

Museum Partnerships: Dili – Darwin Return

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Abstract

Do Australian museums have a role to play in Timor-Leste's quest to establish a national museum of international standards?

This paper aims to explore the issues of developing relevant programs of collaboration, exchange and training that will support the process of imaging, planning, establishing and managing a national museum of Timor-Leste.

Through the lens of past and present exchange programs operating between the staff of the Timor-Leste Division of Culture and Museums (TLDCM) and the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT) a variety of training, exchange and internships initiatives will be considered.

This paper will consider the potential of the UNESCO Museum-to-Museum Partnership Program in the Timor-Leste and Australian context. It will highlight the current opportunity for Australian museums to contribute to the capacity of the Timor-Leste Division of Culture and Museums to meet the challenges of preserving the vulnerable moveable cultural heritage of Timor-Leste.

The journey by air from the capital of the Northern Territory, Darwin, to the national capital, Canberra, is about eight hours. Timor-Leste's national capital, Dili, is only one hour away by plane from Darwin, closer than its nearest town in Australia, Katherine, 310 kilometres to the south. For a number of reasons, but not least being the immediate geographic proximity between Darwin and Dili, the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT) has for some years now provided professional assistance and formed collegiate partnerships to assist in fostering Timor-Leste's cultural development, recognising that the goal to establish a national museum for Timor-Leste is a contribution to the preservation of the heritage of our region.

Timor-Leste and Australia's close geographic ties are borne out through the strong historical links shared between our two nations. On the eastern tip of Timor-Leste is Jaqo Island, home to Pasar Walo where archaeological remains indicate exchanges between Indigenous Australians and the Fataluku people of Timor-Leste prior to the arrival of European exploration of Australia (Da Silva). During the Second World War Australia became indebted to the Timorese *creados* who risked their lives in order to protect Australian servicemen. More recently, Timor-Leste and Australia's bi-lateral relationship has continued through the presence of Australian peace keeping forces in Timor-Leste; a presence that most recently aided the peaceful election of Timor-Leste's second President, Mr Jose Ramos Horta.¹

¹ At the time of writing this paper, Mr Jose Ramos Horta was elected as the second president of the democratic republic of Timor-Leste by over 70 percent of the nation's citizens.

For centuries Australia and Timor-Leste have been inextricably linked through a shared process of history and cultural contact; it is on the basis of our shared past that the people from Timor-Leste and Australia now look to the future.

Today, the cultural heritage of Timor-Leste, a small and culturally diverse nation, is at risk. What remains of the nation's cultural heritage is dangerously finite, unable to sustain further disregard, damage or indifference. In the broader Southeast Asian regional context over the past three decades the phenomenon of globalisation has effected rapid social change resulting in a significant loss of cultural heritage and craft traditions (Taylor, 1994). In addition, Timor-Leste's cultural heritage has been further reduced by conflict and war, resulting in its loss, theft and damage (Assis, 2006). During the recent decades of social dislocation and trauma it has been difficult to sustain traditional art and crafts practices in Timor-Leste. There is an urgency, therefore, to preserve what remains of the nation's distinctive cultural heritage before it is lost forever.

In an attempt to redress the critical nature of Timor-Leste's moveable cultural heritage, UNESCO identified Timor-Leste as one of ten nation's world wide in urgent need of support through the Museum to Museum Program under the auspices of the *UNESCO Programme for the Preservation of Endangered Movable Cultural Properties*. This program has been developed to foster international technical co-operation with the long term aim of protecting, conserving and presenting endangered movable cultural properties in nations with low incomes and in post conflict situations.² Other recipient nations in 2006 included India, Burma, Laos, Burkina Faso, Liberia, Madagascar, Haiti, Grenada and Egypt. The *East Timor Museum-to-Museum Program*, administered through the University of Melbourne, offers the opportunity for Australian museums to form partnerships with the Timor-Leste Division of Culture and Museums (<http://www.unesco>) and to support the current requirements for sustained educational and training programs in the fields of museum management, object conservation, collection database management and exhibition development. The need for educational opportunities to foster expertise in the fields of archaeology and heritage site management has also been identified (Assis, 2006).

² In the instance of Timor-Leste, the program is being administered under the auspices of The University of Melbourne and UNESCO (Jakarta office).

If Australian museums are to meet the challenge of playing a role in the quest to establish a national museum of Timor-Leste it will be through our capacity to facilitate museum training and exchange programs. Long term capacity is built by investing in people, ensuring the existence of the necessary expertise to make and support informed decisions about the nature and scope of Timor-Leste's future national cultural institutions.

In this context, in February 2007 AusAID announced the inaugural Australian Leadership Awards (ALA) Fellowship Program. This included support for MAGNT to host three Timorese Fellows under the *MAGNT Museum Management and Training Program*. This support from AusAID recognises the relevance of the establishment of a national museum in Timor-Leste to Australia's foreign policy agenda and development outcomes within the Asia-Pacific region. The ALA program aims to develop leadership and build partnerships that facilitate linkages between Australia and the Asia-Pacific. The Fellowships are intended for current leaders or those who have the potential to assume leadership roles that can influence social and economic policy reform and development outcomes, both in their own countries and in the Asia-Pacific region.

