PSI2009 Local Perception of
Cultural Heritage and Globalization: a Case Study
A Cultural Centre in Chambri
(East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea)

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ABSTRACT

In 2001, the Chambri (East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea) decided to set up a “cultural centre” or a “museum house” in their village. Their culture, well known since the studies conducted by Margaret Mead in the 1930’s, has attracted since many scholars and artefact buyers. Chambri artefacts are today conserved in many parts of the world and so far about 2000 have been identified. Documents related to these artefacts were brought back to the village and are today considered as an important testimony about their culture by the Chambri.

Confronted to rapid changes in their culture and important alterations in their relationship with their neighbours and the modern administration, they decided to create a new social and architectural structure in which they intend to show and advertise their existence. The museum located near a symbolic stone symbolises the first inhabitants of their islands and hosts a series of artefacts specially designed for this new institution. It is surrounded by a botanical garden designed to transmit to new generations environmental knowledge and their sense of aesthetics as well as offering to visitors what they consider as the best of themselves. The institution as an architecture, as a collection of plants and artefacts and as a public and collective form of expression is an important element of Chambri strategy to transmit, promote and advocate their culture. It is the expression of the understanding they have of themselves as well as local reflection on the contextual and conceptual changes they are facing.

Keywords
museum, cultural centre, material culture, traditional artefacts, clan, Chambri, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Papua New Guinea, Culture is both centralized and determined by colonial structures and institution (National Museum and Art Gallery, National Cultural Commission, formerly National Cultural Council, National Research Institute, University of Papua New Guinea, formerly National Art School) conserved after independence in 1975. At the same time the constitution of the independent country defends the autonomy of local cultures. An enormous effort was dedicated by the central government and the provincial government to encourage, support and advertise local cultural centres. In 1991, a symposium was held under the auspices of the National Museum and Art Gallery
and was an opportunity to assess the situation and propose some perspectives. A distinction was then raised between museums and cultural centres. These last were attributed four functions (Paulias, 1991:11):

- conserving local artefacts
- recording music, songs and “legends”
- publishing or providing with local arts and crafts
- educating people

Despite these recommendations, the analysis of the cultural centres evoked during the symposium show that very little of them, apart those which were managed by administrative authorities (provincial government or national government) could achieve such goals. On the opposite, when the goals where generated by village people, cultural centres or associations obtain better results (see Kamene 2001:18-29). The Zia Eco-Trust with its open goals, stressing the educational aspect (fourth goal proposed by Paulias op. cit.) creates the possibility to evolve in function of the necessity of the time.

The Chambri cultural centre has adopted the holistic perspective. In East Sepik Province 20 cultural centres existed in 1991 (Huasi, 1991:77). But at that time, it was already admitted that these local endeavour were fragile and such centres didn’t last long. The Chambri cultural centre participate to an existing tradition and many Chambri have visited one or more of these cultural centres (in Maprik or Angoram) and are perfectly aware of what is a cultural centre. They are also aware of the tourist value of such buildings but also aware of the problems linked to management. As we will develop later, the cultural centre was decided not to be a place where will be conserved local artefacts, but a place where will be displayed local artefact, involving that the collection could be fluctuant. Chambri being a too remote village, lacking of cash resources, publications are not one of the goal of the cultural centre. There is no material, nor desire to centralise recording of music and songs. The educational aspect has been indeed the driver of the project and it appeared very soon and clearly that the cultural centre would be a place where on the one hand the younger generations and on the other hand tourists will get information about the culture. It was intended as a place of transmission of knowledge.

The Chambri Cultural Centre is a holistic projects designed by and for the Chambri. It was designed to fulfill Chambris expectations in term of preservation of cultural heritage, economic development, and tourism. It is shaped as a clan dwelling house (yarenk’n tumbé or yarenk’n kurer) but adorned like a ceremonial house (irman), a prerogative reserved to very big clans’ houses.

1a Geography.
The Sepik valley is a wide swampy place flooded during the rain season. Chambri is one of the rare mountains located in this plain. This mountain is situated at the end of a peninsula in the middle of large lake about 15 kilometres wide. Chambri is also one of the rare areas where one can find stone quarries.

