

THE COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN SUSTAINING AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE: THE CASE OF SARAWAK, MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Community involvement in archaeological heritage management is the real opportunities of participation by the local community. The objective of this study was to assess the involvement of local community in preserving an archaeological site. Field visits was conducted to obtain an in-situ preservation while a face-to-face interview survey was also conducted with the local community and Sarawak Museum Staff. Their involvements to preserve the site were recorded. Results showed that community involvement plays a very important role when they were selected as site volunteers for different job specs. Collaboration between archaeologist, heritage managers and local community participation could help in preserving the sites as one of the Sarawak tourism products. Without the community involvement, the aesthetic value of the site will be destroyed or lost due to modernization. Future work should be conducted on other archaeological sites elsewhere to develop effective guidelines and policy involving local community participation.

Keywords: *Community involvement; Archaeological research; Preservation; Sireh cave, Heritage management, Sarawak, Malaysia*

Introduction

A limestone cave has been natural attractions since prehistoric period. Archaeological evidence of early human's interest has been discovered in caves throughout the world. Today, cave in the world are used mostly for recreation by tourists and explorers by the researcher. For example, previous researchers concluded that the involvement of communities in archaeological heritage management or referred as community archaeology has been established practice in Europe, North America, Australia, and some part in Africa and Asia [1-7].

Another researcher identified community archaeology as a local people which are coming together to do archaeology for themselves [8]. Sometimes it is based on the motivation and interest of community members toward their heritage and their sense of history, and often ethnicity and nationality, and redolent of shared values and celebration [9-10]. The connection between communities and their heritage should be recognized, respecting the community's right to identify values and knowledge system embodied in their heritage. The involvement of local communities, the recognition of, and respect for, their cultural heritage, as well as innovative and traditional practices can favour more effective management and governance of multifunctional landscape contributing on their resilience and adaptability [11-12]. The need of

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each community varies from place to place because the objectives of stakeholder groups vary widely. Each community, be it in a rural village, small trading town or peri-urban marketplace has distinctive and special needs and sensibilities. Community activities have all played significant roles in trying to protect archaeological heritage.

Collaboration approaches with local communities are not limited to newer topic of archaeological inquiry but are also having an impact on more established areas of archaeological research. The involvement of communities in various capacities in archaeological research and preservation can be highly productive and successful. Collaboration with the many different stakeholders' groups present within a community also shapes the activities of preservation programs, tailoring them to fit the need of the local population. The involvement of local community may help archaeologist to be more strategic in their use of resources, in partnership and collaboration, and how they present their activities and goals to the site [13]. Futhermore, the well-planned and well-information community participation, with realistic control, contributes to reconciling tourism and cultural heritage conservation [14-15].

Methodology

Location and Description of Study site

Sireh Cave is situated in the centrally of Mount Nambi, one of several isolated limestone outcrops in the Serian District, in the west of Sarawak Malaysia (Fig. 1). According to the Bidayuh tribe's myth, Mount Nambi is a former merchant ship that turned into a big stone because of a dragon attack guarding the gemstones in Bukit Sandong. At present, an entrance to Sireh Cave is through a Bidayuh settlement (Plaman Bantang), which can be reached by car about 40 minutes from Kuching, Sarawak. The cave was located on the hill of a paddy farm in Plaman Bantang Village. It was reported that Sireh Cave has two chambers which is referred as the main and small chambers [16].



Fig. 1. The front view entrance of Sireh Cave

The archaeological research at Sireh Cave has a long story, began with the excavation by Benedict Sandin in 1954. His report accompanied by a sketch map showed the location of his five trials pits [17]. In 1959, excavation was undertaken by the Sarawak Museum under the supervision of Tom Harrison and Wilhelm G. Solheim II. The excavation recovers a large collection of mid-Holocene earthenware, some metal and stone objects and a few human burials [18]. In 1977, Zuraina Majid led the second local researcher excavated Sireh Cave. During the

excavation, they found shells, earthenware, modern ceramics, animal bones, and seeds [16]. In 1980, Edmund Kurai attempted an archaeological survey, but did not publish his findings. The fourth archaeological research in Sireh Cave was conducted in 1989 by Ipoi Datan and Peter Bellwood in two sessions [16]. This systematic survey and excavation found food remains including rice, pottery (local earthenware, Chinese of Late Ming and Qing), beads (monochrome, shell disc), stone materials, human burials, and charcoal drawing. The artefacts were also analysed and published by the Sarawak Museum Journal.