The MAGNT sees the opportunity to host three AusAID ALA Fellowships recipients from Timor-Leste as another step in the institution's ongoing relationship with Division of Culture and Museums (Timor-Leste).³ The continuity of this relationship is a critical element underlying the foundation for the AusAID support of the *MAGNT Museum Management and Training Program*, illustrating the importance of long-term engagement and partnerships in preference to ad-hoc projects. The ability to foster sustainable relationships is essential to the MAGNT's engagement with Timor-Leste. This collaborative relationship grew out of field trips by MAGNT curatorial staff and researchers visiting Timor from as early as 1989. Following the establishment of the Provincial Museum of Timor-Timur in 1995 during the Indonesian era relations continued between the staff of both museums.

³ The three ALA Fellowship recipients are Mr Manuel Smith, Mr Joao Fatima da Cruz and Mr Abilio da Silva of the Division of Culture and Museums, Ministry of Education and Culture, Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste. Mr Smith and Mr Fatima da Cruz worked at the Timor-Timur Museum since 1995 and 1997 respectively. Mr da Silva has recently joined the Museum Section, following working as a Media Liaison officer from the Division of Culture and Museums.

In 2000, after the violence which followed the referendum for independence in September of the previous year, there was a critical situation at the Provincial Museum of Timor-Timur which required urgent conservation and collections management assistance from MAGNT.⁴ Staff from MAGNT travelled to Dili to instigate a salvage operation of the nation's collection which had previously included a total of some 1,800 objects. Following the destruction arising as a consequence of violent attacks by militia, by the end of 1999 this collection had been reduced to a mere 600 objects (Fatima da Cruz, 2007). This assistance from MAGNT ensured the rescue, documentation and basic treatment of the remaining collection objects. The collection was removed from a disused museum caretaker's cottage and rehoused in temporary but secure container storage. Remaining museum records and library books were also salvaged at this time. This collection now forms the basis of the national collection of Timor-Leste (Bennett, 2000).

In 2003, MAGNT was approached by UNESCO to facilitate a museum staff training program, in conjunction with Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation (CCMC), which was delivered in Dili to Timor-Leste Division of Culture and Museums staff.⁵ This training focussed on museum exhibition development and community public outreach programs as well as on conservation training with the remaining collection. The CCMC has continued to undertake training in relation to object conservation and crate building. The Division of Culture and Museums have mounted a total of four public exhibitions in Dili since 2000 featuring the national collection. Various other outreach programs, including an annual national cultural festival, handicraft fair and regional documentation programs implemented in the thirteen districts of Timor-Leste by a network of regional cultural officers, are testimony to efforts by the Division of Culture and Museums in the renaissance of social and cultural traditions following the many years of disruption and conflict.

⁴ This salvage operation was instigated by Mr Patrick Filmer Sankey, former MAGNT Director and implemented by Ms Sophie Luissier, former MAGNT Senior Conservator, Mr James Bennett, former MAGNT Curator of Southeast Asian Art and Material Culture and Mr Cameron Wood, former MAGNT Collections Manager.

⁵ This program was delivered by MAGNT staff, Mr James Bennett, former Curator of South East Asian Art and Material Culture, MAGNT and Ms Joanna Barrkman, former MAGNT Research Associate. Staff from the Centre of Cultural Material Conservation, Ms Robyn Sloggett and Ms Marcelle Scott also delivered training modules in conservation techniques as part of this program.

In December 2006 under the auspices of the *East Timor Museum-to-Museum Program*, the MAGNT hosted a delegation of 15 staff from the Timor-Leste Division of Culture and Museums. This visit to the MAGNT included the opportunity to view MAGNT facilities and exhibitions and meet MAGNT staff. A series of lectures were presented by senior MAGNT staff providing the group with insight into the institution's structure, information management strategies for collections, cultural and historic sites and policy. A 'behind the scenes' tour through the MAGNT operations included the collection stores, photography and design studios, workshop, wet stores, receiving room, conservation laboratory and armoury. Visits to the Chung Wah Society Museum, operated by Darwin's Chinese community, and the historic Fannie Bay Goal provided the delegation with wider exposure to local community museum and heritage site initiatives.

The delegation also presented papers at a public seminar at the MAGNT, which revealed their aspirations and challenges. This visit provided the Timor-Leste delegation with a comprehensive orientation to MAGNT organisation and collections structure, and also updated MAGNT staff about the directions and vision of our Timorese colleagues with regard to the development of a national museum. This two way exchange formed the basis of positive 'people to people' relationships critical to the development of a meaningful partnership and cross-cultural museum training program.

