

WORKING WITH LOCAL MUSEUMS: A CASE STUDY FROM EASTERN INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

Local museums can provide solutions to some common problems encountered by field archaeologists. These institutions can curate artefact collections and improve community relations by educating the local public about the research taking place in their communities. Additionally, the process of designing and installing educational exhibits in cooperation with local people can provide insights into not only community perceptions of the research project, but also of local conceptions of history and the role of the past in the present. In this article, a case study from the Banda Islands of eastern Indonesia is presented with the aim of encouraging archaeologists to embark on similar projects, and helping them avoid some of the potential pitfalls of such projects. By participating in local museum development, archaeologists can both strengthen these institutions and gain the benefits of their presence in the research locale.

In July 1998, a new public exhibition opened in the *Rumah Budaya* (Cultural Center) in the Banda Islands of the Maluku province of eastern Indonesia, on the archaeology and history of the islands. The exhibit, which grew out of my archaeological research on the late pre-colonial period in these spice trading islands (Lape 2002, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c) was intended to be a way for me to give something back to the people of Banda, who had helped me in many ways during the 14 months I spent in the islands. However, the giving went both ways, as the experience of making this exhibit deepened my understanding of the role the past plays in the present in Banda, and the impact of my own research on local history. I present my experiences here in order to help and encourage others to try similar projects.

Conducting archaeological research in small, tightly knit communities like the villages of Banda is a very public activity. Often a large audience observed me as my mostly non-Indonesian crew and I conducted surveys and excavations. Despite the fact that many people watched our activities, it was difficult to convey to the public the true nature of the work – especially while busily engaged in it. While I attempted pit-side explanations in-between digging and note taking, I was aware that most people had little idea of what I was up to. Occasionally rumors surfaced that indicated some concern over my activities (e.g., I was digging for treasure, disturbing sacred sites or graves, etc.) that must be familiar to archaeologists anywhere in the world. An exhibit, I felt, would be a good way to quell rumors and educate large numbers of people about my investigations into the past of their islands. Rather than simply taking the data and running, I could ensure that the knowledge I gained was available and useful to the local community.

I had other concerns that I thought might be addressed with the creation of a museum exhibit. I was worried about the final curation of the large collection of artefacts I had unearthed in Banda (40,000 plus objects). Under current Indonesian law (Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia 1997, see also the English summary Department of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia 1996), artefacts collected by archaeologists in Indonesia generally come under the control of the federal government, and final placement of collections is under the jurisdiction of the Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan (DepDikBud). Individual archaeologists can recommend storage of collections in their choice of institutions subject to DepDikBud approval, and if no institution is specified, collections are curated by the local DepDikBud office nearest the collection locale.

For my project, the options were to:

1. send the collection to a government-run Provincial Museum (Muzium Siwa Lima in Ambon, on another island about 100 miles away);
2. send them to the National Archaeology Research Center (Pusat Penelitian Arkeologi Nasional) in Jakarta; or
3. keep the collections in Banda at the local DepDikBud office in Banda Naira.

I chose the latter option for a variety of practical and ideological reasons. Packing and shipping my large collection would have been costly and difficult, as well as potentially damaging to the artefacts.

I worried about transportation and the state of the big federal institutions during this period of major political upheaval in Indonesia (June 1998). But most importantly, I felt that local people would be the best caretakers of the collection, and could perhaps benefit most from it staying in Banda. The DepDikBud national office in Jakarta approved my decision, and at the completion of my fieldwork, I moved the collection to a secure storage room in the Banda Naira office, which was equipped with shelves and related documentation that I provided.

While the majority of the collection was not displayed, I felt that a public museum exhibit of some of the objects could ensure that local people and institutions understood the importance of the collection, in addition to educating them about my research. But there were many potential problems, especially in Banda where the past is extremely politicized, and knowledge of the past is an important source of social power. I chose to install the exhibit in the *Rumah Budaya*, which is owned by a private foundation in Banda (*Yayasan Warisan Budaya Banda Naira* – the Banda Naira Heritage and Culture Foundation) which, with its controversial director Des Alwi, is situated in the middle of struggles for the control of knowledge, property and power in Banda (Hanna 1978, Wrangham *et al.* 1996, Kenji and Siegel 1990). I made this choice because the space was already set up and run like a small museum, was well known by local people and tourists alike, and was centrally located; a public institution would have been a better choice if it had existed.