Three villages, Indingai in the centre, Wombun towards the North, Kirimbit towards the South, are built around the mountain, not far from the shore of the lake. Today about 1700 people are living in the Chambri community.

1b Social Organisation
The Chambri society is divided in three villages and comprises about 15 clans. The history of this community is based on the history and the migration of each of those clans. Each of the clans is ruling a specific part of the ground which is transmitted from one generation to the next. Each clan has its own history transmitted by the myths, songs and some specific rituals. In spite of numerous divisions and subdivisions the main structure of the Chambri community is founded on the binary system created by a couple of mythological brothers: Mariyambumke. The two ancestors Mari and Yambuke should be seen as one entity and cannot be apprehended separately. They are the necessary foundations of the unity in a binary system. Each of its components has its value and allows some connections with other cultural and natural oppositions: lake and mountain; day and
night; sun and moon; man and woman; son and father...

Each clan is supposed to have its own ceremonial house called irman. The

The ceremonial house is also the place of the conservation of memory and cultural heritage. The myths relating the creation of the world and the development of human being are transmitted there. It is a sacred area where some of the tutelary supernatural beings of the clan or of specific lineage are living and which can house more powerful supernatural beings on the occasion of rituals and ceremonies.

There are two large ceremonial houses in Chambri. The oldest, called Walindimi, was built in Wombun to celebrate the independence of Papua New-Guinea in 1975. The ceremonial house of Holimbit in the village of Kirimbit was inaugurated in 1999. Several other ceremonial houses of smaller size are built along the three villages. The last one to be built is the Parambarumman ceremonial house, erected as a venue for the most important rituals of the Chambri community. In this ceremonial house part of the activities of the cultural centre will take place.

2. CHAMBRI CULTURAL CENTRE

Since 2000 the inhabitants of Chambri are setting up a double building in order to create an extended cultural centre. This cultural centre houses a documentation section, a small museum, a botanical garden, an archaeological section and in the future a small zoo. This cultural centre has three main aims: protecting the Chambri culture and facilitating its transmission to future generations; promoting the Chambri culture amongst the scientific community; attracting tourist activities in Chambri.

The Chambri are worrying about the increasing fragility of certain traditions being part of their culture. They wish, through the cultural centre and traditional activities, to transmit as much as possible the heritage of their ancestors and at least to record a part of that heritage through photographs, audio recordings, sketches and artefacts. They also hope that this will stimulate the work of scientists in order to create in this cultural centre a place of communication and exchange between themselves and the international community.

2a Genesis of the Cultural Centre

The first concept for this project appeared in 1998 in a discussion with William Yakam, former headmaster of the Community school of Chambri. At the time he wished to establish inside the school a small museum housing several remarkable objects of the Chambri culture. Those objects had to present and to preserve the variety of techniques used by the Chambri and several of their neighbours.

On my side, I have been collecting since 1997 ancient documents related to the Chambri culture gathered by western scientists and travellers. Western museums have sent since the end of the 20th century several expeditions to collect artefacts along the Sepik River. Unfortunately, those
collections were gathered sometimes too quickly and many of the artefacts collected then were not correctly documented. Since 1997 I have gathered around 2000 sketches and photographs of artefacts conserved in western museums. I presented about half of my documents to the Chambri. Those documents were commented and analysed by the big men when one of them could be correctly identified. The return of those documents has led to several meetings in the different ceremonial houses of Chambri. The big men of Chambri decided to respond positively to William Yakam idea and asked me to help them in that project. Since that time there are about two meetings a month during which different details of the project are discussed. In one of those meetings it was decided to set up a committee in charge of realising the different missions of the cultural centre.

The location was carefully chosen to avoid the effects of the annual floods, human degradations, and thefts. After about 6 years of debates, the location was chosen in Indingai, at a place where the first ancestor of the community, Yambuke, had built his own house. The selected area includes an important archaeological monument called “Yambuke Awinamp”, a large flat stone where this first ancestor was resting and sleeping. During the construction of the cultural centre numerous ceremonial stones such as *awinamp* (flat stones) and *mungan* (long standing stones) were dug out and replanted where they were discovered. Indeed the location was the object of debates but also of conflicts. For the Chambri, the cultural centre was symbolising Chambri as a whole and the location of the centre could confer to those holding the land prestige, honour, but also a prominent situation within the village. Yambuke Awinamp is a consensual location where Chambri people agreed that it was the first settlement of their ancestors. This was the public discourse. In private it was systematically challenged by elders of various clans who considered that the oldest location is situated elsewhere on the mountain.

