of water puppet performances at the museum in order to assist a dozen local water puppet groups to maintain their distinctive

identities. Each month, the museum features performances of different local groups, providing the puppeteers an opportunity to show their devotion to their art to a diverse audience. The artists also share their knowledge on local puppetry traditions as well as advocate for the revival and sustainability of these traditions.

The Vietnam Museum of Ethnology conducted in-depth research and numerous surveys on each of the featured groups. The performances at the museum are also accompanied by exhibitions on each group's history and distinctive characteristics.



Above all, the museum has encouraged all of the water puppetry groups involved to maintain and develop their own distinctive styles of performance and musical accompaniment. All of these activities help to bolster the puppeteers' deep pride in their work and also to show the puppeteers the

larger public's high regard for their art. At the same time, these activities raise the public's awareness on traditional water puppetry. In particular, it gives young people in urban areas a rare opportunity to understand and enjoy this delightful facet of Vietnam's cultural heritage.





Water puppet performance: Creating a place for children to play water puppets.

# CONCLUSION & FUTURE PLANS

The VME is aware that *culture, first of all, is closely linked to livelihood*, i.e. reproduction of material life is always closely and dialectically associated with cultural reproduction. Similarly, the initiative to preserve and develop the culture – including intangible culture – of a community, an ethnic group, or a locality stems from the owners of culture themselves. Only by closely following the process of local and community production can cultural heritage be preserved and developed in a more effective, significant, and sustainable way. The *holistic* approach – combination of culture and livelihood – is the key to all activities including research, collection, and exhibition of the VME, thus having close connections with the community is paramount in these efforts.

Its holistic approach is guided by the awareness that intangible culture is inseparable from the process of material production and social development. Spiritual values such as knowledge, traditional folk experiences, rituals, religion, belief

and performing arts are inseparable from the daily life of the owners of cultures. Spiritual values also take a direct and active part in propagating culture, especially in handing down culture from one generation to another.

VME's approach to the preservation and development of intangible culture of the community focuses on the following objectives and processes:

1. Assessing and identifying the needs of local people and community in the process of preserving their culture;
2. Discovering aspects of local culture that have the potential to create and promote livelihood;
3. Developing an action plan, with participation of the community, in the process of restoration and development of select cultural values; and
4. Organizing the restoration, handing down, improvement, and



display of cultural property at the museum and in the locality to promote cultures and increase cultural exchanges.

Those are some examples of the museum's concepts and activities, thus introducing some of the VME's experiences in encouraging communities to preserve and develop their intangible cultural heritage. Museum professionals hope that Vietnam's museums, particularly museums of ethnology and anthropology, will develop approaches that work for the

community and encourage community participation, thereby the museum contributes to the discussion of urgent social problems in the face of globalization. By doing so, the museums will have a closer and stronger link with the people, thus inciting more public interests in museums. As it is, the number of Vietnamese visitors to the museum has increased tenfold in the past ten years since it opened, as such, the VME envisions to sustain that trend in the years to come.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Nguyen Van Huy** was the founding director of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (1995-2006). Leading colleagues to conduct the first sociological surveys of ethnic groups across the country, Nguyen directed his interests to contemporary issues of socio-economic development of ethnic minorities and ethnic relations. He is the author of approximately 60 journal articles and more than 10 books. For his contributions to the preservation of cultural heritage and enrichment of local daily life, Nguyen received *Chevalier de L'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*, (Republique Francaise, 2007), *Aid to Artisans Award* (2002), and *Rockefeller 3rd Award* (Asian Culture Council, 1999).



# THE ECO-MUSEUM OF SUOJIA, GUIZHOU, CHINA



Suojia Ecomuseum documentation centre, photoed by Chang Wu 2005

**Suojia Chang Wu**



Established by the Guizhou provincial government and the Norwegian government, the Suojia Eco-museum was opened on October 31, 1998 in Liuzhi, Guizhou Province, Southwest China. The eco-museum aims to protect the cultural identity and heritage of the Long-horn Miao cultural group and to promote social and economic well-being of the local people.

The eco-museum covers an area of 120 square kilometres and consists of 12 villages. An office manages the cultural information about the local Miao people; it also serves as a venue for public activities and provides services for researchers and visitors.

The staff consists of seven people, four of whom are full time, including one person taking charge of the affairs of the information center and another two employees doing data collection. One local scholar was invited to be the honorary director and the folklore advisor. The museum's governance is affiliated with the local government of Liuzhi Special Zone.

The eco-museum is equipped with a vehicle, computer, TV, camcorder, camera, printers, and projectors. Also, in 2009 the museum received an investment of over 2 million yuan for the construction of the building for collecting artefacts.

# IMPACT OF THE MUSEUM



A Miao family in Suojia by Xiu Yang 2006

The eco-museum has certain positive influences on the local community. Originally this region was underdeveloped, particularly in education and health services and facilities. Since the establishment of the eco-museum, achievements have been made in improving living conditions, i.e. additional school-buildings, availability of farming technology, cultural heritage protection (including maintenance of

ancient buildings and promotion of local handicrafts, folk music, and dances), and environmental protection (vegetation, water sources, and farm lands). The local school used to be housed in a cattle shed. In 1996, a new school was built along with the planning of the eco-museum. In 2002, one more school-building worth 0.4 million yuan was finished. There were only three teachers prior to 1996, but now there are eleven.



# CHALLENGES

One of the biggest challenges, however, was the construction and management of the museum itself. The administrative rank of the museum proves to be too low to attract enough attention. There is a shortage of experts and scholars specialized in eco-museum construction and the disagreement between the culture and tourism authorities was likewise hampering the progress of the construction. While tourism brings money it also has an impact on local traditions (including values and the style of dress). It is doubtful if the public and government would place considerable importance on the construction of the eco-museum however if tourism activities cease. Therefore, it appears that the museum is solely motivated by tourism expansion.



A Miao moman uses a wax knife to draw her batik works by Fanhang Meng 2005

# CULTURAL PROTECTION AND PRESERVATION PROGRAMMES

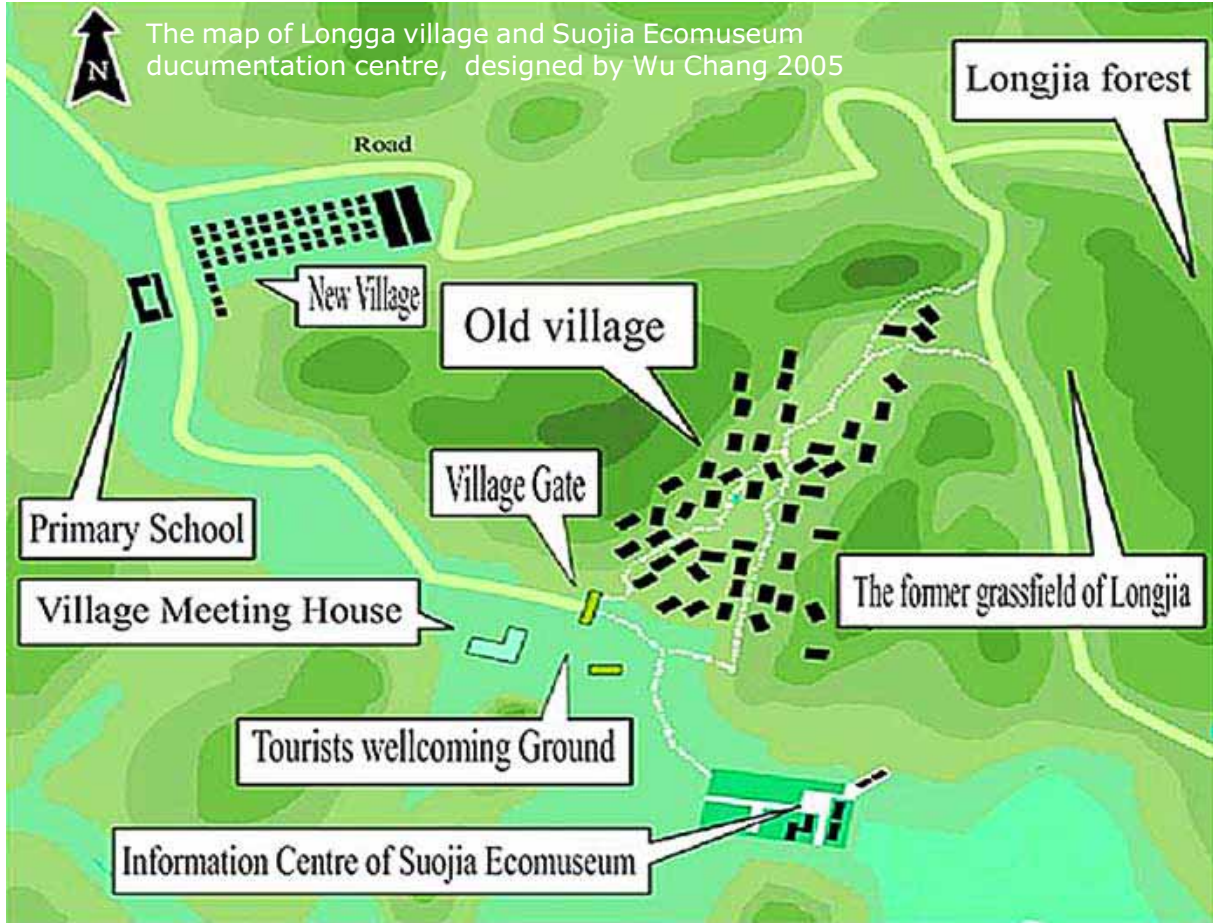
The museum is divided into three general areas. The first area is Longjia village, which is considered as the “core protection area” of the whole eco-museum. The original village was built on the mountain side, which is not accessible to vehicles. No new constructions are allowed in this area. The second area is Gaoxing village, which is called the “important protection area”. In this 4.93 km<sup>2</sup> region the main targets for protection are the local agricultural tradition and vegetation. The third area is the entire museum area itself, which is called the “strict protection region”.

To preserve local traditional knowledge, Mila, or local experts, have been asked to assist. Mila have kept detailed Traditional Environmental Knowledge (TEK) of their traditional rituals. To protect local artefacts, the provincial bureau allocated special funding to maintain about ten old buildings and many

local villagers learnt traditional carpentry and masonry skills. Also, the museum provided a space for local women to produce embroidery crafts thus, preserving this tradition. Many other villagers rent commercial stands in the tourist spots to sell souvenir items. Villagers also found other job opportunities, including folk singing and dancing. Over 10 villagers have been recruited into the performance troupe.

Along with the development of the museum and tourism, the local people also realized the importance of their traditional artefacts and many of them began to re-plant hemp used in traditional textiles.

The protection of local heritage gave rise to the promotion of social cohesion among local villagers. All villages have representatives to the Villagers Committee of the Soujia Eco-museum. There are regular meetings to exchange ideas



between the village representatives and the museum and to find ways to promote greater visibility of the culture of the minorities and to promote dialogue among the stakeholders.

The documentation of stories and other intangible heritage related to

the collection proved to be fruitful. These traditions include the Miao traditional wedding and funeral ceremonies, dances with lusheng, dances with wooden drum, three-hole flute performance, wine songs, love songs, myths, textiles, dyeing, and embroidery technologies.



A Miao woman working at her loom by Fanhang Meng 2005

# LIUZH I P R I N C I P L E S

The Suojia eco-museum operates not solely on Western knowledge that may be disconnected from the local conditions, nor is the museum purely a product of domestic knowledge. The eco-museum is instead a testament of the effectiveness of knowledge sharing and synthesis in the field of culture and museum management that had been in effect since China opened up to foreign influence.

Currently, the eco-museum is under a governmental organization called the Cultural Relics Bureau. Soon after the eco-museum's establishment, the experts from China and Norway agreed to manage the eco-museum

under the guidance of the Liuzhi Principles, to wit:

1. The people of the villages are the true owners of their culture. They have the right to interpret and validate it themselves.
2. The meaning of culture and its values can be defined only by human perception and interpretation based on knowledge. Cultural competence must be enhanced.
3. Public participation is essential to eco-museums. Culture is a common and democratic asset, and must be democratically managed.



Miao women in Suojia by Lizhe An 2006



4. When there is a conflict between tourism and preservation of culture the latter must be given priority. The genuine heritage should not be sold out, but production of quality souvenirs based on traditional crafts should be encouraged.