Sireh Cave yielded evidence of prehistory habitation by foraging people as early as 20,000 years ago. A human picture (Fig. 2) found in the cave showed that it was about 5,000 years ago meanwhile the pottery probably aged between 35,000 and 45,000 years ago. Sireh Cave was used for human burial sometime 2000 years ago and that trade relationship between China happen until the last century [19]. Therefore, the excavation provides not only the information about the activities at the site but also some preliminary information about its chronology and occupation.



Fig. 2. Human painting found in Sireh Cave

Sireh Cave preservation was under the jurisdiction of Sarawak Cultural Heritage Ordinance 1993. Sireh Cave preservation took part when this archaeological site was listed as one of the important sites in Sarawak. Sireh Cave requires a special care from the Sarawak Museum. This is because Sireh Cave becoming one of tourist attraction in Sarawak. Preservation activities involving Sireh Cave are including in situ site, painting and route to the cave. Sarawak Museum staff and a group of expertise have been asked to restore the cave painting due to the presence of new paintings done by the visitors on the cave wall.

The main issues involved Sireh Cave is publication where this has been agreed that very little has been published about the Sireh Cave [20]. After the excavation in 1959, the emergency came along, and nothing further was done with the material. It was reported that the first excavation by Tom Harrisson and Wilhelm G. Solheim in 1959 did not publish formally and their record can no longer be traced [20]. Only the pottery and some of the animal bones have been published. It was also reported that all bone was dry and highly fragmented. Due to the non-available record, it was difficult to detect the original grid. The previous archaeological excavation destroyed all or part of the site [20].

Data Collection and Analysis

The study used a qualitative approach with an in-depth interview with selected community members mainly among the Bidayuh tribe residing the Sireh Cave. This research did not involve a large sample size, but it focused on several respondents using purposive sampling (Table 1). Unstructured and semi structured interviews (Table 2) with knowledgeable elders and Sarawak Museum Department employee used to clarify the role of community involvement in archaeological research and preservation at the site. Once they provide their information, they then nominated others whom they regarded as both having information, and the essential right to speak about the issues of concern.

Table 1. The Display of Research Respondent

Respondent 1: Head of the Village
Respondent 2: Researcher Guide
Respondent 3: Curator Archaeological Section, Sarawak Museum Department
Respondent 3: General Staff in Archaeological Section, Sarawak Museum Department.

Table 2. Question for The Local Communities and Sarawak Staf Museum

No.	Question for the Local Communities
1	Are you interesting with the cave activities? What is your role as a head of village regarding any activities involving Sireh Cave?
2	Do you involve in archaeological research in Sireh Cave?
3	Did the Sarawak Museum Department trusting you in order to monitor Sireh Cave
4	What is the importance of the archaeological sites to the communities reside the Sireh Cave?
Question for the Sarawak Department Staff	
1	Is there any collaboration between the Sarawak Museum Department and the Communities reside the archaeological site? What is the collaboration justification?
2	What are the preservation activities done in the Sireh Cave?

The study also used an observational approach which was a site visit to know the details about the site, including the research that had been done in the cave, human remains in the cave, preservation done by the government agencies, and activities related to the cave. On-site observations are one of the most effective tools because the researcher personally goes to the site and discovers the surrounding of the site. As an observer, the researcher gains first-hand knowledge of the activities, and operations on-site. This information is very meaningful as it is unbiased and has been directly taken by the researcher. This technique is time-consuming, and the researcher should not jump to conclusions or draw inferences from small samples of observation rather the researcher should be more patient in gathering the information.

Data was analysed qualitatively using an *Atlas.ti* software, where primary data was scanned for words and phrases most commonly used by respondents. In addition, words and phrases were used with unusual emotions that compared the findings of interview; discussion about which aspects of the issue was not mentioned by respondents and comparing primary research findings.

Results and Discussion

The Involvement of Local Community in Archaeological Research

Many scholars referred archaeology as a study of the human past, ancient human behaviour using material evidence likes objects they made or used [21-26]. Archaeologists need to find out what people thought about the world to understand them as agents. These definitions support the idea which acknowledged the relationship of archaeology to human behaviour including the physical manifestations of man activities, their rubbish, treasure, building and

graves [27]. All this “objects” found by the archaeologist seem to be a source of endless fascination because of their link with people need, capabilities and aspirations. The societies within them use objects to define, punctuate, perpetuate and manipulate their social personate.

Archaeological research is one of the methods to enhance the artefact collection in the museum. Research is essential in the preparation of statement of significance, proposals for listing or for conservation, and ultimately in the documentation of listed and protected items. Archaeological research consists five phases of processes namely asking questions, building models, collecting data, analysing data and evaluating results [28]. Meanwhile, research in archaeology processes involves six information components such as observations, sample summaries, empirical generalization, theories, predictions and empirical interpretations [29]. Archaeologists typically work in areas where local people have vested interest in their work. Hence, it can concluded that archaeological research has produced a broad range of information and knowledge, which has not only contributed to the formation of public understanding of the past but also has become the basis of people collective identities [30].

