

# **Cultural Heritage Projects; should be about learning together**

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## ***Kurdish Cultural Heritage Project; should have been learning together through process, not product for the sake of London-Museum outputs***

Defining the word of "the Kurdish community" in UK like anywhere else within the Diaspora community can be very difficult indeed. While there is no much of unity among the Kurds of four parts of Kurdistan, due to political and language (dialects) differences, most Kurds do dream of seeing such unity and togetherness in near future. Living in the west, and away from political barriers and enjoying the "free world" benefits, equality and freedom of expression, just might have been the perfect idea for such dream to come through.

The Kurdish Cultural Heritage Project was a year long partnership with Hackney Museum, which ended its first phase in 2005. The understanding of that project was that it had been based on shared community work alongside the museum and its staff, and that community members were being asked how they felt it was appropriate to see their culture represented to wider audiences. This came through running a number of workshops, and two exhibitions, each which remained at the museum for about three months. The very admirable idea behind this was to give Kurds in London a sense of belonging and a chance to express their identity, and to make people feel they have been given the chance to contribute to the wider multicultural society in practice. Through the course of this project, some of the community members realised that participation of Kurds was through only a small and select group, as the museum chose to work with one particular community centre and exclude the others. Therefore, even though the aims were good and worthwhile ones which for sure every Kurdish person would support, the vast majority were not given the opportunity to do this or in fact had any knowledge of the work at the Museum.

Given the diversity of the large Kurdish community within London, with more than 23 community centres, spread all across London neighbourhoods and representing four spoken dialects of the Kurdish language this was a shame, and something that failed the original aims of the work. It felt that one of the central reasons for taking part in the project, and a huge benefit that it could contribute to Kurds in London, was that it might foster a feeling of togetherness and shared purpose for this sometimes disparate community – we would have the chance to meet one another and use culture, (rather than the typical politics), to create dialogue and understanding. This was an outcome that was addressed as important by many people within the community during our initial consultation meetings, taking a collaborative approach, where individuals and communities as well as the museum would gain something through the work. It should therefore have been important to work towards these goals identified by community members.

The idea of such a project could have been put in the public domain, and been more transparently publicised, rather than simply forming a partnership with one community centre and misrepresenting it as "the Kurdish community". Other community centres should have been consulted about this great opportunity, an issue which was raised several times in meetings and interviews. Members were interviewed and recorded different times by the Project staff from Museum of London, plus a long evaluation process including form filling, was completed.

Again in these contexts this point was raised. The usual reply to such concerns was that the size of the project did not enable us to extend our work beyond this small group.

A few community members suggested many ways that the museum might try to reach out to the greater Kurdish community by consulting with and inviting other community centres, using their mailing lists to publicise the project, putting notices in papers and using other sources of media such as [kurdishmedia.com](http://kurdishmedia.com). This would not have been difficult or created extra work for museum staff, since community members would have supported the work. What Hackney Museum may not understand is that by aligning themselves with an organisation and excluding others, they will automatically alienate people who are marginalised within community life as well, as there are great numbers who are marginalised and have no connections with community centres because of different political and social reasons, and that something the Hackney Museum and Museum of London-Hub was warned about through out of the project by anthropologist working with this project , but such advice was ignored.

As the project drew to a close it was felt that participation of community members, which was set as the central goal in the first place and which Hackney Museum committed to delivering, was not achieved. Instead it ended up with a very small number of people. The feeling was that the project was just pushing forward without any real, ongoing input from community members, simply so that the museum could advertise the "success" of the project, and the privileged community centres could use it as a chance to display their logo.

When problems or challenges arose, including the dwindling number of participants, they were ignored. Instead, these times could have been used as opportunities to develop some real potential, draw on new skills and participants. Although those who did participate did very good work, and the products in terms of the displays were positive, these were outcomes that were of benefit to the museum rather than the stated benefits which should have reached communities represented. The further along it got in the project, the less attention was paid to these community development aspects, so that finally it ended up with a project that reproduced the kinds of unequal working relationships which were meant to be challenged and changed. This left many people, feeling ignored and voiceless, and contributed to increased inter-community tensions.

