unit 64

**CASE STUDY 2 – Mount Merapi, Indonesia: living on a volcano**

Case Study 2 considers the situation of residents of the slopes of Mount Merapi, Indonesia, whose ICH and culture more broadly has developed in the context of repeated volcanic eruptions. The case study provides participants with an example of the complex interactions of local and scientific forms of volcanic knowledge, and the opposed responses to successive disasters of government and communities.

Mount Merapi, near the city of Yogyakarta on the island of Java, is one of the most active and dangerous of Indonesia’s volcanoes: it erupts almost continuously, with major destructive events every 8-15 years, and catastrophic events every 26-54 years. Historical records document eruptions going back to at least 1006 CE, but the largest eruption in recorded history was in 1672 CE when more than 3000 people were killed. Despite this history of eruption, local communities numbering over 50,000 people continue to inhabit the slopes of the volcano, benefiting from the very fertile soils which are attractive for both agriculture and livestock. These communities have adapted over centuries to a culture of volcanic hazard.

As the local population grows, the hazard risk increases. An eruption in 1994 killed 63 people and destroyed many people and cattle; although 55,000 people were evacuated, 810 remained. An eruption accompanied by an earthquake in 2006 killed 6000 people and damaged or destroyed 280,000 dwellings, leaving 1 million people homeless. And in 2010, another eruption killed 200 people and left 100,000 homeless. But for many Merapi residents, devotion to their faith, commitment to ancestral lands and lifeways, and limited or less attractive options elsewhere, mean that they will continue to return and live on Merapi’s slopes.

Merapi is a focus for local animist, Hindu and Islamic beliefs, as well as the World Heritage site of the Buddhist temple of Borobudur. Local beliefs hold that the fertility of the region, and the safety of its inhabitants, is dependent on appropriate moral management of the volcano by local communities and by the Sultan of Yogyakarta. Ritual ceremonies are performed to manage the relationship with spirits held to live inside the volcano. Disastrous eruptions that involve the loss of life and property are often attributed to the moral failings of humans of the region or elsewhere in Indonesia.

Merapi residents rely on the combination of traditional signs (wild animals fleeing, intense lightning storms etc) and scientific warnings of impending eruption (see the figure below), but their very strong preference in all but the strongest of eruptions is to stay in their villages and on their land, caring for their livestock. Seven observatories monitor the volcano’s activity and issue warnings. The government has designated risk zones and areas where people cannot build houses, but these restrictions are not always observed. After each major eruption, attempts are made to relocate local communities, but most manage to return to their ancestral lands and settlements. The local guardian of Merapi, the deeply respected Mbah Marijan, symbolised the resistance of Merapi residents to relocation. Himself a resident on the slopes of the volcano, he refused to move after each eruption, but perished in his house during the massive 2010 event.

**Points to be raised by the facilitator after introducing the Case Study:**

* The Merapi case illustrates the challenges for ICH safeguarding of changing historical conditions, with an increase in population leading to an increase in the risk of disaster.
* At Merapi, all three ‘modalities’ of people, place and story, are under severe threat – from both the certainty of eruptions and the possibility of relocation.
* The Merapi case invites participants to reflect on the way that many cultures are adapted to – and to some extent dependent on – the possibility of disaster.
* Are there other instances known to participants where scientific and local knowledge of disasters and appropriate responses are in opposition?
* What can the Indonesian government do to convince Merapi residents that the risk of disaster outweighs cultural and economic reasons for remaining in place?