Archaeological research in Sireh Cave involved local community as a site guardian and field assistant in research expedition and restoration project. They involved in helping the researcher to a research process such as carrying heavy objects, digging and cleaning the artefact. Although residents have limited access to the knowledge and other benefits from the research that is taking place in their backyard, their involvement was very important because archaeological investigation need access to the cave. However, young generation reside the Sireh Cave did not involve directly with the archaeological activities due to problems in communicating with the tourists, especially the foreigners.

Local community has become an agent in the construction and elaboration of their own history. This situation happened in the beginning of the archaeological research. Collaboration between archaeologist and community residing in Sireh Cave are very important to gain more information about the site and about the history. Through an oral tradition within research process that focuses on the situation where complementarity and compatibility between different knowledge happen between the researcher and some of the informer in the village. The researcher interviewed them to know more detail about the site before the excavation taking place. The local community encourages archaeologists to ask the question of the past they would not otherwise consider seeing archaeological remains in a new light and to think in a new way about how the past informs the present. This would help in a holistic understanding of the archaeological material since it is expected to accommodate the voice of local community to interpret their own past.

The Involvement of Local Community in Sireh Cave Preservation

Archaeological preservation can be defined as the act of keeping archaeological remains the same or preventing it from being damaged. Archaeological preservation emerges to be crucial way to help established a long-term research capability for the archaeological discipline. It has also been agreed that it can be promoted by numerous techniques and modern methods that makes it possible for researcher to gather information with a minimum of deterioration to archaeological remains [31-32]. In archaeological research and preservation, community involvement and local engagement concepts are now systematically associated with heritage management effort. Collaboration between researcher and local community are now the major concern, and archaeologist is responding to the public with serious scholarly attention. In the same time, archaeologist and communities forge research partnerships much as people in another field [33].

Community residing near or among the location of cultural resources have important, sometimes critical influences on the protection and preservation of the archaeological site. Communities deeply concern about the Sireh Cave because they live next to the cave which they have a cultural connection. Community members protect and maintain the resource when they regard them as their own. The action of the local community increasingly is of important in

cultural resource preservation, protection, and interpretation. Local community show more interest in preservation activities involved the site. Their involvement in Sireh Cave preservation is essential in sustainable heritage management and heritage tourism.

Sarawak Museum collaborated with local community to develop and manage such site especially in-situ site preservation. The involvement of local community in site conservation and preservation led to a conflict-free and very positive process [34]. The collaboration is very important to avoid the vandalism in the site. In the 80's, it was reported that the major issues related with the Sireh Cave was vandalism that leads Sarawak Museum to preserve the Sireh Cave [19, 34]. During this period, they found the cave in a mess with bamboo canes, bird feathers, tins, and plastics. The walls were also tempered with paints of all media including enamels, crayons, acrylic, chalk and charcoal. There are also many new paintings and writings on the cave wall created by the visitors and bird collector's due to the poor site supervision.

Local communities also monitor the activities in the cave for economic purposes such as heritage tourism job opportunities. Monitoring was conducted not only for protected areas but also the entire site to sustain the valuable limited resources, experiences and conditions on the site. Local communities realized that archaeological resources have a high economic potential value, namely tourism services, activities, accommodation or food. Tourism activities may result and contribute to the economic benefit of the local community, especially to the village cooperative unit. Despite a minimal entrance fee charge of RM5 per head, the village cooperative unit is having some forms of income from the cave. Active and meaningful involvement in heritage tourism makes them change their behaviours on site and for the preservation of the site. Preservation is not undertaken individually but integrated into social development including tourism.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the involvement and responsibility of the local community is a must for any research and management efforts in preserving archaeological site. Community involvement as a site guardian; volunteer workers in research expedition; agent in the construction and providing historical facts; monitoring the activities in cave; and helping in developing site preservation can also enrich archaeological site research and management, making it a conflict-free and very positive process in sustaining the archaeological site as one of the cultural heritages. The long-lasting relationship in collaboration with the local community will at the same time benefit the researchers, site managers as well as the residence community. It is important for a local community living nearby the Sireh Cave to control the archaeology which is conducted on their land and to be actively involved in the process of consultation on those projects which impact their resource. It brings a better workability of archaeology and heritage management sector in Sarawak and opens a new avenue of research in community heritage methodologies. This also provides a solution to the problem of unemployment to the community reside the side.

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