

# 20 | ICOM Australia Award for 11 | International Relations

## Australian Museum testimony

Australian Museum, with the University of Goroka in Papua, New Guinea and other PNG Cultural Agencies, for the exhibition *Rituals of seduction: Birds of paradise* testimony.

The Australian Museum's cultural component of the exhibition: *Ritual of Seduction Birds of Paradise* (9<sup>th</sup> April – 30<sup>th</sup> September 2011) was a major collaborative project developed with the University of Goroka and other major PNG cultural agencies. The main aim of this exhibition was to illustrate the world of these magnificent birds by exploring behavioural patterns, evolution and their habitat conservation. Another important aspect was to investigate the role that these birds play in PNG's rich traditions today given the unique understandings that indigenous tribal groups have of their living environment.

The Museum recognised the importance of developing a project in collaboration with cultural institutions and representatives of PNG communities so as to include community views. This initiative was developed by actively engaging and forming relationships with major cultural institutions already established in PNG, such as the University of Goroka, the Komuniti Tok Piksa (film unit), the National Cultural Commission, the Department of Protection for the Environment and Wildlife, and the Golgoi Cultural Centre in Minj (Jiwaka province). Other major PNG agencies included the Pacific Trade and Invest, and the Travel and Promotion Authority of PNG.

In August 2010, a cultural curator for the Australian Museum's project team was invited to travel to Goroka in the Eastern Highlands. After a series of meetings with scholars from the University of Goroka a plan was developed to form a small team to travel for nine days overland through the Highlands to identify relevant cultural groups and document their cultural views regarding different Birds of Paradise.

A number of cultural groups were identified and invited to share their narratives. All participants showed great interest and willingness to contribute in the discussions. This revealed that there was a wide range of differing cultural approaches to the Birds of Paradise, and also to different species of Birds of Paradise. All discussions were filmed. The primary contributors were a traditional Waghi Big Man (man of status), the Director of the Golgoi Cultural Centre in Minj; a group of Jimmi Bird of Paradise hunters from the remote Jimmi valley; a group of Huli people from Lake Koroba in the Southern Highlands; Enga people from Enga province; and other cultural groups from the Western Highlands.

The inclusion of indigenous PNG people's voices and shared knowledge about their myths, body decoration, status, trade of plumes, use of magic in traditional hunting practices, and concerns about preservation of the birds' natural habitats – currently under threat – resulted in a powerful

visual exhibition which assisted the viewing audience to understand the intimate relationship between certain PNG cultures and Birds of Paradise – relationships that may have developed over the past 40,000 years.

Another important component of this collaborative project was the seven-day visit to Sydney by representatives of the University of Goroka, Komunity Tok Piksa, a group of Huli people, and the Director of the Golgoi Cultural Centre. They attended the exhibition's opening and participated in a series of cultural and educational public programs. A series of traditional performances by the Huli representatives wearing elaborate costumes, body decorations and headdresses decorated with Birds of Paradise plumes was presented for the Museum's audience.

Members of the public were able to engage actively with the group to ask questions about their culture, relationship with the birds, and learn about the threats to the birds' natural habitats and their preservation. Scholars from the University of Goroka actively engaged with the Museum audiences giving lectures about the significance of the Birds of Paradise for Huli and Waghi cultures.

Another important component of this project was the physical engagement of the indigenous representatives with items of their cultural heritage held in the Museum's PNG collections. This opportunity to access and view these collections from their own cultural areas was one of the highlights of the visit. They were able to provide much valuable interpretation identifying changes in the production, utility and importance of these objects since the time of original collection, which greatly enhanced the Museum's understanding and documentation of the objects, and also allowed the indigenous representatives to encounter aspects of their past cultural practices that had since dramatically changed.

The outcome of this close collaboration was of mutual benefit for the Museum and all the PNG delegates, who felt a sense of achievement from the collaboration between the PNG cultures and a major Australian institution. This contributed greatly to the exhibition's success. Copies of photographs and film were distributed to each delegate to take back home to their communities.

Upon his return, the Director of the Golgoi Cultural Centre organised a major gathering with his people in Minj to share his experience and views of his participation in the project and start a series of workshops for the youth in conjunction with the University of Goroka's Kai Boma. This collaborative group is currently planning cultural initiatives for the preservation of Waghi culture and the Birds of Paradise's habitats for future generations. Major rapid changes due to modernisation and globalisation are undermining Waghi culture and this represents a risk of losing the cultural identity for future generations. In this context aspects of this participation and increasing international relationships between the Australian Museum and PNG cultural institutions are of major relevance. The establishment of these relations brings together remote communities that otherwise would not have the opportunity to engage with large cultural collections held in major museums.

The collaboration with the University of Goroka is ongoing. In June 2011, Kai Boma, a Museum Studies lecturer, was offered an internship at the Australian museum to work with the Waghi ethnographic collections. The outcome of his initiative was significant for two main reasons: it was the first time an internship was offered to a Pacific islander in the capacity of researcher and resulted in the production of the first report about the Waghi collections. This is a significant document enhancing and providing further understanding of production techniques and changes that have taken place of the last three decades in the Waghi valley. Copies of this report are available for students at the University of Goroka and have been distributed to the Golgoi Cultural Centre in Minj, Jiwaka province for community use.

The project *Rituals of Seduction: Birds of Paradise* demonstrates the value of traditional oral knowledge and how fundamental it is to adequately contextualise the Museum's collections. This

invaluable intangible knowledge, interlinked with stories, dance and songs interwoven with their living environment, and the input of someone from the cultural background are essential if we are to fully reveal the significance of the objects and their role in cultural traditions.

It highlights the potential that museums in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have. As holders of large cultural collections, they are uniquely placed to develop major projects working closely with indigenous people and cultural institutions. Furthermore, by actively engaging with cultural initiatives we are strengthening relationships as part of the ongoing NSW State Government and Australian Federal Government relationships with PNG and beyond, to the rest of our Pacific Islands neighbours.



*Rituals of Seduction: Birds of Paradise* exhibition

Photo: James King, Australian Museum



Highlander

Photo: Stuart Humphreys, Australian Museum



Big man headdress

Photo: Carl Bento, Australian Museum