2b The departments of the cultural centre

The cultural centre is divided in 5 sections: a documentation centre, a museum, a zoo, a botanical garden and an archaeological section.

The cultural centre is built with local materials to reflect the architectural traditions of Chambri and to avoid high costs. The construction was made by youths from the three Chambri villages under the supervision of the elders. During the construction process a special attention was paid to the respect of traditional techniques. Some of them, almost forgotten, were revived for the occasion. The most talented artists of the community were invited to participate in the construction. There is no nail in the building and all the elements are bound with rattan according to ancient techniques. The most knowledgeable men from the village assisted young generation, and altogether they designed a building which can be considered as one of the most perfect example of vernacular architecture for the all Sepik Region. The cultural centre is built as a *yarnk'n kwer*, or clan’s house. It is built on high stilts on a terrace supported by large stone walls. On the ground, visitors can see a series of ceremonial stones, rare examples of very ancient ritual sites. The museum itself is accessible on the first floor and displays an important collection of traditional artefacts and posters evocating various aspects of Chambri social life. The roof finials support two sculpted eagles representing the two ritual moieties which split the Chambri during ritual ceremonies. Facades display large painted masks designed by Gordon Pambang under the supervision of his father Peter Pambang. Outside the building, a meeting ground was arranged to permit community meetings and performances for tourists.

2c The museum

The museum exhibits artefacts symbolising the art, techniques and knowledge of the Chambri. Several artefacts kept in museums in the West are already copied in order to be displayed in the museum. An agreement was decided during the meetings of the committee: no ancient piece of art will be displayed. The exhibition of these kinds of artefacts might attract the covetousness of art dealers. Several artefacts of large size are displayed outside the museum (including a war canoe completed with its ornaments), other objects of the everyday life are
displayed inside the dwelling house. Close to the dwelling house an area for the extraction of the sago pith will be reconstructed. Special attention was paid to artefacts produced by women. Tourists have many occasions to discover the men’s production through their discussions with their guides or during the visits of ceremonial houses, but only a few tourists become familiar with the way of life of the women in the Sepik region. Indirectly it led to a progressive disappearance of techniques mastered by women, such as mosquito baskets, techniques which were revived on the occasion of the construction of the centre. In the museum a big range of fishing traps, cooking tools and body ornaments will be displayed. The collection was gathered thanks to the participation of the 15 clans of Chambri. 

![Figure 4: an assembly of women outside the cultural centre. December 2007.](image)

**2d Needs and aims**

The ceremonial house Parambarruman, considered as the start of the cultural centre was inaugurated after a mourning ceremony and an initiation ceremony in February 2002. On this occasion the site of the “dwelling house”, the second part of the centre, was decided. It was inaugurated on 28th June 2008, by the Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, Sir Michael Somare. On this occasion, which was considered as the “real” opening of the cultural centre, important dances and rituals were performed. They were intended to revive ancient dances and rituals which haven’t been performed for a generation or so and therefore to transmit important aspects of Chambri culture to younger generations.

While opening the cultural centre, Chambri people also wish to establish solid links with different scientific institutions. Many elders are preoccupied by the follow-up of the superficial archaeological research which has already taken place. They are also preoccupied by the degradation of several sacred artefacts which they wish to restore with modern techniques. If possible they would like to provide training to young men of the village so that restoration work can be carried out within the village. This is also important because many of the ritual artefacts have to remain hidden from the public.

The Chambri Cultural Centre represents a tremendous effort to bridge their traditional culture and the issues of the contemporary world. It expresses the desire of a contemporary Papua New Guinean Society to conserve its culture but also to share it with others including their fellow citizens and tourists. It reflects the capacity of Chambri people to formulate in innovative ways several of their most important cultural features.

**Bibliography:**