There were other potential problems. The oral, rather than written, nature of local Banda history means that the overall structure of stories about the past is quite different from textual or academic ones. I wanted to create an exhibit that didn't claim to be the one absolute "correct" story of the past, to the detriment of a rich and varied (and contested) oral tradition (Schmidt and Patterson 1995). But, I also wanted to convey what I think are real advances in knowledge resulting from my research, in a way that was understandable and useful to local people and tourists alike. Museum exhibits, which use space, objects, words and

images to allow visitors to construct stories, can transmit messages that may or may not have been the intention of the exhibit designer (Taylor 1995). While the potential messages I would be transmitting to the people of Banda by creating an exhibit were impossible for me as an outsider to comprehend completely, I at least wanted to begin to explore them. I hoped that in the process of designing the exhibit I could learn something about Bandanese story telling and how people there think about material objects and their past.

To do this, I decided to incorporate local people into the design and construction of the exhibit. I recruited 12 students and a teacher from the local high school. This choice of codesigners helped avoid some potential power conflicts that I would have encountered using adult members of the community; people generally found the students' work (and their questions and interviews) non-threatening. We met as a group a few afternoons a week, after school, for about two months. Before we began the actual design and installation of the exhibit, we spent time with some basic issues. Some meetings were devoted to my explanations of how archaeology works, and its relation to history. I invited knowledgeable village elders to present their versions of Banda history to the group, and we had some lively discussions afterwards. We talked about how to contextualize the material objects in the exhibit to give them meaning, the nature of our audience, and how to incorporate multiple story lines into our single exhibit. To give the students a feeling for archaeological research, I invited two Indonesian archaeologists to come to Banda and we all spent two days on one of the outer Banda islands surveying and excavating a site, and processing artefacts.

The first homework assignment was for the students to write their own version of the history of Banda, and all 12 responses were fascinating to me, worthy of further analysis in their own right. Some were timeless and mythological, relating, for instance, the coming of Islam to the islands, while others were focused solely on the Dutch arrival and conquest of the islands in 1621. No history incorporated the 20th century, except for a few mentions of WWII, and few considered times prior to the 16th century. Interestingly, none of the students incorporated the story of the exile of important Indonesian leaders of the independence movement (such as Hatta and Sjahrir) to Banda in the 1930s and 40s by the Dutch. This is considered of central importance in state-published history textbooks and tourist literature and a government-encouraged "source of pride" for Bandanese. We decided to leave them out of our exhibit, mostly because the houses of these two men in Banda are already federally financed museums.

We hashed out a basic exhibit layout as a group, and I tried to restrain my own input to matters of visual design

only, based on my own previous experience designing and installing museum exhibits. I stood back and allowed the students' interests and ideas to guide the object selection and exhibit layout. This was particularly difficult at times, as I tried to decide whether design choices I disagreed with were simply the result of inexperience on the part of the students, or more complexly related to culturally specific ways of structuring space and telling stories. I spent time questioning the students about these choices, and in the end, they often managed to convince me that their way was most appropriate. We decided to add historical objects, maps, and paintings of historical scenes borrowed from the *Rumah Budaya* and other individuals to archaeological material from my collection. Our stories covered everything from the geological history of the islands to recent developments, such as the building of the airstrip, electricity generating station and high school in the 1980s. Students went out and interviewed their families and neighbors, and we included various (sometimes contradictory) versions of myths and accounts of life during the war, or during the last years of the Dutch colonial plantation system. Some borrowed my cameras and took photographs of what they thought were historically important places or buildings, and we hung enlargements of the photos in the exhibit.

We used locally available materials for the construction of the exhibit; signs were made from paper glued onto 3 mm plywood, pressed flat with sand bags, and sealed with clear spay paint. We glued most of the wall-mounted materials to the cement walls with contact cement. A local carpenter was hired to build display cases. The students used my laptop computer to write and print out textual material, and we all worked on translating the texts into both English and Indonesian so that our expected audiences of local people and domestic and international tourists could read the information (this was especially time consuming). As usual, the last days before the opening were hectic, with some late night gluing sessions, and last minute corrections or alterations. But all was in place for our grand opening ceremony. We invited the media from Ambon, and local and provincial dignitaries, and served food and drinks, interspersing speeches with *gong sembilan* music. The exhibit got great reviews from locals and visitors alike (see Turner *et al.* 2000:986), and the TVRI crew made a half-hour documentary about our project that has been rebroadcast several times. In all, this was a very rewarding experience for me, and I think for the students who worked with me, besides leaving behind a permanent contribution to the local community. The success of the project has inspired plans for a state-funded museum, which would utilise one of the many historic buildings from the Dutch colonial era which stand empty in Banda today. The project has also created some local

expertise in cultural resource management and exhibit design, which may become valuable if the islands are listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site as planned, although since 1999, ongoing violent conflicts in Maluku have put a hold on these developments (Winn 1999). However, while this kind of project would be impossible for those researchers operating under severe time restraints in the field, I found the investment in time and energy worthwhile.

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