5. Long term and holistic planning is of utmost importance. Short time economic profits that destroy culture in the long term must be avoided.

6. Cultural heritage protection must be integrated in the total environmental approach. Traditional techniques and materials are essential in this respect.

7. Visitors have a moral obligation to behave respectfully. They must be given a code of conduct. There is

no bible for eco-museums. They will all be different according to the specific culture and situation of the society they present.

8. Social development is a prerequisite for establishing eco-museums in living societies. The well-being of the inhabitants must be enhanced in ways that do not compromise traditional values.

These principles can be classified into three main categories. First, the local people are the owners of their culture and they must participate in the management of the eco-museum. Second, when there are conflicts between culture and tourism, culture will be considered first. Third, it is necessary to improve the living conditions of the local





Villagers dancing in the centre ground by wuchang 2006

people without bringing harmful impacts on the local traditional values.

An eco-museum is not just a passive entity in communities; it serves as the “tangible or geographical centre” of a local culture. Moreover, an eco-museum cannot be developed without the participation of the local community. Likewise, it should primarily serve the interest of local people. To the people of Suojia, the eco-museum, as a cultural protector of the community, will undoubtedly have an impact on their lives now and in the long-term as it influences all aspects of their social life.

On one hand, the eco-museum takes the necessary role of cultural protection (such as identifying the

cultural aspects for immediate preservation, provision of textual description to the displays, recording of audio-visual materials, management of files, etc.). On the other hand, it assists the government in developing education and health services and promoting the tourism industry. It is thus hoped that the museum will push further in identifying other cultural aspects of the locality that is in need of protection.

The dedication, goodwill, and professionalism of the museum administrators shown towards the residents will hasten the above-mentioned goals and functions. Their achievements will surely have lasting impact on the life and cultural values of the people of Long-horn Miao.



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Suojia Chang Wu** earned an MA from the China Art Academy in 2007. He is currently a lecturer in the Arts Department of the Hubei Institute for Nationalities, Hubei, China.



# WAT PONGSANUK COMMUNITY- BASED MUSEUM



Woralun Boonyasurat  
Angela Srisomwongwathana

# INTRODUCTION TO THE MUSEUM

The Wat (temple) Pongsanuk community-based museum consists of three main sections designated for key objects: north manuscript chest; south manuscript chest; and jataka painting banners.<sup>1</sup> Three other spaces are allocated for museum display and storage, to wit: the old monk living quarters is dedicated to the Viharn<sup>2</sup> Phra Chao Pun Ong conservation project; the old tripitaka<sup>3</sup> library houses little Buddha images and ancient manuscripts; and a one-room building near the north museum contains architectural elements from Viharn Phra Chao Pun Ong.

Located in the compound of Wat Pongsanuk (60 Pongsanuk Road, Wiang Nua Tambon, Muang District, Lampang Province), the museum serves the 838 residents of the

Pongsanuk community as well as approximately 50 to 100 visitors per month from throughout Thailand as well as other countries. The number of visitors, mainly students (ranging from kindergarten to university levels), had increased to 3,000 - 4,000 per month after the temple earned a UNESCO Merit Award for Cultural Heritage Conservation in Asia-Pacific 2008. The increase in visitors has effectively turned the temple-based museum into a knowledge center outside the classroom.

The museum's work concentrates on preserving and providing knowledge on the unique and important Buddhist artefacts of Lampang, hence, cultivating public awareness. Available spaces in the temple were modified and reused while collections

<sup>1</sup> A Buddhist painting on a piece of textile banner, jataka depicts the scenes from the past ten lives of the Lord Buddha. It is hung as a sacred ornamentation in Buddhist temples or Buddhist religious buildings.

<sup>2</sup> Also known as vihara, a viharn is a Buddhist monastery or a residence for Buddhist monks. It may also be a building in the compound of a temple where important Buddha images are enshrined.

<sup>3</sup> The tripitaka are the three parts of Buddhist doctrine.



Museum Workshop

development was still in progress. The museum started with just one room displaying the manuscript chest, which was later on transferred to another building where a pulpit and other architectural decorative pieces, and most recently jataka banners, were added.

The three mentioned museum spaces -north, south and jataka-were established in 2006, 2008, 2009 respectively.

The monks of Wat Pongsanuk run the community museum along with seven key museum personnel whose main scope of work is to take care of the museum, provide information to visitors, and manage the sale of temple publications. Their work is on a voluntary basis.



# THE MUSEUM AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Evidence from ceramics excavated during the Viharn Phra Chao Pun Ong conservation project suggests that Wat Pongsanuk is 500 years old. Found on the temple grounds is the first city pillar of Lampang, making Wat Pongsanuk an important historical and spiritual site for the community. In its long history, the temple has collected many valuable Buddhist art pieces including manuscripts and chests, pulpits, and jataka painting banners. However, proper collections management was not established nor practiced until the recent Viharn Phra Chao Pun Ong conservation project (2004-2009), which partly resulted to the exhibition of the manuscript chest, the museum's first display.

The museum was simultaneously constructed while the Viharn Phra Chao Pun Ong conservation project was implemented. During this time, age-old manuscript chests and a pulpit were restored, and the photographs of which (together with photos of other artefacts and temple buildings) were used in the first traveling exhibition and the

publication of a book and a set of postcards in 2005. Not only did these projects raise awareness of the monks and community but they also raised more funds for conservation.

Actual documentation of the museum pieces commenced in 16 February 2006 when 186 wooden Buddha images were moved from under the viharn roof where they were originally kept for safety.

Taking part in this process were the Fine Arts Department, Nan Office (whose jurisdiction covers Lampang), the monks of Wat Pongsanuk, local community members, academics from Chiang Mai and Silpakorn universities, and a photographer. It started with a Buddhist ceremony to properly ask permission to move the mentioned Buddha images, followed by cleaning, photographing, measuring, cataloguing, and storing them in a safe place. The old tripitaka library served as the images' storage place, thus, the room's collections (mainly manuscript chests) were transferred to the now north manuscript chest museum.

Eventually, additional buildings and rooms housed the south manuscript chest and the jataka banners.

The project was the first of its kind to truly encourage collaboration between the local monks and the community. It sparked the pride of the monks and the locals, strengthening their resolve to safeguard their shared heritage. An “open-door” approach, which allows everyone to be a stakeholder, promoted local involvement in conservation activities. It is significant to note that the conservation work was supported by the Little People in Conservation Group, a network of young people from various backgrounds. These young people had a strong intention to protect the cultural value of vernacular architecture and to conserve this heritage for the next generations.

With the support of volunteers from The Little People in Conservation Group and the Northern Archaeological Center, Chiang Mai University, other collections of manuscript chests, pulpits, architectural elements, jataka painting banners, and a century-old elephant flag were photographed and catalogued.

In 2008, the Wat Pongsanuk monks and community members, as well as academics from Chiang Mai University, expanded their work on collections management to seven other temples in the neighboring district of Mae Ta, Lampang Province. These temples are: Wat Pa Jum, Wat Nam Jo, Wat Baan Luk, Wat Tor Kaew, Wat Pa Tun Luang, Wat Sri Ouan, and Wat Na Kot Luang. With these temples under their care, they managed a collection reaching a total of 1,412 Buddhist artefacts.





With growing demand for their collection management skills, a UNESCO Museum-to-Museum Partnership Project was implemented in May and June 2009.<sup>4</sup> Wat Pongsanuk was selected as the first partner and venue of the said project. UNESCO's aim was to enhance the capacity of temple-based communities to manage their artefact collection particularly the

monks who are the traditional caretakers of temples. Other temples have likewise requested trainings for their monks and lay staff to manage their collections, some with the intention of setting up community-based museums similar to Wat Pongsanuk.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>The project was conducted in collaboration with Deakin University in Australia and Chiang Mai University and was supported by UNESCO and financed by the US Department of State.

<sup>5</sup> More details in <http://www.unescobkk.org/information/news-display/article/us-consul-general-in-chiang-mai-visited-the-wat-pongsanuk-temple-museum-in-lampang-on-30-march-2009/>.

# REBIRTH OF ARTIFACTS

Dr. Chatthip Nartsupa, a Thai scholar, mentioned that there are two social systems in Thailand: (a) state and capitalism and (b) local community (Vittayasakpun: 1991, 83). Although both social systems are dynamic, their objectives are not similar. While the state and its capitalist system put less importance on people and their environment, the local community mainly focuses on these. In heritage management methodology, the local community has two aims: (a) to focus on tangible heritage and (b) to rebuild or reconstruct an old and crumbling building with the use of new materials and techniques to “complete” the heritage.

Sometimes the structure of the museum is more important than the artefacts it houses. This attitude to buildings is partly influenced by the Buddhist concept of giving *dana*, or a gift or donation referred to as *punakirya-vatthu* or meritorious action (Payutto, 2003: 70). *Dana* is considered as one of the most important Buddhist practices related to attaining salvation and nirvana. To construct a new building is considered as the best practice of

giving *dana*. In the context of heritage management, building new museums for the sake of *dana* may result to many new museums that are not in touch with the local community and its culture.

The motivation behind the Wat Pongsanuk museum building is different. Monks and locals believe that although it is important to construct new infrastructure, more important is the knowledge behind the artefacts and their links with the local community. Because of industrialization and globalization, the role of the community in people’s lives is quickly eroding. Likewise, the community is often perceived by capitalists as weak and bereft of







South Manuscript Chest Museum

rights, much less influence (Nipoj Thienviharn cited in Vittayasakphun, 2002: 29). The value of people is downgraded to labor purposes while the community and social institutions are exploited for marketing. Accorded little respect by authorities and investors, the community becomes fragile and weak (Santasombat, 2003: 43) and, ultimately, unhappy.

Communal pride in their unique identity and history would have quickly vanished if the community in

Pongsanuk did not respond. They established a temple-based museum, and through Buddhist artefacts were able to retain their historical, social, spiritual, and artistic values. Once those Buddhist artefacts were cleaned, photographed, registered, and put on display, they were also used in appropriate occasions or religious ceremonies, allowing the locals to pay respects to the religious artefacts, hence, the passive artefacts are ultimately reborn and given life.

# PRESERVING THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE

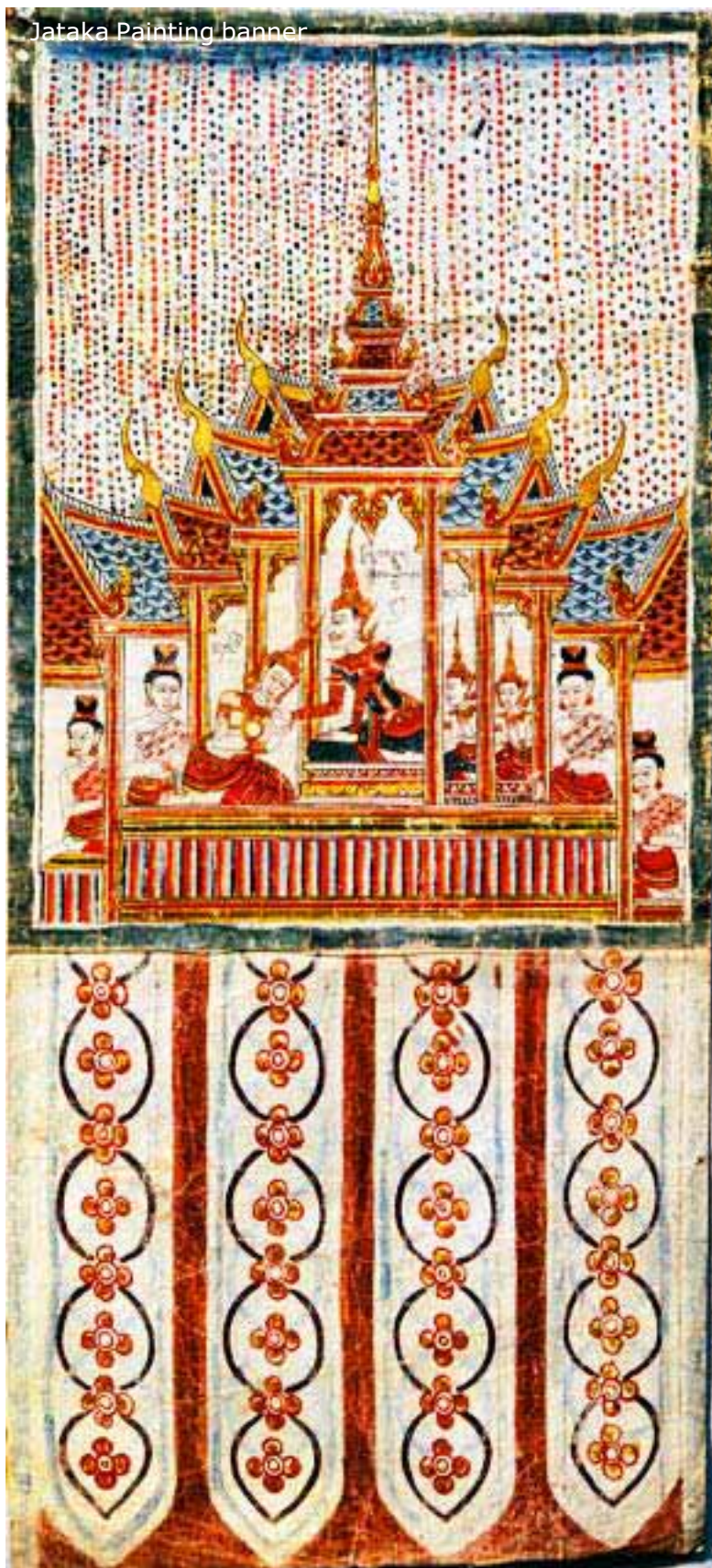
In the case of the conservation of Viharn Phra Chao Pun Ong, it was deemed important to preserve the tangible (body) as well as intangible (mind) aspects of the heritage (Boonyasurat, 2009). The same concept was applied in building the museums. At the core of the endeavor is the establishment of stronger ties between the temple and the community in the present-day setting.