Organisations such as Hackney Museum and Hackney Council, along with Museum of London should take seriously their commitment to project work such as this, and also to the communities who they are entering into relationships with. If they make promises to community members, these should be taken seriously, as the outcomes mean a lot to people who have not had such opportunities before. They should also have, or work to develop an understanding of the community relations and cultural, political and social norms within communities before they simply plan a project about those issues. This project began much more comprehensively, working with the community as whole, and aiming to produce something of value for the future, which could also be of use to Kurds in London.

Through this project the community members were informed that there was potential for future funding, and for the establishment of an archive, also that the museum would look into sources of funding to start this work, later to be handed over to a community organisation. This funding has now been successful, but through the course of the process, community members and some project participants were not informed or updated about the stages of the work, while the Museum did not taken much interest to reach out to marginalised Kurds or

broaden their scope to all the Kurdish community centres in the area. It is still not widely publicised in Kurdish newspapers or websites. Most importantly the direction of the project has changed from the original idea of archive project to on line image/collection and numbers of workshops.

Such project which could be a significant and important way of celebrating identity and improving a sense of belonging for community members. It must be emphasised to the Museum and the council that this is a vitally important thing for this community, as they did not have such opportunities in their countries of origin. This should not be taken lightly or trivialised by the work of the Museum or the project. It is very important that the museum and those who are working to establish such projects should be transparent with community members and participants if such matters or challenges are arising, so that the community members have their say and can be consulted in order to look for suitable alternatives, and to work together on problem solving. If this is not the case, the collaborative approach and shared ownership over the results as planned in initial stages of the project is not being lived up to.

Now, as the project is in a new stage of developments without having addressed these issues. The Belonging project was introduced to the community through Hackney Museum, as London-wide project where communities of refugee background would be represented by the communities themselves and again through a collaborative approach. A further consultation meeting for this was held at the Museum of London, talking about items and objects which could be used. But this was a partial and unfair consultation with "the Kurdish community", as there was no call out to the public but only the old members of Hackney museum project, no invitation sent to any other Kurdish community centres across London, who represent great numbers within the community including many writers, artists, singers, community workers and so on.

In fact, the Belongings Project (currently on show at Museum of London) is simply a reprisal of five already completed projects, despite a proposed plan for greater participation of communities, and ways that others could be made aware of the project in order to have their say. The Belonging Project, by the sound of it, is a collection of a number of already completed projects across London museums that will be placed on display in the same formats as it was represented for months at these other venues. It has to said the original idea of such action by the museum London by which bringing all this different communities together it's a very positive step and for sure it will be learning process for all. With respect to the Kurdish Cultural Heritage Project, there were already serious concerns that it was representing a very small number within "the Kurdish community" even in Hackney, as the community even there are diverse and represented by different groups and community centres. In north London alone there are sixteen Kurdish community centres, while just two them was involved with the 2nd phase of the project.

Presenting the same project without truly consulting "the Kurdish community" will only be repeating the same mistakes again, instead of using the time as an opportunity to put things right. But carrying on without addressing the issues or making any attempts to understand community dynamics will only serve to create a sense of alienation from future work and relations between the community as whole and museums in general. On this basis, proceeding in this way will fundamentally contradict what I believed to be the aims of both projects in the first place. One is left with the conclusion that such projects and the organisation and people who run them are trying to 'clean up' the image of refugees in London and the belief that they are happy and thankful to be given such a life of privilege (i.e. refugee status).

