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Engaging cultures across the Timor Sea

As modernisation and globalisation extend into eastern Indonesia, traditional culture's decline in rural communities is undermining the vibrancy and dynamism of their arts. A partnership between two organisations in Australia and Indonesia is supporting a re-dedication of these communities to the traditions and values of the past through a program that facilitates a re-imagining of their place in the future.

Georgia Sedgwick

Australia and Indonesia have a long history of cultural engagement, the earliest recorded contact going back 400 years when Bugis Makassar traders sailed to the shores of East Arnhem Land in northern Australia to trade sea cucumbers with the local Yolgnu people. Modern-day cultural encounters traverse a much broader landscape; traces of those early connections, however, continue to resonate and it is these historical links that form the basis of the Northern Territory-Eastern Indonesia Partnership programme.

Asialink at the University of Melbourne in Australia and the Kelola Foundation in Indonesia are extending their existing Australia-Indonesia Arts Management Program to encompass a pilot cultural partnership programme between the Northern Territory and eastern Indonesia.¹ It aims to support the development of community cultural centres in eastern Indonesia currently working towards the revitalisation of the traditional arts through a programme of exchanges between indigenous arts centres and other cultural institutions in the Northern Territory.

The programme recognises the achievements of the indigenous arts sector in the Northern Territory, its commercial and critical success in the national and international art scenes and its capacity to rejuvenate the cultural traditions of once-devastated communities. Blossoming from humble beginnings in the 1980s, the market for indigenous artwork in the territory is now estimated to be worth A\$100 million a year. This income allows communities to stay together, ensuring the transmission of traditional knowledge and ways of life and a sense of pride in the traditions.

Art centres, located within indigenous communities across Australia, are the main centres for the production of indigenous artwork and training in the performing arts in remote areas, and fulfil a variety of functions depending on the needs of the community within which they operate. The Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre and Museum in East Arnhem Land is an example of a highly successful model, owing in large part to the emphasis placed on cultural maintenance by the local community. The Centre is not only a venue for the display and sale of artworks (sales are also made via the Centre's website), it also has a museum and printing studio and will soon establish a knowledge centre to document and present the written, pictorial and oral histories of the local community. The local Yirrkala people have a strong sense of the role the Centre plays in maintaining and revitalising local traditions, and invest much of their time and energy supporting its programmes.

The ability of indigenous Australian communities to maintain cultural integrity while catering to the demands of the market has in the main eluded their eastern Indonesian counterparts, and it is the challenge of this programme to find economically and culturally sustainable ways for these communities to strike a similar balance.

The Indonesian context

The traditional arts of eastern Indonesia, an area encompassing the islands of Sumba, Flores, Rote, Alor and West Timor, are rich and varied, reflecting the region's great cultural diversity. It is predominantly the textile and performing arts traditions of eastern Indonesia that inform and complement the region's broader cultural systems, and in this sense are traditionally the most integral to the daily life of these communities. However, in the years following independence in 1945, Indonesia has seen a significant shift in its cultural landscape; traditional arts in particular have struggled to maintain their relevance in the face of dramatic change. The impact of tourism, globalism and modernisation, the forced abandonment of traditional systems of organisation, dramatic transmigration policies, and an increase in accessible education have had a devastating – and in many cases irreversible – effect on traditional arts practice.

Traditional knowledge of dance, music and textile production is less and less concerned with nourishing the cultural life of villages and more focused on satisfying the demands of the market. This has resulted in the production of low-quality synthetic textiles and, in the case of the performing arts, performances that are repetitious rather than challenging and interesting to the audience, to the performers, or to the art form itself. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that younger generations can now afford schooling and are not involved in village life to the same extent as previous generations. There are therefore fewer opportunities to transmit knowledge and inject new life into these art forms.

How then is re-dedication to traditional values encouraged in a less than supportive environment? One place to start is to identify existing structures that could support this kind of activity. It is from this position that the Northern Territory-Eastern Indonesia Partnership proceeds, focusing on the *sanggar* (studio, collective), the main centres for training and producing traditional art for visiting tourists and local and international markets. There is immense potential for these centres to develop into community cultural centres that nurture both the cultural and economic life of the community through the production of high-quality performances and textiles for discerning consumers. *Sanggars* might also be developed as venues for the presentation of works produced, thereby facilitating more active community involvement and generating pride and value in local living traditions and culture.

Tafaen Pah Foundation: a case in point

Assuming a mentorship role in the program is Yovita Meta, founder and manager of the non-profit Tafaen Pah Foundation in Kefamenanu, West Timor. The Foundation is a weaving cooperative and gallery that supports the work of 25 self-managing groups of female weavers from surrounding villages. Prior to the establishment of the Foundation, local weavers had almost completely abandoned traditional methods of producing textiles, opting for more affordable machine-made cotton and more vibrant but environmentally destructive chemical dyes. Traditional motifs and weaving styles were traded for those that were easier to make and in demand, producing a glut of textiles that were neither culturally significant nor of high artistic or technical quality.

Workshops and training programmes are now conducted at the Foundation to share traditional knowledge of textile production, including instruction on *ikat*,² supplementary weft and tapestry weaving, natural dyeing and hand-spinning cotton with the aim of producing the highest quality textiles for local and international markets. The cultural significance of the motifs and the associated music and dance traditions that complement them are also shared, ensuring their transmission to younger generations and cementing their place in the futures of these communities. The Foundation's success has encouraged men from local villages to participate in offshoot activities, for example, using profits from sales to cultivate the cotton and indigo necessary for producing the textiles and establishing house-building co-operatives. The Foundation is an inspiring example of how the re-articulation of traditional culture in a contemporary context can empower communities, both economically and culturally.

Theory into practice

The Foundation and the indigenous art centre models will serve as the starting point for the development of eastern Indonesian *sanggars* involved in the pilot programme. Key arts practitioners and community leaders working towards the revitalisation of the traditional arts will be identified to engage in cultural exchange internships with local *sanggars*, indigenous Australian art centres and other key Australian cultural institutions. The Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT), which houses an extensive collection of material culture from across eastern Indonesia, will play a key role in supporting this programme. These organisations will facilitate an understanding of the immense potential community cultural centres have to maintain, interpret and nurture local cultures and identities. The programme's format is intended to provide participants with an understanding of the strategies these organisations employ, the possibilities for applying these models in their own communities, and the opportunity to build networks and skills to support this development.

Through experimentation and cultural exchange, the Northern Territory-Eastern Indonesia Partnership programme seeks to facilitate a revitalising role for *sanggar* by developing their potential as a community resource. Stimulating informed 'cultural tourism' and establishing new and more discerning markets will provide the necessary economic support to foster pride and continued investment in the cultural heritage of these communities. <

Notes

1. The program is supported by the Ford Foundation in Jakarta, an organisation concerned with the transmission of traditional arts to new generations of Indonesian performers and practitioners.
2. A fabric in which the yarns have been tie-dyed before weaving. From the Indonesian *mengikat*, 'to tie' or 'to bind'.

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A member of the Tafaen Pah Foundation producing ikat textiles.

courtesy Joanna Barrkman