The manuscript museum preserves not only the religious objects of the community but also encourages the revival of traditional ceremonies. The first manuscript chest museum was recognized as a symbolic space to relay the old messages of Buddhism and to revive the old ceremonial tradition of *tang dhamma luang*. During this annual ceremony at the end of Buddhist Lent (during which the 24-hour sermon takes place) the manuscript chest is moved to the viharn, the tripitaka manuscript is used, and the jataka painting banners depicting the story of the Lord Buddha's lives are hung around the viharn.

Other religious artefacts in the museums, particularly the *jong berk* (a large wooden seat for 4-5 monks), inspire monks and novices to research about these pieces and to revive the old and unique Pongsanuk monk chanting practices (which have not been practiced for a very long time). Also gaining interest is the revival of the *klong luang* (massive drum) drum-beating styles used in different occasions to relay messages to the community, say to mark Buddhist holidays or to indicate that the chanting of the monks have ended. The styles of beating the drums for these purposes were researched by young Pongsanuk descendants. This drum beating inspired other temples in Lampang to study, revive, and practice their own temple's unique styles.

The interior of the museum also revives the traditional and indigenous knowledge of weaving bamboo mats known as *sart yang*, which applies the concept of Lan Na *fa lai* (sliding wooden windows) and woven ceilings widely used in northern Thai houses.

Jataka Painting banner



Jataka painting banners are good examples of how the artefacts allow the locals to be part of preserving their heritage. Instead of displaying the originals which are light, sensitive, and fragile, as they are made of cloth and mulberry paper dated more than over 100 years old, the jataka painting banners were professionally photographed and then reprinted on canvas and vinyl. The life-size reproductions were donated by the locals and used as museum displays while the originals were kept in a cabinet with a proper environment inside the Jataka Painting Banner Museum. Assisting in the photography of the banners, a Chiang Mai university student (who has his family roots in the community) was inspired to do further study in jataka and his works later appeared in the museum.

The museum in Wat Pongsanuk does not bring any income to the personnel (composed of monks/novices and community volunteers) running the facility, but on the whole the museum builds pride among the people and promotes community involvement in interpreting the collections. Moreover, the community and monks actively extend their experiences in Buddhist artefact collections management, particularly the knowledge they learned from the Viharn Phra Chao Pun Ong conservation project and the



Artefact Photo



UNESCO Museum Capacity Building training, to their neighboring temples in Mae Ta District starting with seven temples in 2008 and reaching to 44 temples in 2009. The younger generations from the neighboring districts, including Youth of Baan Sa Group in Chae Hom District and several vocational schools in Lampang, also requested the personnel at Wat Pongsanuk to impart their knowledge on collections management.

# CONCLUSION AND FUTURE PLANS

The Wat Pongsanuk community-based museum bridges the gap between Buddhist artefacts and the local people. It also emphasizes a spiritual connection between locals and their cultural heritage that forms part of Thailand's national heritage, which in turn is grounded on local wisdom, intangible heritage, and the spirit of the place. Most importantly, the museum vigorously encourages participation of the community to assess the spiritual value of Buddhist items integral in cultural heritage. The museum thus facilitates the integration of knowledge, experiences, and skills of the community into museum practices (Vergo, 1989). The framework provides an opportunity to explore new models in developing a fully integrated cultural heritage management system. Meanwhile,

the museum management has to look at the sustainability of the facility and to create income for its personnel.

Nonetheless, the museum management, composed mainly of volunteer academics and personnel, are more resolute than ever in preserving cultural heritage. To do this, the team strengthened and expanded the network through regular lectures, seminars, and advice to other temples, while at the same time becoming aware that the Pongsanuk museum can still improve their interpretation of the artefacts to effectively relay the messages of Buddhism to newer audiences. As such, the display needs to be more dynamic and should attract various groups of visitors.



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# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Woralun Boonyasurat** is an Associate Professor at the Department of Thai Art, Faculty of Fine Arts, Chiang Mai University.

**Angela Srisomwongwathana** is a photographer and the leading member of the Little People in Conservation Project.



# THE LAHU BAMBOO MUSEUM



Carina zur Strassen  
Jakhadte Jayo





This article introduces a community-based initiative aimed at the cultural restoration of indigenous highland peoples in northern Thailand. While still in its early stages, it has been successful to date in part through external support. Established in August 2008 with the help of forty-eight villagers and funded by the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (SAC), the initiative was launched to create cultural awareness among young and old Lahu people who have experienced cultural erosion due to various modern intrusions in their traditional lifestyle. In the face of these challenges the Lahu people opted to

rehabilitate their cultural heritage. One such effort is the Lahu Bamboo museum. This article describes both the self-governed character of the Lahu Bamboo Museum and the decision-making process that made its individual and collective efforts successful.

The Lahu Bamboo Museum is located in Huay Nam Rin, a highland village in Thailand's northern Chiang Rai Province. Measuring not more than forty square meters, it hosts a small but unique collection of cultural artefacts belonging to, and provided by its founding members. The museum houses the only such collection of the Lahu Sheleh culture



group, a sub-group of the Lahu people. This collection, exhibited in a stilt-based bamboo hut fashioned after traditional Lahu houses, comprises sacred as well as profane objects, including contemporary and antique photographs, posters, maps, and traditional Lahu implements. Aiming to preserve the Lahu Sheleh cultural heritage, the museum serves Huay Nam Rin's indigenous population of seventy six households plus visitors from the neighborhood and elsewhere. With descriptions written in Thai and English, it also informs members of other culture groups about the Lahu people's traditional livelihoods.


The Lahu Bamboo Museum is a place of indigenous self-governance. Community-driven as it is, the museum has no personnel of its own

though its initiator acts as the director in charge. The founders, forming the governance body that makes decisions on items to be exhibited and activities to be conducted at the site, have set up a committee composed of the local youth group, the women's group, and local knowledge experts. This governance body provides the cultural initiative site with a respected group of people who head the decision-making for the museum and who supported the villager who originally proposed the idea to the community and to the SAC. In the following section, we shall look at this self-governed museum as a cultural centre, which started as an idea of one villager and, step by step, developed into a community project.


# INCEPTION OF THE LAHU BAMBOO MUSEUM

With a record of researching and documenting both tangible and intangible items of the Lahu Sheleh culture, Jakhadte Jayo has been a pivotal force of the museum initiative. In early 2008, he approached community elders to seek their advice on establishing a heritage site that would host the group's cultural valuables. Wishing to see again and remember their customary objects, the elders encouraged the young man to archive common utensils like opium scrapers, hunting tools, etc., for future generations to appreciate these items. However, they also wanted him to secure sufficient funds to build a stable wooden structure instead of the bamboo hut he had in mind, since they were reluctant to exhibit valuable items, such as silverware, in a provisional and thus unsafe place. Given this support, he proceeded to consult with external parties with whom he had worked before.

The museum was patterned after the idea of a living museum, a place where a variety of culturally relevant activities could take place, e.g. skill



*I thought there was a lot of change and rapid development happening and entering the community. So it was important to have a plan to learn about our own tribal group.*



Jakhadte



Traditional household utensils and a group of mythical deer

enhancement in the fields of music, weaving, etc., as well as promoting Lahu children's art and crafts to be exhibited on certain occasions. The museum was also envisioned as an archive of the villagers' cultural heritage within a community-based museum made of local materials. To promote participatory decision-making, the museum is guided by the village council, which is the formal decision-making body of the local community. The village council represents the diverse views of the individuals in the village and shares a common perspective of the Lahu culture as a whole.

The initiative received encouragement from the Thai Research Fund (which had earlier financed a community-based culture research and video-

archiving in his village) and the SEAMEO Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts (SEAMEO SPAFA, an inter-governmental organization focusing on cultural resource management). Both organizations believe a community-based museum project can only be successful with the support of the village members.

The museum was also granted a donation<sup>1</sup> from the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, which was used for constructing a simple bamboo structure (not yet the wooden building community elders envisioned), thus, the name Lahu Bamboo Museum. Although they could not exhibit the tribal silver-works now becoming exceedingly

<sup>1</sup> The donation was 40,000 THB (900 Euro)

rare, villagers worked together in constructing the museum. As soon as the structure was erected and the walls were fitted with the help of everyone, customary outfits and agricultural tools, bush knives and bamboo traps, trays and gourd bottles were brought in. After which, the villagers placed a *No Gkuma* (large reed pipe) next to the fire place, thereby providing the museum with the most sanctioned cultural item of the Lahu Sheleh people in Thailand. The Bamboo Museum overlooks the *Jakhuegue*, which is the sacred dancing ground of the Lahu Sheleh.

In a meeting with the village council, villagers defined the museum's scope, outreach, and significance for the community. Calling the museum a cultural centre, the council first enlisted the group of the founders who had built it and contributed their

belongings. As this group pledged to continue supporting the museum the village council shared views on possible implications for and beyond the local community. Some saw the museum as a local community place and others viewed it as a Lahu heritage site. Some suggested inviting Lahu Sheleh people from other provinces, who could contribute items from their respective cluster groups. Other participants thought of Thai and foreign visitors possibly wanting to visit and support the museum project. The wider the scope was set more ideas were raised on how the project could possibly attract additional support, for instance, through membership. In the next two meetings, villagers continued defining membership and purposes of the Lahu Bamboo Museum, and thus its role for the people in the place.



Flutes and rusted poppy growing utensils used in former times

# ROLE OF THE MUSEUM IN THE COMMUNITY



The Lahu Bamboo Museum's home-style fire place area

To understand how the museum serves the Lahu community we will first look at the context of the community's geographically remote, as well as, politically and culturally marginalized place in a society that does not give enough recognition to members of non-Thai culture groups. The sense of affiliation the villagers feel for their community translated to their sense of ownership of the museum project. Moreover, membership was associated with commitment, friendship, and support. Consequently, museum members were defined as 'friends of

the Lahu culture', which also referred to those who empathize with the Lahu people's need for cultural visibility and preservation, and were thus expected to support these two purposes with either money or time. All participants approved of educational activities, including the above-mentioned skill and craft enhancement, considered important in community development. Everybody agreed that local youths would benefit if they took part in the museum's cultural activities. Participants were, however, uncertain as to how that integration could take

place, and not everybody approved of the idea of organizing changing exhibitions at the museum. Some were not ready to assume a role in the range of activities discussed at the meeting. Finally, it was decided to leave the decision-making and planning process in the hands of the initiators. A committee composed of the founders was established in order to further clarify the role of the museum and to find appropriate ways for enhancing its possibilities. The founding members discussed approaches and activities suitable to the original purposes of the Lahu Bamboo Museum.

