CASE STUDY FOUR:  
Kelabit Highlands Community Museum Development Project

Author:  
Dr Jonathan Sweet, Senior Lecturer, Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies, Deakin University, Australia  
Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific  
School of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Faculty of Arts and Education  
Melbourne Burwood Campus  
Deakin University  
http://www.deakin.edu.au  
+61 3 9251 7056  
jonathan.sweet@deakin.edu.au

Community Consultation, Miri, Sarawak, June 26, 2013. © Meghan Kelley

Project background

The Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific (CHCAP) has carried out a range of projects in South East Asia focused on heritage and development issues, including working with UNESCO. In 2011, the Rurum Kelabit Sarawak (RKS) made contact through an educational consultant based in Malaysia to seek assistance for the Kelabit Highlands Community Museum Development Project (KHCMDP). The intent and potential scope of the KHCMDP matched expertise in pertinent areas at Deakin University (DU) including museology and cultural heritage management, sustainable architectural practices, cross-cultural visual communication and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage (through film and digital media).
Aims and outcomes

The KHCMKP is seen as an anchor for the preservation and interpretation of Kelabit culture, born of the concern for the preservation of cultural heritage and community-based sustainable development. It builds upon current preservation efforts and aims to be a powerful symbol of Kelabit identity and to play a role in cultural tourism, acting as an interpretation centre for Malaysian and foreign visitors to the remote Kelabit Highlands. It is conceived as a space that will be inclusive and useful to all members of the community, providing services for their reference and their participation. It is envisaged that there will be a physical location in Bario and a virtual presence in the World Wide Web, and that it will help sustain the cultural capital of the region.

Are/were you merely providing access / information or is this a project with mutual aims and outcomes?

This project provides mutual aims and benefits to all participants. Further to the aims and outcomes for the Kelabit Community outlined above, this project provides the Deakin University representatives with two substantial outcomes; the first is a practical application to extend the research knowledge of the four academic areas represented: cultural heritage and museum studies, film and documentary studies, architectural studies and visual communication design; and the second is the ability to provide opportunities for students from each of these disciplines to develop knowledge and skills in cross-cultural heritage development work.

How were the aims/outcomes agreed?

The desire for a community museum is a logical extension of current efforts to preserve Kelabit cultural heritage. This is evident in the practices of people to carefully store heirlooms of aesthetic, historical, social and spiritual significance. The first phase of the project included extensive community consultation that established the key aims. It investigated the extent to which a museum concept was understood and shared by the community at large and the extent to which existing cultural capital and assets might be utilised to sustain a museum-concept. As community consultation continues so does the negotiation of agreed aims and outcomes.

Who are/were the lead personnel on the project?

Deakin University
Dr Jonathan Sweet, Senior Lecturer, Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific
Mr Simon Wilmot, Senior Lecturer, School of Communication and Creative Arts
Dr Meghan Kelly, Senior Lecturer, School of Communication and Creative Arts
Ms Susan Ang, Senior Lecturer, School of Architecture and the Built Environment
Ms Ursula Lorentzen, Deakin International
Community Consultation, Bario, Sarawak, June 27, 2013. Standing Dato Isaac Lugun and Dr Jonathan Sweet. © Meghan Kelley

Who are/were you working with (a whole community, a selected group or an Individual)? Please describe:

The Rurum Kelabit Sarawak
Dato Isaac Lugun, President, Rurum Kelabit Sarawak
Cr John Tarawe, Baram District Council
Kelabit community representatives

Are you clear about why you are working with this selected group and with their role as representative of others? Please comment:

The RKS is the peak organisation that represents and promotes the Kelabit community’s social, cultural and economic interests. It is strongly supported by the community and works in close association with the traditional village governance system through committees of Longhouse or Village Headmen. The RKS is best placed to lobby for the resources and support to create a museum both within the community and within government and industry.

Assessment of authority: why are/were you dealing with this individual or group; how are/were they empowered to speak on behalf of a community? Are/were you satisfied with their 'credentials'?

The members of the RKS are appointed by the community and are highly credentialed in a range of professional expertise.

Partners – who are/were they? (Please provide website addresses if possible):
Rurum Kelabit Sarawak
Is/was it a museum-to-museum/ cultural centre project?

This is a cultural heritage and museum development project in association with community development and cultural tourism.

What are/were the budgets and other resources? (e.g. grant awards, dedicated staff, sponsorship):

Deakin University has supported the input of the academic representatives and assisted with the development through providing support for student mobility programs. The Commonwealth Government of Australia and the Kelabit community have also supported this project.

What are/were the timescales?
This is an ongoing project that begun in 2011, with the ambition to complete by 2018.

Ethical considerations – describe what these involved in relation to the project and how they were agreed/adhered to?

Deakin University academics are guided by both professional codes of ethics, such as the ICOM Code of Ethics, and those mandated by the university. Human ethics approval has been granted through the Faculty of Arts and Education Human Ethics Advisory Group (HEAG) number HAE-13-114.

Please also describe any compromises, surprises and how the project may have been transformed through the engagement:

The project is continuously being transformed through the consultation process. Many interlinking issues were identified in the early stages of the first phase. There was some initial debate about whether or not a physical museum was required at all with preference for the concept of virtual web-based museum. Community consultation confirmed that there was a desire for a physical entity and this then necessitated the inclusion of design based disciplines, and the need for capacity building in some aspects of cultural heritage management and cultural tourism. Further issues are surfacing concerning policy, governance and management, promotion and engagement.
What things would you consider if embarking on a similar project again?

The unique combination of Deakin University academics from a range of discipline areas – regionally focused museum and heritage studies, film and documentary studies, architecture and the built environment and visual communication design - is required to provide suitable skills and knowledge for the unique outcomes of an extensive project of this scale. Without the full palette of combined skills and knowledge the outcomes of the project could be limited, whereas, with this unique team of multidisciplinary professional practitioners we are able to embark on a project of this sort, at any scale.

What things would you avoid?

The issue of development in a fragile location such as the Borneo highlands is politically charged. Australian academics working in this context need to be conscious of not overtly entering into domestic political issues.

References to publications relating to project (online/in print):


Wilmot, S., 2013. ‘World Within No More’, Documentary Film, Deakin University