Part of the Belonging Project is an oral history project by the Evelyn Oldfield Unit, which conducted a number of interviews with refugees who have contributed to London life. The oral history project deliberately targeted some numbers of people who are high profile and well known within the communities; in order to tell their life stories and how they managed to achieve their goals. Some of those who are Kurdish intellectuals within the UK Kurdish community and up until now have been unfailingly active, and the community owes them much in the progress they have made. It is a worthwhile goal to show some positive representations of refugees, and there is nothing wrong with this portrayal of successful role models for refugees, as long as it is complemented by a complete picture and while there is such bad publicity over the whole idea of refugees and talking about community integration and sensitive issues of Islam and the free world such a project can help to give a different version of the events and life of those who themselves have been affected by it.

What this project fails to show is the great number of people who had high profile and successful lives in their home land, and the problems and challenges they face in UK as that is lost from them, or to show the life of ordinary people with dreams and aspirations in their new lives. There are obviously political reasons for project planners, both within communities and professional museum communities, to give such one-sided portrayals of refugee life. It certainly makes things easier for the project as a whole.

But the primary problem with the projects of collaboration with some Kurdish organisations, it has to be noted is the attitudes of staff in working in the community, and the poor ways in which some participants, their beliefs and contributions, have been treated. Communications have been handled unprofessionally, exclusively, and in a manner to encourage subterfuge, distrust and competition within communities. When undertaking such a project to work directly with communities and help strengthen their cultural resources, it is necessary to understand the channels of communication most appropriate to reach out to a diverse audience. In this case, Kurdish people are typically more responsive to informal and face to face communication. Although this issue was raised many times in meetings and consultation, and project staff claimed to be aware of this, few efforts were actually taken to ensure such an approach. The poor record of publicising and advertising the project, which resulted in a lack of inclusivity and a feeling of exclusion among many, was raised throughout. The Museum had every opportunity to make full use of community resources by placing adverts as well as in independent Kurdish websites, or leafleting the areas which are known gathering places for Kurdish people; this could have been done in both in Kurdish and English.

If the UK museums and project directors really want to include community members and draw on the many talented people hidden from view, the untold stories, barriers and obstacles, and fair representations of community life through a process that people can feel part of, they should avoid reproducing projects like that of Hackney Museum just for the sake of financial utility or to showcase work "outputs". The Hackney project was indeed a good start and worked with some dedicated people, whatever the concerns over the way it was conducted, and the limited participation from the community, while the other four projects had also had difficulties similar to the Kurdish project. But there should be no excuses for making the same mistake twice.

Also it is necessary for more professionals to become involved in the future so that the community can benefit from their advice, as discussed with the original plans for the development of the archive project. There are thousands of pounds

being spent on a project which deserves every care and attention both from the museum and the community, as something that can stay in the years to come as a starting point as to how ethnic minorities can work with and trust government and mainstream cultural institutions. There should be far greater transparency between museums and communities and only through such processes can both the communities and the museums produce good and collaborative work where those involved will feel that they have been given the opportunity to represent who they are, their challenges, talents and experiences, rather than a small number who are being empowered to talk for them by project planners.

Many community members have put many hours of work into the Kurdish Cultural Heritage Project, about which they felt passionate and committed. Due to this, although concerns and above issues have not been taken into account, but hope in the days to come the Museum of London will start by consulting people, not only community centres, which has to be said do not represent all community members and who don't share the same ideas with them. Such action help to an exploration of other ways to reach out to marginalised members of the community who have no voice and by listening to their wishes bring about a successful project where the community and the museum learn from each other through the process, emphasising this instead of some static products which many people will not see as representing their lives, but only contributing to misunderstandings within their own communities and in society in general.

At the end it's important to stress the point once again that many meetings and the limited number of community centres involved, and in fact whose delegations were made mostly of staff, do little to reflect the original aim of this project. The project was meant to be about "the Kurdish community", and was focussing on cultural heritage, free of local and regional politics, a transparent and inclusive project which would bring together all groups of people from different parts of Kurdistan as well other ethnic groups. Such cultural projects MUST be about learning together through process, not only product driven for the sake of museum outputs.