In the first committee meeting, a flexible approach was chosen to accommodate various possibilities for the museum. Loosely defining the role of cultural and educational activities, founders discussed the use of funds the museum was expected to generate for the village. Membership fees, for instance, would be used for collective purposes such as cultural heritage preservation measures, for conducting communal activities, and for improving the museum building. The fees would also be used to establish a fund to cater for the private purposes of its contributors, especially for cases of unforeseen emergency that villagers may face e.g. medical.

The new governance body also endorsed the plan to buy stationery and art materials that were not available in the highlands, and to ask local children to depict their social and natural environment (with the intent of exhibiting the children's art works in the museum).

The Lahu Bamboo Museum started to receive different kinds of support, particularly from external parties, that motivated local villagers to extend, by means of institution-building, their social outreach. Aside from donations from the private, governmental, and inter-governmental sectors, there was also technical, conceptual, and moral support worth mentioning. For technical support, SAC trained the founders in state-of-the-art techniques of cultural heritage archiving. Conceptual support was offered by individual scholars working on rural and social resource development issues. Moral support came from 'friends of the Lahu culture' offering to become external museum members, from neighboring Thai farmers praising the community spirit of the initiative, and from individual visitors of the museum. There was also institutional encouragement for the local villagers to keep up the self-determined planning of its activities as well as



Display of formerly used and present-day Lahu Sheleh outfits

the flexible approach they chose for governing the museum.

Given that the Lahu Bamboo Museum is rather new, only few activities have been conducted so far. They include the hosting of visitor groups, the establishment of a revolving fund, the exhibition of Lahu Sheleh cultural items at the Bangkok Museum Fair in late 2008, and a TV programme. Initial steps to have the museum become a part of the Suan Lahu Project<sup>2</sup> are under way. This local project, which aims at natural and cultural preservation, is based at a nearby coffee plantation which offers lodging, meals and guided eco-tours to visitors. Suan Lahu also conducts various pilot activities towards being established as a learning center for organic farming.

The first outreach activity was conducted as part of the plan to involve children in the project. With his presentation of the museum in a children's television programme, a nine year old villager became the youngest participant of the Lahu Bamboo Museum. Jadto gave an example of how local children could contribute to cultural preservation and visibility. The presentation on Thai TV was actually the second time the primary student explained, and also translated into Thai language, meanings of Lahu cultural items; the first time, he showed viewers across the nation how to construct a wooden tricycle, which in Lahu language is called *Jagkulu*.

Activities to be mentioned in the context of empowerment have meant

<sup>2</sup> For information on the Suan Lahu Project see [www.suanlahu.org](http://www.suanlahu.org)



opportunities for the villagers for intercultural dialogue and exchange with outsiders well as a chance to study their own culture. So far, some documentaries have been housed at the farm managed by Jakhadte and his older brother, and the Bamboo Museum is thought to become an additional site for not only archiving but also displaying this ethnographic work once electronic equipment can be stored there.

Though educational standards have remained comparatively low in the highland community, local villagers' intercultural experience has been rather ample. The idea to give greater visibility to the indigenous culture has thus been formed by the community's marginality and also by the encouragement given by individual people and institutions (i.e. the TRF, SEAMEO-SPAFA, SAC) so as to alter these conditions.

Note the Thai Research Fund, which in 2001-2003 financed local villagers' study of the preservation possibilities of their culture; while focusing on the documentation of Lahu Sheleh cultural resources, crafts, and musical instruments, the fund has actually been the sole governmental support to the community-based initiative, even when this support preceded the establishment of the museum.



*I want my local people to see and learn from the video. And also to pass on information and knowledge; to pass on their own stories of livelihood, for example, I filmed one Lahu village where they kept pigs in pens. When I showed my people this they could see that this was a good idea. They learnt how to take care of our pigs in a different way.*

Jakhadte



With the financial help given by the SAC for constructing the building, Huay Nam Rin villagers were able to share outcomes of that community research and also reap benefits from the contacts established in its course. Because of these contacts, the museum can now display a collection of old photographs of Lahu Sheleh people from the 1960s which were repatriated to Thailand.

The plan includes also the expansion of the museum's space and collection, by which visitors can be offered further insight into the community culture and modern preservation activities. *Images Returning Home*<sup>3</sup> will be the latest documentary to be housed there.

Since its most incipient stage, the museum project has counted on the support of individuals and groups, particularly voluntary donations. Because of the government-funded community research, for instance, local villagers were able to collect data and images that have educational and informative value. Aside from functioning as videographic evidence of their work, these materials are available to visitors of the Lahu Bamboo Museum. So far, most museum visitors are foreigners who wished to learn about the indigenous lifestyles in the highlands and have also donated monetarily. There have also been group visitors, such as massage students practicing ancient healing methods in Huay Nam Rin's massage

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<sup>3</sup> Images Returning Home is a documentary film made by the co-authors of this paper.

school. These visits have encouraged the local museum members to conduct English language cultural tours in and around the Lahu Bamboo Museum, and to include foreigners in preparing English placards.

Forty-eight people from various Southeast Asian countries also visited the museum. These visitors were the participants of a Culture and Development workshop conducted by SEAMEO-SPAFA, the inter-governmental body mentioned above. Their field

day, which was dedicated to visiting Huay Nam Rin village and the Lahu Bamboo Museum, provided income to the Lahu households who hosted the group, and to twelve women selling textile products (shoulder bags and tribal outfits). The group was the first to contribute a relevant amount of money to the community. The fund has since been utilized by the museum committee as a revolving fund and has now consequently tripled in value.



# CONCLUSION AND FUTURE PLANS

The article describes the process of establishing the Lahu Bamboo Museum in Huay Nam Rin, northern Thailand. Placed in the context of both marginality and empowerment, it highlights individual as well as collective influences, such as local villagers' actions, planning, and decision-making that characterized these processes. The museum presents us with a food for thought on community-driven developments and possible outcomes, like those described in the fields of cultural preservation and visibility as well as intercultural dialogue and exchange. The case shows us a unique museum initiative based on culturally suitable pillars, namely a functional support system, a flexible management concept, and an innovative outreach attitude.

The Lahu Bamboo Museum has a governance model that attracted support from both local and external sources. While the model has its limitations, there have been beneficial outcomes at various levels. An important effect of the museum project's first outreach activity, for instance, was how Jadto's TV appearance attracted admirers. Not only did community members flock to the boy's home to watch the digital copy of the recorded programme, but there were also Thai visitors to the Bamboo Museum who claimed to have been inspired by it to know more about the little place in the northern mountains. The museum's activities have had different effects, not all of which can be described here.

There are several plans for the Lahu Bamboo Museum, the most important of which is on its reconstruction using more durable building materials. The bamboo that will be used in the main exhibition room must be cut in springtime to avoid insect plagues like the one



attacking it at present. According to the innovative vision of one member, the new building is also planned to have a thickly thatched grass roof that is supposedly more durable than the typical Lahu roofs, and more environment-friendly than either metal or cement roofing material sold at the lowland markets. The outside area of the museum will feature a foot-operated rice husker of the type used until about ten years ago, and, finally, a wooden room will be added to host the valuable objects of the Lahu people.

In conclusion, favorable and unfavorable conditions called for the establishment of the Lahu Bamboo Museum in Huay Nam Rin. The remoteness of the small, ethnically defined heritage site caused the prolonged marginalization of the indigenous community. This resulted to social under-development and cultural erosion, and has triggered their search for adequate solutions. Yet, pointing out present-day possibilities of overcoming marginalization, the article shows that cultural decline can also stimulate tangible solutions. The collection of traditional exhibits brought moments of social cohesion and participation among the villagers who belong to different generations but with a shared pride and enthusiasm for community-based cultural management.



*I want to have a video player in a multi-media room... I have an idea for young children to take a camera and make films and have that as part of the heritage. I also want outside people to know more about Lahu people. I also want a shop at the museum for the women to have some job and some income.*



Jakhadte

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Jakhadte (Somchai) Jayo** is a farmer from a Lahu (Na) Sheleh highland community in the southernmost part of Chiang Rai province. During his young adulthood he gained expertise as a Lahu/Thai translator and language teacher. In 2002, he initiated an indigenous village project on cultural development funded by the Thai Research Fund- TRF in which he was also team leader.

**Carina Zur Strassen** is a German/Peruvian anthropologist focused on issues of social change and Lahu ethnicity. In her capacity as freelance consultant for research and development projects she has spent sixteen years living in Thailand during which she has maintained a long-term engagement with ethnic Lahu people.



# AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF COMMUNITY MUSEUM DEVELOPMENT AND MUSEUM STUDIES IN THE PHILIPPINES



Ana Maria Theresa P. Labrador

# COMMUNITY MUSEUMS AS CONTACT ZONES

Cultural anthropologist James Clifford (1997) wrote of museums as contact zones in the sense that:

*The 'world of museums' is diverse and dynamic. To a varying degree, the different contact zones I have been tracking partake of a postmodern marketing of heritage, the display of identity as culture or art. And there is no doubt that the museum-structure of culture – objectified tradition, construed as moral/aesthetic value and marketable commodity – is increasingly widespread. Aspirations of both dominant and subaltern populations can be articulated through this structure, along with the material interests of national and transnational tourism (p. 218).*

Museums tend to legitimise representations of identity and aspirations because it is a site of authenticity where real objects are encountered. These objects are part of the museum's work that includes forming collections, conducting research and displaying them at exhibitions. Museologist Flora Kaplan (1994) suggests that as social institutions, museums are a 'potent force in forging self consciousness, within specific historical contexts and as part of a political process of democratization' (p.1). Using this presumed democratic disposition or mandate (that is, open to the public), a

museum makes itself far more accessible than other historical institutions that keep collections. For example, private collectors' homes or churches do not usually open their buildings to the public. If they do, they tend to have discriminatory entrance policies, such as limited opening hours or exorbitant admission fees.

The public's access to national and local government collections has helped shape perspectives of identity to the extent that some indigenous groups in other parts of the world have used museum collections to instruct their young or to help make





The National Museum of the Philippines during a busy day

them remember the past (cf. Connerton 1989). Conversely some groups view museum collections as repositories of objects taken away from them. There are recent examples in which groups have re-appropriated objects through repatriation and established their own museums or keeping spaces (for examples, see Kaeppler 1994 and Saunders 1997). These show that the process of gaining control over their representation is also a contentious phase of identity-formation and museum development.

In this sense, museums could focus on the unravelling of identity-formation that has been constantly at play among members of a community as well as between communities. Museum practitioners could also place their attention on those communities by approaching

it from the perspective of cross-cultural heritage management. Kreps (2003) says that it involves 'sharing curatorial authority and power in the interpretation and representation of culture' (p. 155). It could begin with museum collections that provide communities with proofs of their past, help preserve the objects and the knowledge around them in perpetuity and display them to the public that considers not just tourists but local groups especially.

Given the advantage of historical collections in many museums, its staff may be able to transform them from object-centred institutions to people- and process-oriented spaces. The basis for this may be validated on the recent bodies of work that stress on communities not as well-defined groups of people, but

as constructs of people who associate themselves with a particular territory and share common cultural practices (see MacClancy 1993 and McDonald 1989, among others). As if responding to this notion, a growing number of museums world-wide have gradually incorporated the redefinition of communities and the place of objects into their exhibitions. For example, the Museum of Mankind (the Ethnography Department of the British Museum) has ventured into this area by crossing-over conventional boundaries between traditional and contemporary objects.

Elsewhere the ecomuseum concept is being employed in establishing new museums for communities. The interdisciplinary museological approach was pioneered in the 1970s by French museologist Georges Henri Riviere who emphasised on the importance of place (Rivard 1984). This has become a worldwide new museological movement in which museums are re-organised or created appropriate for the needs of the community rather than just a repository for objects.<sup>1</sup> A success

story is the experience of the Ak-Chin Native American community which decided on a museum building and system project on their reservation in Arizona. As one of their facilitators, Museum Research Manager Nancy Fuller (1992) wrote about the course of action the community developed to build a museum that will help them manage change. She writes in her report:

The establishment of the ecomuseum was a sign of pride and self-respect in a community whose image has changed rapidly. Opening the new building brought to a close the first phase of the ecomuseum process – the identification of a community need for a new system to transmit cultural knowledge, and the community’s assumption of a responsibility for the process. A new process – the operation of the Ak Chin Him Dak – was about to begin (p. 361).