In January 2007 the MAGNT facilitated a conservation training workshop at the Provincial Museum of Eastern Indonesia, Kupang, Indonesia.⁶ The participation of staff from Timor-Leste Division of Culture and Museums was supported by UNESCO. This initiative provided practical hands on conservation and collection management training in textile handling and storage, condition reporting, insect identification and a storage review of the museum's facilities. The workshop, delivered at the Kupang collection storage facility with collection objects used locally available materials and appropriate technologies.⁷ Further conservation training for wooden and bamboo objects has also been identified as a pressing need in the future due to the vulnerability of such objects to insect infestation in the extreme tropical climate and humidity experienced in Timor.

⁶ The Indonesian name for this museum is UPTD Museum Negeri Nusa Tenggara Timur.

⁷ Materials were generously donated by the Palmerston City Council – Sister City Committee. This workshop was facilitated by Carolyn McLennan, Conservator and Joanna Barrkman, Curator of Southeast Asian Art and Material Culture.

Another significant aspect of this workshop was the rekindling of past working relationships between the Provincial Museum of Eastern Indonesia, Kupang and the Timor-Leste museum staff. The participation of staff from Timor-Leste in such workshops achieves the dual function of developing capacity in collection management and conservation as well as fostering exchange between museums in the region. This precedent in collaboration of training programs for staff from both Timor-Leste and Provincial Museum of Eastern Indonesia, illustrates the potential for cost effective, strategic, locally delivered training which has the additional advantage of multiplying exchange between museums. Regional exchanges provide a stronger foundation for museum development in eastern Indonesia, Timor-Leste and north Australia.

The *MAGNT Museum Management and Training Program* is a targeted, strategic program of capacity building which extends the existing relationship between the MAGNT and the Division of Culture and Museum, Timor-Leste. The MAGNT hopes to provide the critical experience required by the Fellows for the responsible management of national collections and exhibitions management in Timor-Leste. The program is structured to provide individual professional development based on mentorship models and includes on-the-job training, short in-house technical courses and English language studies; all with the aim of exposing the Fellows to best practice in Australian museum standards and protocols.

The Fellowships focus on three key operational areas: Museum Facilities Management; Collections Management; and Exhibitions and Public Programs with each of the Fellowship recipients working under the supervision of senior MAGNT staff facilitating their involvement in the day-to-day operations of the MAGNT. The *MAGNT Museum Management and Training Program* will culminate in the formulation of draft strategic planning and policy documents, including a draft collections policy and disaster preparedness plan, for the longer term implementation of the establishment of a national Museum of Timor-Leste. This will enable the Fellowship recipients to return to Timor-Leste with tangible outcomes for discussion and strategies for future implementation. A collection database will also be developed as part of the training program for use upon return to Timor-Leste.

As part of the *MAGNT Museum Management and Training Program* the Fellows will work on the documentation and research of Timorese artefacts held in the MAGNT's Southeast Asian Art and Material Culture Collection with the longer term view of developing a collaborative exhibition featuring collections from the MAGNT and national collection of Timor-Leste. This exhibition planning will begin to draw on the skill sets learnt by the Fellows and enable them to apply these skills to a practical situation. It is also envisaged that through the implementation of this exhibition the Fellows will assume leadership roles, passing on skills and experience to their colleagues upon their return home.

Through training programs outlined above the resultant capacity building is a two way process, which strengthens the MAGNT's ability to work in our region, as well as the capacity of our Timorese colleagues. Whilst the training approaches outlined are all strategies to deliver targeted, practical and relevant training, the MAGNT program is but one small step in contributing to the skill development required to adequately envisage, plan and operate a dynamic, relevant national museum of Timor-Leste. It remains important that ICOM and other Australian museums recognise and respond to the need of our near neighbour for practical skills development support from now into the future.

The long-term process of constructing a stable, democratic, civil society, in one of the world's poorest nation's, is not something achieved over night. In this post-independence era of turmoil and uncertainty, most recently witnessed during April to June 2006, it is easy for Australian museums to assume that it might be premature for the Timorese to take on the task of planning for a national cultural institution. Perhaps it is easier at this time for Australian cultural institutions to look in other directions, rather than to enter the difficult terrain of uncertainty and hardship which currently characterises the world's newest nation's vision to establish a national museum.

Yet this would greatly undervalue the assistance that Australian museums could provide. A theme of this conference is that museums are going through difficult times financially; yet in comparison to Timor-Leste we appear wealthy. Where we are rich is in our knowledge base and skills of our industry professionals and through workshops, training and collaboration with colleagues in Timor-Leste, we can offer assistance to develop the skills that will enable the preservation and appropriate level of long-term care for the

material culture and heritage of this new nation. This is the very time Australian museums can play a critical role by instigating further training programs in anticipation of the time when the Timor-Leste Division of Culture and Museums is ready to implement the long term goal of establishing a national museum.

The desire to establish a national museum in Timor-Leste remains a critical step in the process of nation building. Once achieved, a national museum of Timor-Leste will symbolise the nation's quest to assert its independent identity following over 400 years of Portuguese colonisation and 24 years of Indonesian rule. The establishment of a national cultural institution will lay a platform for the formation of a civil society, which recognises the importance of the nation's history, heritage, traditions and diversity as a basis from which to move confidently into the future (Assis, 2006).

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