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Ethnographic Museums Must Examine Price of Development

BANGKOK, Jul 30 - Reflecting the fact that ethnic diversity is a central characteristic of all the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) countries, ethnographic collections are relatively common, with the exception of Cambodia where museums mainly focus on archaeological artifacts and on experiences of war.

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By Rosalia Sciortino*

BANGKOK, Jul 30 - Reflecting the fact that ethnic diversity is a central characteristic of all the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) countries, ethnographic collections are relatively common, with the exception of Cambodia where museums mainly focus on archaeological artifacts and on experiences of war. In China, Thailand, and Vietnam there are full-fledged ethnographic museums exclusively devoted to the preservation, presentation and exchange of ethnic cultural heritage. In Burma and Laos, national museums and cultural centres showcase ethnographic displays of their official ethnic groups.

Preserving 'Doomed' Cultures

Despite different country contexts and the variation in number, quality and scale of their collections – China has the most and the largest collections in the region– ethnographic museums in the GMS share the common goal of supporting nation-building ideologies.

Their exhibits portray ethnic minorities according to orderly categories, such as China's 56 nationalities or Laos' Lao Lum (lowlanders), Lao Theung (uplanders) and Lao Sung (highlanders), which fix the position of the various groups within the boundaries set by the State, and reject eventual sectarian claims. Exhibits stress national unity among diverse groups and encourage a shared sense of belonging through smooth cultural integration.

Ethnography museums are also expected to compensate for the inevitable cultural losses due to well-intentioned development schemes in the poverty-stricken and remote upland areas where ethnic communities live. Progress takes precedence, even if it implies the homogenisation of previously distinct cultures and lifestyles and the devaluation of indigenous knowledge and traditions.

In this political context, ethnographic museums feel moved to help preserve some parts of these 'doomed' cultures by collecting artifacts, documenting the sources of intangible knowledge of the 'culture bearers', and representing traditional ceremonies and festivals. Some may also try to contribute to the process of economic development by encouraging handicraft production by ethnic minority groups and the sale of these products at museum shops.

However, the ethnographic museums' function of making up for cultural losses seems increasingly inadequate in the face of the dramatic changes that ethnic minorities are experiencing today.

The transition from subsistence economy to market economy is exposing ethnic communities to vulnerability and marginalisation. They are losing their habitat as mountainous areas are targeted for infrastructural development and resource exploitation. Deprived of traditional sources of livelihood and detached from their cultural heritage, more and more ethnic minority people, especially the young, are feeling disenfranchised. With low literacy levels, no relevant work experience and weak bargaining power, ethnic people are finding exploitation rather than welfare in the promised world of 'development' and 'modernity'.

Advocating for Living Cultures

This gloomy picture challenges ethnographic museums to find more forceful ways to express their concern for the fate of ethnic minorities and to go beyond elevating them to be the museums's main focus of attention and preserving their heritage within the protected environment of these structures.

Through their exhibits, museums can raise questions about the appropriateness or success of development paradigms, and probe into the wisdom of culture-insensitive policies toward poverty alleviation.

In changing the ways they portray ethnic minorities, museums can stop presenting them as living in an idyllic or romanticised situation. Instead, they can look into the challenges these communities face and expose their struggle for survival.

Exhibits should not only celebrate the richness of their cultures, but also address how ethnic communities deal with day-to-day problems so as to give the public a more realistic picture. This would raise awareness about the uncertain future of ethnic communities and promote discussion of how best to address the 'negative' impacts of unbalanced development. These include competition for and rights to land and natural resources, citizenship and language issues, the strain caused by permanent and temporary in-migration on previously isolated areas, the effects of tourism on local culture, values and lifestyles, the

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Looking into the problems of ethnic communities would also compel museums to revisit their representation of these minorities as groups with unchanging essential core characteristics frozen in a timeless ethnographic present.

Exhibits in GMS museums generally represent ethnic minority cultures as isolated, static and timeless, failing to capture the dynamism, interaction and fluidity inherent in them as well as their transnational links across countries in the region and beyond.

At a time when the GMS is undergoing widespread and profound socio-economic transitions, changes in the lives and livelihoods of ethnic minorities cannot but be valued as subjects fit for examination and interrogation by museums -- if these institutions are to be relevant to the very people they are supposed to represent.

Pioneering Reform

An example of how ethnographic museums can embrace development and change in their work in order to call greater attention to the threats ethnic communities face is provided by the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology in Hanoi. From June to October 2009, it is holding a special exhibit on the completion of Road No 9 as part of the GMS East-West Economic Corridor. This exhibit pinpoints the transboundary road's economic and infrastructural value for the region, as well as its distressing socio-environmental and health consequences for already disadvantaged countries and groups.

A follow-up exhibit will focus on the Mekong River and expose the effects of environmental degradation, including dam construction, on the lives of riparian communities. In spearheading this unconventional form of museology in the GMS, the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology is encouraging a process of reform in museum practices - one that would account for the rapid transformation affecting ethnic minorities in an effort to sustain their living cultures far beyond museum walls.

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(This column is adapted from a soon-to-be-published article, co-written with Alan Feinstein and presented at the Conference on Museum and Urban Anthropology, held in November 2008 in Hanoi.)

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