Recently, a group of Filipino cultural advocates have been conducting projects that ultimately placed on the UNESCO World Heritage List the town of Vigan, Ilocos Sur in northern Luzon. A component of the proposed

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<sup>1</sup> The more famous among these museums are: Anacostia Neighbourhood Museum in Washington D.C. (created by the Smithsonian Institution), La Casa del Museo in Mexico City (created by the Museo Nacional de Antropología) and the La Maison des Cultures Frontières in the Saar region, on the French-German border (Fuller 1992). Despite its lack of recognition, the Tagudin Living Community Museum may have been added to this list had its potential been realized



Roadside map and sign welcoming guests to the Tagudin Community Museum

project includes converting the colonial Spanish town into a heritage museum site, using as model Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia. Vigan as a Heritage Museum Town is a lofty ideal that others might also want to strive for in other towns of the Philippines. However, Vigan's position as a World Heritage site makes it special. Those concerned must temper their enthusiasm with a pragmatic consideration for the proposed Vigan community museum – they must build local expert knowledge along with professional museum qualifications.

In whatever forms the proposed museum takes shape, it is important

to balance the consensus, political will and imagination of community members with sound museological practices, government policies and industrial enterprise. Its long-term maintenance, however, may require the involvement of local people as the museum's primary experts and supporters. This can only be promoted if museums are viewed as contact zones and sites of articulation between people and objects. Moreover, the development and maintenance of community museums will also depend on the quality and expertise involved in museum studies programs in the Philippines.

# MUSEUM GROWTH SPURTS

In the Philippines, there is a current growth in museum development nation-wide. This has been spurred by the increasing popularity of art museums as advertised by museums' websites and museums' promotion by the tourist industry. It actually began its revival as a result of the centenary celebrations on the independence from Spanish colonial rule. From 1996 to 1998, part of the attention of the National Centennial Commission went to renovating or creating historical museums and heroes' shrines. As a result of these activities, more Filipinos became aware of museums' presence and prominence in the process of defining Filipino identity and history.

In a sense, the concept of a museum seems to have become even broader than last encountered. Somehow museums also affect Filipino's perception of what constitutes a museum. Although they may think

that everyone has a good concept of what a museum is – invariably, a collection of old objects displayed in a case or on a table, gathering dust – there were instances when Filipinos entertained doubts. Museums such as the Museo Pambata (Museum for Children) in Manila are an example of an interactive museum where children (and sometimes even adults) learn while they play.

The International Council on Museums' (ICOM) definition of a museum reflects a contemporary view of museums revolving around the collecting, conserving, researching and displaying objects or specimens. The traditional image among Filipinos of a proper museum may be that of a neo-classical temple (such as the National Museum of the Philippines) serving as national repository of historical objects, visited by busloads of schoolchildren on Saturdays or holidays. This image



Sr. Delia Coronel, ICM pointing out to one of the markers in Tagudin



Bontoc exhibit in the Bontoc Museum

was established at the start of this century by the American colonial government (Labrador 1998).

A way to understand local community museum development is to examine the history of Philippine museums briefly. In this case, I am drawing attention to the National Museum of the Philippines (NMP) as it is the archetype of most museums established in this country. The US colonial government formally established the NMP in 1928<sup>2</sup> but it began its early years as the Insular Museum of Ethnology, Natural History and Commerce in 1901<sup>3</sup>. While the collection of the early NMP

composed mainly of ethnographic objects and natural history artefacts<sup>4</sup>, by the 1930s it was eclipsed by the size and interest on archaeological materials (Solheim 1968).

Today's NMP has retained its research and collection strength in archaeology as its interests in ethnology, fine arts, and natural history lag behind. More space has been allotted for archaeological exhibitions than other departments when they moved to their refurbished buildings last year (see Ronquillo 1997). This has largely to do with the current thrust in marine

<sup>2</sup> Philippine Legislature Act No. 3477 (PCCA 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Philippine Commission Act No. 284 (PCCA 1989).

<sup>4</sup> The American anthropologists of the Bureau of Ethnological Survey's collection policy influenced this for the Universal Exposition in St. Louis, Missouri, USA (see Vergara 1995).

archaeology and salvaging sunken Spanish galleons. Moreover, the Archaeology Division has also established collaborative projects with foreign commercial and academic organisations.

A reason perhaps why archaeology is attributed much prestige and more funds at the NMP has to do with archaeology's focus on antiquities and pre-history. If this is the case, then it can be surmised that the project of reconstruction of the past contributes to its homogenisation and eventual basis for defining a Philippine nation. The centenary celebrations, through its official totalising narratives, have imposed this model on most new and renovated museums. This may be a

counterproductive exercise if this is not balanced with a concern for contemporary practices.

Archaeologists and historians continue to debate over theories on the origins of the Philippine nation and the common practices among people living within its boundaries. None of these include what the people residing in these parts have become. However, there are evidences that the Philippines' community museums, using New Museology as framework, may be able to assist present and future generations with their active identity formation. In this way the attention focuses on challenging stereotypes and according supporting roles to members of the community.



A display in the entrance of the defunct DWU Museum in Tacloban City

# THE EXPANSIVE MOMENT

During the height of the Philippines' centenary celebrations, one of the biggest projects was the Expo Filipino in Clark Field, Pampanga, Central Luzon. The complex that used to be a US American air base has become a site of mostly unfinished structures, having been contrived to be part-theme park and part-world fair. Unfortunately, it succeeded only to look like a symbol of many other projects in which those involved ran sooner than they can learn to walk – a project that lost much steam even before the organisers could complete a third of their way towards the finish line.

In a way, the Expo Filipino has now become a warning to those involved in cultural programs to proceed with caution when planning grand projects. Moreover, the Clark project is examined in the light of its multibillion-peso funding. Despite

financial support no longer being an issue, this extraordinary cultural project still fell short of expectations. I can attribute this to a lack of adequate community support through consultation and accountability without which many projects of this size are bound to be of short duration or more than likely fail.

To give us a perspective on this rife interest in museums, we can compare it with a similar museum-building fad during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>5</sup> These were partly inspired by the national cultural projects of the then President Ferdinand Marcos and his wife, Imelda. When Martial Law was declared in 1972, Marcos began his 'New Society' nation-construction programs. In the arts, he and his wife actively supported schemes to promote their notion of the Filipino national culture. State museums were created in the country's city centres, particularly in

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<sup>5</sup> This can be observed from examining museums' histories in the series of guidebooks produced by the National Commission on Culture and the Arts' Committee on Museums (see, for example, Zerrudo 1996 and Calderon-Hayhow and Deiparine 1992).

Metro Manila. Among them are the Metropolitan Museum of Manila, Museum of Philippine Art, the Philippine Museum of Traditional Arts, Museo ng Buhay Filipino (Museum of the Filipino Life),<sup>6</sup> and Museum of Philippine Costumes. These were established either in purpose-built or converted buildings. Of these, only the Metropolitan Museum survived the political and economic upheavals and remained in its original space.

The Museum of Philippine Art (MOPA) that used to occupy the present building of the Museong Pambata closed down after the Office of the Mayor of Manila reclaimed it in 1987. The Marcoses had just then been deposed. Despite the appeals of artists to keep the museum going, its former galleries were nevertheless converted to municipal office spaces as its art collection was

transferred to the Cultural Center of the Philippines (Herrera 1994). The Philippine Museum of Traditional Arts<sup>7</sup>, on the other hand, suffered from the same neglect as the Nayong Pilipino complex where it was housed. I was told that the interim managers of the Nayong Pilipino decided to sell some of the most expensive pieces belonging to the Museum collection to cover workers' wages. The collection's future remains uncertain.

Creating a museum is only the beginning of a process involved in housing the nation's heritage. In the Philippines and elsewhere, the more difficult aspect of museum work is the maintenance of museums. If this is not included in the agenda to begin with, it is almost certain that Philippine cultural heritage may be placed in great peril.

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<sup>6</sup> The collection was eventually moved to one of the buildings at the Nayong Pilipino but retained its name.

<sup>7</sup> The Philippine Museum of Traditional Arts was also known as the PANAMIN Museum. The building it formerly occupies now houses the Philippine Museum of Ethnology. PANAMIN stands for the President's Assistance for National Minorities.





# THREE PHILIPPINE MUSEUMS

To demonstrate the necessity of community support, professional qualifications and political will for the upkeep of a museum, I shall cite case studies of three Philippine museums. These are: the defunct Divine Word University Museum in Tacloban, Leyte; the Living Community Museum in Tagudin, Ilocos Sur; and, the Bontoc Museum in Bontoc, Mountain Province. Through these varied examples, we are given a glimpse of the exceptional resources and collections found in the Philippines. Yet these museums also show the lack of an established professional museum system.

It is a coincidence that the three museums I am using as examples for this paper were all initiated and run by Catholic religious orders. Perhaps this is an important point to consider and with which to begin the discussion. Apparently the early museums were established by Catholic religious orders as adjuncts to educational institutions. As cabinets of curiosities and educational tools, these antediluvian museums may have been formally arranged, according to materials or function.

## **Divine Word University Museum**

The now-defunct Divine Word University (DWU) Museum in the Visayan Islands may have begun with that type of museum display. When it was refurbished in 1991, however, the concept for redesigning involved showcasing 'a living culture rooted in the past that continues to sustain the present' (Calderon-Hayhow and Deiparine 1992: 97). It became a successful initiative where the museum became a centre for local people to understand themselves better. Although mainly a university museum, the curator expanded it to accommodate non-specialist viewers.

The curator carefully planned the refitting of the museum in 1991 by taking the step of reacquisitioning the collection and assessing its strengths. Having done that, he evaluated the local population's perception of their culture and history. When the time came to redesign the exhibition, the curator, who is also a professor of history and an artist, engaged the services of an art curator, a graphic designer-photographer, and a painter.



Opening during the inaugural of the Tagudin Community Museum of the specially built center to promote local crafts

Together they conceived a design that would be visually appealing as well as informative.

The result was an exhibition familiar and accessible to the local populace. At the heart of the design was the use of the *banig*, or floor mat, which is popular in the Visayan island region of Leyte and Samar. The standard colours of the *banig* – red, green, and yellow – were used repeatedly throughout the exhibition. This rounded off the collection of anthropological artefacts, religious relics, historical documents and other material culture that reflected the

*Waray* way of life in the Leyte-Samar region. Needless to say, the attendance at the museum rose dramatically after its reopening (Labrador 1993).

In 1993, access to the museum became a problem when the University shut down as a result of labour problems. Its success among local visitors persuaded the board members of the DWU Museum Foundation to keep it open for some time, long after the University closed. Eventually museum operations could no longer be sustained since not enough financial

and political support was given to it. Up to now the future of the museum with its valuable collection remains uncertain.

### **Tagudin living community museum**

Another interesting museum is the living community museum in the northern Luzon town of Tagudin. Touted as the country's first museum of its type, the Belgian Catholic ICM religious order worked with local people to conduct research on Tagudin's historical sites as well as townspeople's contemporary activities. One of their discoveries included the name of the town that comes from the word *tagud*, meaning to clean thread. Tagudin once held the distinction as one of the main suppliers of cotton threads to many parts of northwestern Luzon and the Cordillera highlands.

Delia Coronel, a nun belonging to the ICM and who initiated the organisation of the museum, wrote to me prior to its opening about the cotton thread processing primarily done in Bimmanga village. She described the procedure of preparing the dyed cotton threads that included washing, starching,

stretching in big bamboo frames and then drying. These are then cleaned (*tagud*) of woolly hairs by combing them with coconut husks, using quick strokes. In addition, she pointed out that in the course of their research they found only one woman, the late Irene Lardizabal, who continued this practice. Coronel added that this was the result of 'factory-manufactured threads that are cheaper and increasingly more available' (pers. comm.). Others in Bimmanga had gradually shifted to producing more profitable goods such as sewing sacks, making concrete blocks, and woodcarving.

The community museum opened to the public on 4 April 1994. Apart from Bimmanga, other sites of the museum include the houses of lace-makers, the municipal hall with a big painting featuring the tagud, the Baroque-style Catholic church built in 1796 by Spanish Agustinian missionaries, and the Handicraft Center displaying traditional and contemporary bamboo crafts. Visitors continue to be given historical narratives and contemporary stories by local residents in more than ten sites around Tagudin. At the height of the centenary celebrations,

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<sup>8</sup> Sister Basil, as she is popularly known, worked mainly in the Mountain Province as a missionary from 1931 until her death in 1983. A Belgian national, she was buried in the remote village of Sadanga, Mountain Province, at the request of the villagers.



'pilgrims' (a term with which the locals began referring the visitors) were treated to performances that were interpreted from those early narratives. Reports indicate, however, that the number of those 'pilgrims' have waned considerably. They attribute this to the ending of the centenary celebrations and more recently, the economic crisis affecting tourism worldwide. Although the website of the local government of Tagudin boasts the town as the country's first and only 'living community museum,' little support has been given to effectively support the museum concept adapted by the local nuns.

### **Bontoc Museum**

On the other hand, the Bontoc Museum in the highlands of north Luzon is housed in an unusual building not because its architecture was based on the vernacular architecture of another mountain group. Rather, it is created out of the reciprocal affection and regard between the late Basil Gekiere and the local people.<sup>8</sup> The collection of the museum began from the community members' generosity, offering those objects as personal gifts to Gekiere who was also a nun from the Belgian ICM Catholic order. Reciprocity became the idiom by

<sup>9</sup> This is a rather fuzzy boundary that seems to have expanded and contracted from the time of Jenks (1905). See Worcester (1906), Kroeber (1943) and Cawed (1972) for examples. Recent research on Bontoc has moved away from enumerating membership into culture areas, focusing instead on aspects of Bontok life as analytical concept (see, for example, Muratake [1989] on Bontok settlement patterns and kinship).

which the museum was established and eventually opened to the public in 1980. It houses not only objects covered by the Bontoc 'culture area',<sup>9</sup> but also features the material culture of other indigenous groups, such as the Gaddang, Kankana-ey, Ifugao, Kalinga, Apayao, and Ibaloi. More gifts contributed by individuals and additional acquisition funds subsequently added to the growth of the collection.

The displays inside the main building are mostly arranged in glass cases, grouped according to use or technology of production. These were placed against the walls of delineated galleries. The full-sized mannequins seemed to depict ethnic and gender features, typically adorned according to ethnic groups. These stood outside the cases in conspicuous exhibition areas. Photographs also hang from the walls to create contexts for some objects.

The open-air area of the Bontoc Museum with the vernacular buildings captured a time in a village when institutions (represented by those buildings) were still intact. Among the structures are the men's clubhouse (ato), houses (afong), girls' dormitory (olag) and the rice

granary (al-lang). Without the appropriate labels, however, this area is like many ahistorical exhibitions perpetuating an imagined, unchanging world. I was nevertheless impressed by this display for representing what I imagined a real Bontoc village would have looked 40 years ago.

Despite this wonderful history and the museum's exceptional collection, the majority of current museum visitors are tourists. This may be attributed to many reasons. During my field research there, most of the Bontoc I interviewed felt that the Bontoc Museum, as it is currently organised, does not truly epitomise them. This has mainly to do with their lack of control over their representation in it. Not being able to play a part in the Museum has meant for the Bontoc that it is more of a privately owned space rather than a truly public one. As a private space, they are constrained to stay away as they would in other private spaces in their own spheres of everyday practices. On the other hand for a small museum with a good collection but only a couple of regular staff, getting other people involved in the Museum's operation may be a problem. However, it is not an insurmountable one.

# MUSEUM STUDIES

One of the ways in which to solve the problem of meeting demands for museum skills may be for staff to obtain further education. A positive response to the predicament of burgeoning museum activities with, as of yet, few competent museum professionals is to advocate for more training and formal degree courses specifically designed for Philippine museums.

The Department of Art Studies, University of the Philippines at Diliman, contributed to the goal of increasing museum expertise in the country. It has instituted a graduate degree in Museum Studies. The program addresses the imbalance of the lack of requisite academic qualifications among museum workers while having a wealth of practical knowledge gained through experience. This professional program builds on the relevant academic foundation of a student's previous undergraduate or graduate degree. Its aims are, among others, to prepare students in confronting past, current, and future controversial issues facing the museum profession.

The challenges to local museum work that need to be addressed more fully are: (1) the debate between 'classical' museum practices and the 'new' community development museum framework; (2) the place of museum conservation in indigenous communities where the process of making is more important than the preservation of an object; (3) the relationship of the museum to a commercial art market that emphasises art for investment but culturally devalues art and fosters a rise in forgeries, plundering, and illicit acquisition; and, (4) government intervention in the arts and the effect of state policy in the management of the national cultural heritage. In this sense, it is important to include in our future discussions the sharing of strategies by focussing on museum programs such as those proposed for future museums.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ana Maria Theresa P. Labrador, Ph.D.,** is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the Ateneo de Manila University. Her contact details are: Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Ateneo de Manila University, Loyola Heights, 1108 Quezon City, The Philippines or [alabrador@ateneo.edu](mailto:alabrador@ateneo.edu)



# THE THARU CULTURAL MUSEUM

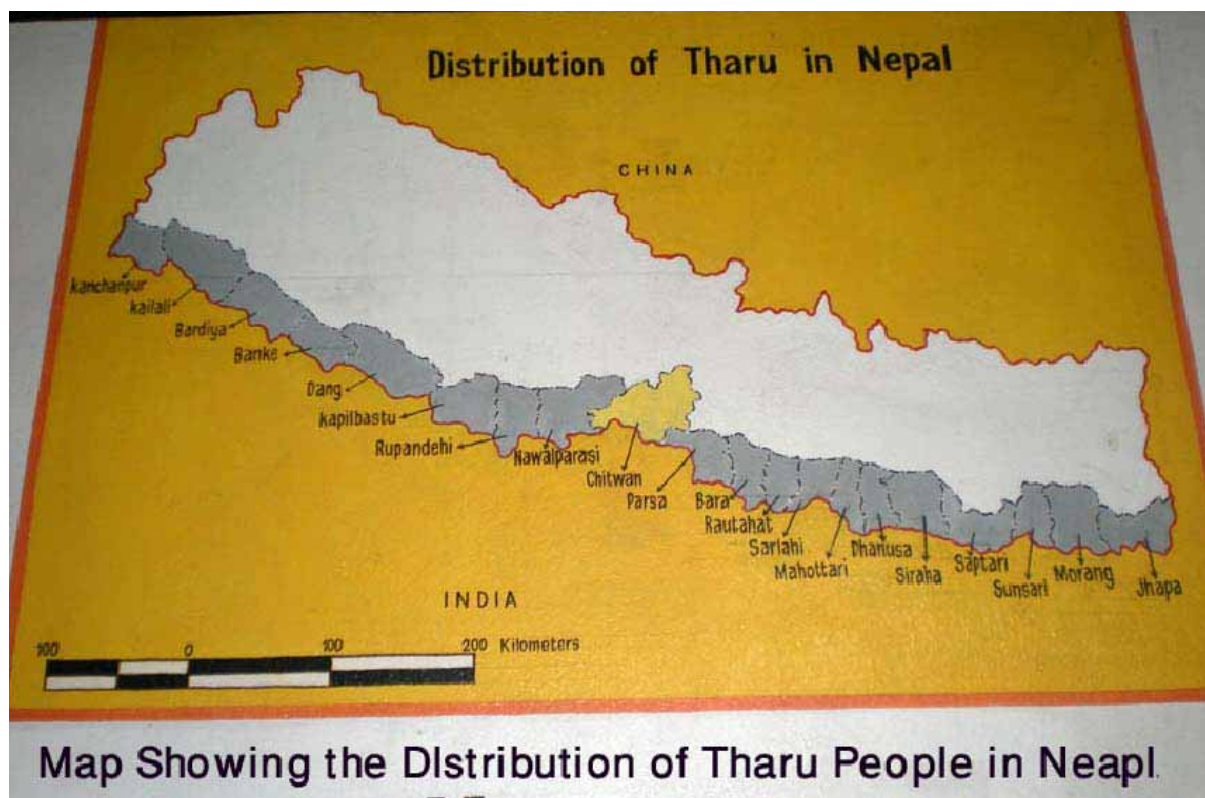


Sanjaya Mahato  
Birendra Mahato

# HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

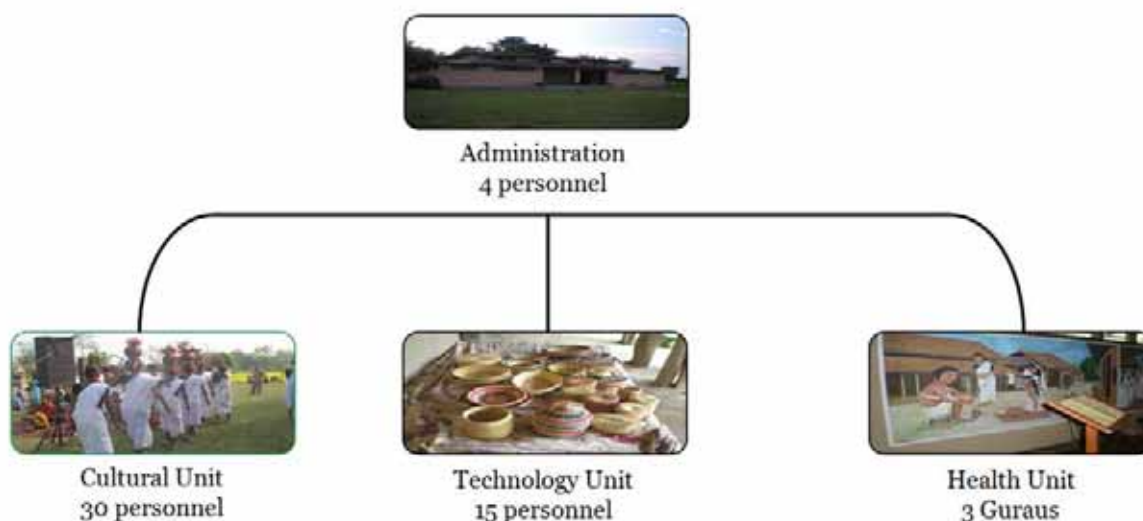
The Tharus are one of the dominant ethnic groups in Nepal. They are indigenous inhabitants of Terai, the narrow strip of flat and fertile land that lies between the mountains close to the border with India. Their physical features indicate a Tibeto-Burman ancestry; but because of the proximity of the Indian plane their language is similar to Bhojpuri and Hindi, a type of Indian language. The Tharus have unique rituals, festivals, and music, while their clothes and ornaments are similar to some ethnic groups of India.

Among the many challenges the Tharus face is their assimilation into the dominant Nepali culture. After the eradication of malaria from Terai within 1950 to 1962 (with the help of USAID and the government of Nepal) the rate of migration climbed dramatically, particularly the Hilly people, whose culture, along with the use of the Western education system, was gradually adopted by the Tharus. The community is thus under threat of slowly losing their ethnic identity and cultural values largely because of these external influences.



Map Showing the Distribution of Tharu People in Neapl

# INTRODUCTION TO THE MUSEUM



The Tharu Cultural Museum is located in Bachhauli, 6 Bachhauli, Chitwan, Nepal. Primarily, it serves the local Tharu people (estimated population: 30,408). With an annual average of 22,000 visitors, the museum's funds come from its cultural shows, souvenir and handicraft shop, food festival, and museum fees. The museum itself houses medium and small-sized collections, such as endangered handicrafts, paintings, indigenous instruments, costumes, ornaments, jewellerys, and different agricultural tools used in cultivating the fields.

The museum is community-based and is run by the Tharus themselves. It has four sub-divisions, each with its own respective personnel. There are 51 personnel altogether, some of whom work full-time and others work part-time. Most of the artists in the cultural unit work part-time. The diagram above shows the roles and responsibilities of the personnel, which cover the scopes of: (1) cultural, (2) indigenous knowledge and technology, and (3) herbal medicine.

# THE MUSEUM AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The Tharu Cultural Museum and Research Centre endeavours to conserve the cultural heritage of the Tharu, which include their indigenous knowledge, skills and technology, antiquities, and arts. Because the museum was established with direct involvement of the local Tharu people, there were no difficulties or challenges in ensuring that the museum supports community development.

Modernization threatens almost all the indigenous knowledge, skills, and technology of the Tharu but the museum played a significant role in consolidating their consciousness, which further helped promote the position of the museum in upholding the culture of the community.

In the beginning stages, the museum initiated a “cultural rediscovery” programme by culling researches related to the Tharu. Scholars in Tharu culture, along with the group of Gurau (traditional healers), were identified and then invited to help bring awareness on the history of the Tharu and thereby facilitate their sense of solidarity despite their

internal conflicts and geographical distance. Through such “cultural re-awakening”, it was hoped that the museum would garner more support in its effort on heritage restoration and preservation.

A meeting between the scholars and museum administration subsequently led to the formation of three sub-committees (under the Tharu Cultural Museum and Research Centre) to handle the different aspects of Tharu life, namely:

1. Cultural Unit: assigned to the conservation of cultural heritage of the Tharu, e.g. cultural dance.
2. Technology Unit: assigned to handle indigenous knowledge, skills, and technology, e.g. handicrafts.
3. Health Unit: assigned to handle the tradition of the Gurau clinic; research, plantation, and conservation of medicinal herbs; and the implementation of a health camp.

One of the most successful programmes of the museum was



called “Women as Catalyst of Sustainable Development”. Through a cultural show, women were made aware about domestic violence and discrimination against women. In Tharu tradition, women are a great contributor to the conservation of Tharu culture. The said program thus helped build a strong bond among the Tharu women and, most importantly, it taught the second and third generation of women about the importance of their culture.

Despite this success, among other milestones, the museum faced some

challenges too. First, it did not have any experienced cultural experts who can advise on and organize future plans and programmes. Activities were nonetheless implemented mainly because of strong public support. Second, and the most difficult challenge, was financial. People were willing to contribute their labour but monetary contributions were scarce. Instead, funds were collected from the performance of cultural dances, particularly the Tharu stick dance, which is very popular in Nepal.

# CASE STUDY

## Conservation of cultural objects and performances

The identity and cultural objects of the Tharu people are inextricably linked to each other, therefore, conserving the cultural objects is akin to conserving the identity of the Tharu people. Since its inception, the prime goal of the museum is to conserve Tharu cultural objects, and through its Cultural Unit, it currently displays Tharu costumes and ornaments.

The museum also conducts research and conservation work on art objects and other artefacts. For example, in the past the Tharu people used gold and silver coins as their medium of exchange, but this practice has totally vanished, and along with that

the loss of these coins. The few existing silver coins are displayed in the museum. The researchers of the museum are continuously looking for similarly endangered and rare cultural objects.

The museum is most successful in the regular presentation of the Tharu stick dance, which is performed every night for the tourists who visit the Chitwan National Park. The continuation of the performances has contributed to the preservation of the objects used in the dance such as *dholak*, *danphu*, *stick khanzari*, etc. As mentioned above, the dance collects a substantial amount of funds for community development and has made the artists financially self-reliant.







### **Preservation of traditional and indigenous knowledge**

Traditional knowledge has been fast dominated by modern ways of life at the cost of totally losing these indigenous practices. The Tharu Cultural Museum is therefore promoting indigenous knowledge and skills.

The Tharu people have a wide knowledge in farming, animal husbandry, hunting, fishing, and most importantly, healing. They also have techniques in constructing beautiful huts that are environment-friendly. Moreover, the Tharu craft their own farming tools and they use oxen or horses to run their vehicles for transport or for ploughing. Cows and buffalo are reared for the Tharu's popular dairy products such as milk, butter, and cheese. The Tharu are

also famous for hunting and fishing. The nets they use are still a matter of magic. They even use the same net to entrap wild elephants for domestication. They also use wooden canoes for transport and fishing. Their special fishing equipments are now kept and displayed in the museum.

Finally, the knowledge they use to heal the sick makes their traditional healers who use medicinal herbs very famous. It is also still a mystery as to what makes the Tharu immune to malaria without allopathic and modern scientific medicine. Different researches attest to the wealth in indigenous knowledge of the Tharu people. Under the threat of the total takeover of modernization, the Tharu Cultural Museum attempts to conserve and promote this wide system of knowledge. For instance,

the museum houses a Gurau Clinic. A Gurau is a traditional healer in the Tharu community. The clinic is managed by a group of Gurau under the direct supervision of the Health Unit. In the grounds of the museum, a nursery for medicinal plants houses the diverse plant species used by the local healers for medicinal purposes. Recently, the museum also planted different species of medicinal herbs in the Jankauli Community Forest.

### **Promoting indigenous skills in handicrafts**

The Tharu women in particular have indigenous skills in making various handicrafts. Tharu handicrafts are the most famous in Nepal, especially in Sauraha, one of the top three tourist destinations in Nepal and located on the edge of the Chitwan National Park, which is enlisted by UNESCO.

The Tharu Cultural Museum has trained some Tharu women to hone their indigenous skills. They now make handicrafts for the souvenir shop managed by the museum's Indigenous Skill and Technology Unit. The souvenir shop is one of the top earners of the museum thanks to the exquisite handicrafts of the Tharu women's group of Bachhauri VDC, who are known for their distinctive woven baskets and woodworks.

Recently, the museum professionalized this knowledge in handicrafts by also training other ethnic groups and minorities. The handicrafts have high market demand. Hopefully, spreading the skill to more people will displace products mostly made of metals, polymers, and other materials that are environmentally harmful. The handicraft programme not only promotes livelihood but it also supports environmental conservation.

### **Creation of jobs for community members**

Creating job opportunities for the indigent population of the Tharu community is one of the most distinguishable works of the museum. "Create opportunities by conserving and promoting the indigenous knowledge and skills" is the main motto of the cultural museum, and along this line, the museum sees economic potential in boosting indigenous technologies.

The museum has directly created jobs for almost 51 people, 30 of whom work under the Cultural Unit, while the Indigenous Skills and Technology Unit is composed of 15 people, who make handicrafts for the souvenir shop. Three people work in the Gurau clinic under the Health Unit, and four people work in administration. On a larger scale, there are more than one thousand direct beneficiaries of the museum.



# CONCLUSION

In the course of conducting the museum activities and research-based programmes, the organization learned a number of lessons that are the guidelines of our future endeavours or which may also be adopted by other similar institutions, to wit:

1) Major social change is a very complex process; it is expensive and it takes time. However, development initiatives on the micro-level are not as complicated and, with their ripple effects, can serve as stepping stones for larger progress.

2) Women play a significant and effective role in promoting significant change and sustainable development. In developing countries like Nepal, women are still treated as the inferior sex and they are often discriminated against in employment opportunities. In the experience of the museum, the success of programmes is not as remarkable without women's participation. It was concluded, therefore, that women's involvement should be at least proportionately equal with that of men if real change is to be pursued.

3) Revival, promotion, and conservation of indigenous knowledge and skills are the more crucial indicators of development rather than the adoption of modern technology. This way, as the community strives for economic development, dependency on modern technology is minimized, the financial cost of development is kept at a minimum, and, most importantly, cultural awareness is strengthened.

4) Cultural and ethnic identity is a key ingredient in enhancing social unity.

# FUTURE PLANS

The Tharu Cultural Museum is relatively new to the field and, to achieve its goals, has more plans in store, such as:

1) Currently, the research programme of the museum is focused on herbal medicine and indigenous knowledge and skills. It plans to expand its research on ethnic issues, cultural heritage, costumes and traditional ornaments, and archaeology.

2) To establish a library on Tharu culture for those who are keen researching and studying the Tharu people.

3) Tharu cuisine is most healthy, hygienic, and rich in protein, and it has been gaining interest among many people. In the future, the museum plans to open the Tharu Kitchen that will serve local cuisine to museum visitors and tourists.

4) The museum also plans to expand the medicinal herb plantation by encouraging the farmers to set up their own herbal gardens as well as to promote agro-forestry as an income-generator. As such, farming can truly provide job opportunities, propagate local herbs, and conserve the environment.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Sanjaya Mahato** has been working in the field of cultural conservation and promotion for sustainable development since 2005. He has been working as the Research Director at the Tharu Cultural Museum and Research centre since 2007.

**Birendra Mahato** is the Founding President of the Tharu Cultural Museum and Research Centre. He has been working in field of bio-diversity conservation since 2000 and has been equally involved in the conservation of Tharu culture through community development and the promotion of cultural rights

# MUSEUM AS A METHOD: FROM VISUALIZING THE COMMUNITY TO SOCIAL CURATING



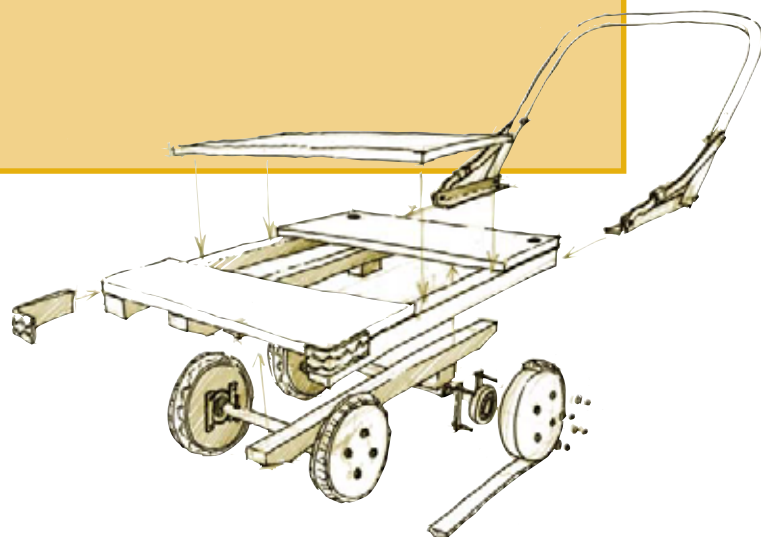
Howard Chan

# INTRODUCTION

The Community Museum Project (CMP, [www.hkcmp.org](http://www.hkcmp.org)) believes that a museum needs not be an intimidating and elitist institution. It can be a means to represent everyday living and values. Through the collection and interpretation of artefacts and visual evidence, indigenous creativity, visual culture and public culture can be explored.

The Community Museum Project focuses not on establishing conventional "museum" hardware but carrying out flexible exhibition and public programs, often within specific community settings. Through this process, the Community Museum Project aims to nurture a platform to articulate personal experiences and under-represented histories. It can also be an occasion to facilitate the participation of the public and cross-disciplinary collaboration. To us, the word "community" has three connotations: subject matter, settings and creative public interface.

The Community Museum Project was founded in 2002 in Hong Kong as a non-profit and non-government curatorial/research collective by Howard Chan (social curator), Siu King-chung (design educator), Tse Pak-chai and Phoebe Wong (cultural researchers).





# METHODOLOGY: INVENTORIZING, VISUALIZING, AND SOCIAL CURATING

The Community Museum Project sees “museum” as a method. It shares the approach of conventional museums in terms of the methodology of collecting, categorizing, interpreting, and display. The differences lie in the subject matters and the way projects are carried out.

The methodology of CMP mainly involved two major motifs: visualizing the community and social curating. Since its inception in 2002, the CMP has been focusing on vernacular culture creativity, such as DIY designs, protest, urban ecology, risk-prevention device, and street craftsmanship, which are often neglected or overlooked by mainstream museums, education, and discourse. These subjects are often exhaustively documented by

the CMP to become a “visual inventory”, and studied from visual and material culture perspectives. The visual inventory helped to create exploratory categorization which might bring out hidden paradigms.

At the same time, the visual record becomes the foundation and database for further cross-sector collaboration. In the recent years, much of the effort has been focused on connecting different kinds of social resources, such as craftspeople, NGOs’ social enterprises, education institutions, and professional designers, to facilitate a more integrated social relationship. The term “social curating” is coined to contrast the conventional curatorial practice of dealing mostly with artists and artefacts.

# CASE STUDY: IN SEARCH OF MARGINALIZED WISDOM - SHAM SHUI PO CRAFTSPEOPLE

## Background

For the last five to six years, urban redevelopment has been a heatedly debated issue in Hong Kong. It is often accused of its brutal “bulldozing approach”, which practically wipes out the original community. Old districts are turned into residential-commercial areas that drive away the original residents with the new price tag, hence dislocating the neighborhood and local business, and most of all, destroying the existing social network.

As cultural researchers who have been keeping a keen eye on indigenous creativity, the CMP was particularly concerned with the drain of local knowledge and skill tradition, particularly in the case of street craftsmanship. This very often undocumented grass-roots business is threatened by mass-produced goods and the lack of new apprenticeship. For long, it has occupied a humble position, if not totally neglected, in the mainstream museum representation and design

discourse, not to mention being elevated to the level of “heritage”. In popular media, it is always related with a nostalgic tone, overlooking the details of the work process. Nor are their contributions to the local economy being recognized by the new regime of economic discourse in the form of creative industry.

Rubbing salt into the wound is the threat of urban redevelopment. Most craftspeople have been using the “chinks” of urban space and its regulations, such as back alleys or portions of the pedestrian walk, as their production bases. These chinks would be closed by the gentrification of the redevelopment. The “messy” industrial production that used to endow the street gives way to the modern shopping-mall style consumption. In addition, the high rental of the new neighborhood simply renders the craftspeople out of the post-development picture. Hence the street craftsmanship is marginalized by the economic and urban development.

# THE RESEARCH: VISUALIZING THE COMMUNITY

The research *In Search of Marginalized Wisdom - Sham Shui Po Craftspeople* started in 2006 and carried on into early 2007, with an exhibition as the conclusion of the first stage. The research was a commission by the Sham Shui Po District Council, the municipal government body. Sham Shui Po is one of the old districts that underwent massive urban redevelopment. Statistically the poorest district in Hong Kong, Sham Shui Po remains a vibrant area with its high concentration of fabric material outlets and low-end technological goods. CMP's interest in vernacular creativity coincided with the District Council's intention to articulate and preserve the values of the community, especially under the imminent context of redevelopment.

With the help of NGOs, eight units of craftspeople were identified for the study. These are wooden cart maker, metalware maker, stuffed toy maker, bead-doll maker, rattan furniture maker, "flower plaque" maker, a self-taught inventor who runs a noodle shop, and a collaboration case

involving fashion designers and seamstresses. They are by no means "the best" in the city, as a conventional museum would have done, but selected as examples of the countless skill and knowledge that went unnoticed in the mainstream representation.

The research started with casual talks and observation of the product making process. Five major areas of focus were then identified: (1) materials and components, (2) tools, (3) process of production, (4) work space, and (5) social network. This general framework used the final product as the anchor, and investigated into various contributing conditions, such as operational, social, material, that shaped the outcome. Expansive photograph documentation was made about the cases, down to the exhaustive details. It is an example of CMP's methodology of making visual inventory on skill and knowledge, things that are "uncollectable" in conventional museum terms, for categorization and analysis, and subsequent narrative-making.



The research was, in a way, “disguised” as a normal commission by CMP to make products for the exhibition display. With the help of the financial support of the District Council, we are able to offer a higher-than-average fee, in return the craftspeople would let us to document their process. It should be noted that in the beginning most of the craftspeople under study were quite

shy from the interview and dubious about the purpose of the research. They seemed to have internalized the mainstream discourse regarding street craftsmanship, to the extent of belittling the importance of their own work. In addition, the idea of an exhibition was alien to their experience, despite repeated explanation by the researchers.

# EXEMPLARY CASES

Here two outstanding cases in our research are cited to illustrate the findings. The first one is Yau Kee Wooden Cart, run for more than 50 years by couple Mr and Mrs Lee. For the division of labour, the husband, the silent one, was in charge of the technical production of wooden carts, while the wife works on customer liaison and general business management. The shop was a combination of both production workshop and shop. Since they had been forced to leave the original location because of a rent increase in 2006, they had been housed under the shelter of a friend's shop to continue their business. Owing to this, most of the production, such as welding, was done on the pedestrian walk in front of the shop.

Yau Kee's wooden carts were heavy and sturdy and used in construction sites or renovations. The materials were mostly recycled. The body was made from old wooden bed planks. According to Mrs Lee, the older the planks the more suitable they are, as the grease they absorb from the human body makes the planks waterproof. The metal handle came from discarded fire hoses from old

buildings, which was quite abundant in the neighborhood. The coating of the wooden wheels and the buffers were made from the uneroded parts of old car tires. Due to the limitation of their tools, only the ones with fabric liner were used. The wheel bearings were recycled from European cars, such as BMW or Mercedes. Those from Japanese cars, having less quality steel, were less favored. The only new part was the wooden wheels, which were made from a special wood from China. The complex texture made them stand to pressure. Having been operating for half a century, Yau Kee is perhaps one of the forerunners of "upcycling" practice.

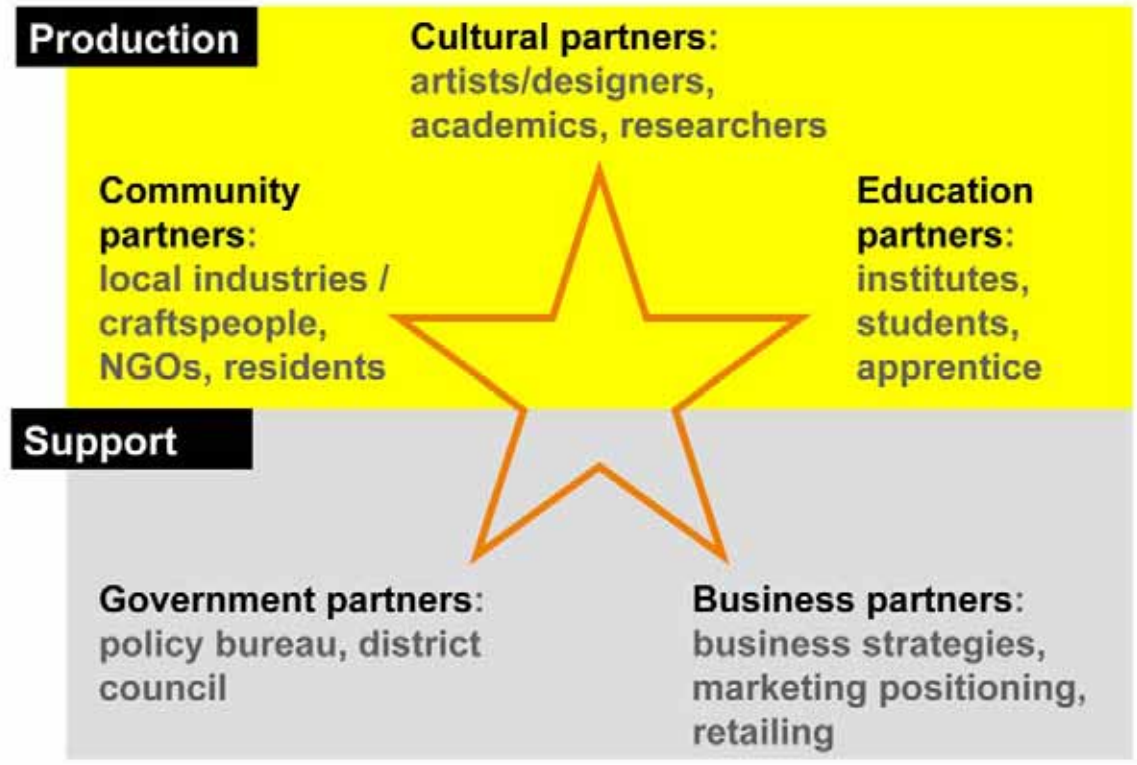
Social network played an important part in the operation. To facilitate the production, Yau Kee had made friends with the cleaners in the neighborhood. They became Yau Kee's informants and material sources. However, after the redevelopment started, materials had been more and more difficult to come on hand. Customers, with their valuable feedback, were another information network. The size of the carts, for example, was shaped by

their feedback on the purpose and location of usage. Carrying construction materials or garbage would have different implications on the design of the base of the cart body. Whether the cart was used in Hong Kong island or Kowloon peninsula also required fine-tuning the design to fit the width of the streets. The size of the cart had undergone several amendments before the final design. The current dimension could be easily maneuvered inside a lift. The design process could not have been possible without the social network.

seamstresses. Since China's economy opened in the 1980's, many factories were attracted by cheap labour to move to the mainland, leaving behind unemployed but skilled workers in Hong Kong, a majority of them being in the garment manufacturing industry. Many NGOs thus fostered schemes, such as social enterprises, to help the seamstresses. But without proper design and marketing expertise, most of these social enterprises are more oriented to satisfy the social objective of community-building than to become a standalone business. On the other hand, many independent fashion designers who run small business are looking for local technical support for their experimentation. Some of them

The second case is collaboration between fashion designers and

### Five-way partnership





have set up production lines in mainland China, but to travel frequently back and forth is something they want to avoid.

This is the case of the seamstress group under the NGO ADPL Social Services Centre and Daydream Nation, a company set up by young fashion designers. CMP, alerted by the need of both parties, attempted to match up the two. Instead of merely studying the skill set of either party, the research focused on the

collaboration process. While most Hong Kong designers are strong in concept, their training did not offer much on technical skill. The input of the seamstresses filled in that gap. The collaboration started out as a service from the seamstresses to the designers. It gradually turned into a workshop format through playful improvisation, with input from both on a more equal basis. This collaboration was important reference in the further development of this project.

# TOWARDS NEW SOCIAL NETWORK: SOCIAL CURATING

The shyness of the craftspeople was replaced by pride and ownership when the exhibition opened in February 2007. On display were the research findings of the eight cases of craftsmanship as well as the commissioned products. The exhibition was held in a series of shop spaces in a vacant and soon-to-be demolished public housing estate. The featured craftspeople, as we noticed, did not only take photos of their own work, but also the exhibition on a whole, indicating their ownership over the project.

The exhibition, however, was not the conclusion to *In Search of Marginalized Wisdom* but rather, it was the beginning of the next stage. Throughout the project, we had been avoiding a nostalgic tone and tried to interpret the craftsmanship from a contemporary design perspective, as seen in the exhibition and publicity text. It became an interface between the old and the new. Thus we need a language that could bridge the crafts tradition with contemporary design. To us, to preserve is to develop.

The exhibition was an anchor and platform for further development. The effect was multi-fold. It certainly

made the craftspeople happy, the showcase and the press coverage brought them new business. The exhibition also aroused public interest in the craftsmanship as this was the first ever attempt to look at the subject with such a microscopic approach. Using the exhibition materials as a production manual, we also invited professional designers to the exhibition to understand the work process and necessary conditions, and to work with the craftspeople to come up with new design. This was an attempt to bridge two separate social and knowledge areas — at least under the existing compartmentalization.

Foundation was thus laid for the craftspeople-designers crossover workshop between April and July 2007. Eight designers joined this program to each work with one or more craftspeople. The collaboration was defined by certain principles: new and contemporary applications were to be created out of traditional technique. Minimum modification should be done to the existing works process, as we could not expect the craftspeople to alter their long-standing production overnight. The last and perhaps most important was that the credits and rights should be





shared among craftspeople and designers.

One of the collaborations was between Yau Kee Wooden Cart and industrial designer Brian Lee. After carefully studying the structure of the wooden cart, Brian proposed a table. It was foldable and with wheels on one end. It retained the basic feature of the cart, and did not require a drastic departure from the existing production. The prototype was completed with input from both parties, the two generations of designers. Brian estimated that the table would be easily fit in a household, thus potentially expanding the business.

The media report on the collaboration, and the publication of the book *In Search of Marginalized Wisdom - Sham Shui Po Craftspeople*

brought attention to the case. The potential of Yau Kee was showcased through various media. Today, apart from producing the usual line of wooden cart, Yau Kee also receives commissions from artists and designers. The matching of previously compartmentalized knowledge fields yielded a new social network that, though might not replace the original one, crossed the geographical and disciplinary boundaries.

*In Search of Marginalized Wisdom* is an example of visualizing the hidden system previously veiled by social, economic or even political factors, and creating an anchor or reference point for discussion and further action, and how social resources can be identified and curated to nurture new social relations.

# WAY-FORWARD: TOWARDS A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

CMP envisions a sustainable system in the form of a social enterprise that is based on knowledge exchange and creativity.

The case with craftspeople has built up a model of how different knowledge areas can work together on an equal basis, and with potential economic implication. Apart from craftspeople, we are also enlisting the collaboration of NGOs' own social enterprises in a similar manner. Concept workshops were held between designers and NGOs, revolving around the skill set of the NGOs' members and sometimes developing from NGOs' own creation.

Based on the experience with craftspeople and NGOs, CMP has been

developing a collaborative model with professionals (designers, artists, researchers) on the one hand, community members (NGOs, craftspeople, people with special skills), and education sector (educational institutes, youngsters under social service scheme) on the other. It is under these social relationships that we start building a business model in which all parties can benefit from it in terms of recognition, knowledge building and monetary return. The business model is also a means to nurture the exchange of knowledge among different social sectors and sustain local knowledge in our society.



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Howard Chan** is the Social Curator of the Community Museum Project.



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