

Guardians of Heritage: The Pivotal Role of Sarawak Museum Department in Enhancing Local Content for Sarawak Islamic Heritage Museum

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Abstract

This study explores the role of the Sarawak Museum Department in preserving and promoting local content at the Sarawak Islamic Museum. The Sarawak Museum Department plays a vital role in safeguarding Sarawak's cultural heritage, particularly in the context of Islamic Museums, by curating and maintaining exhibitions that reflect the region's rich Islamic history and diverse cultural influences. Through qualitative analysis, including interviews with the museum staff and a review of relevant documents, this study highlights ongoing efforts to attract visitors and foster a deeper appreciation of local Islamic heritage. The findings indicate that there are factors that signify the department needs to provide more initiatives and efforts for local content to be enhanced. This study suggested the strategies and actions that the department can employ to ensure the preservation of local artifacts, historical narratives and effective educational programmes that highlight Sarawak's unique cultural identity.

Keywords: Sarawak Islamic Heritage Museum, Sarawak Museum Department, Enhancing, Preservation, Local Content

Introduction

Sarawak Museum Department has assumed a significant role in assisting the state of Sarawak in transforming the roles of state museums with digital technology, particularly for the people of Sarawak, in accordance with its corporate strategy, which is to collect, conserve, preserve, and display the cultural and natural heritage of the state as a source of education and information with the goal of uniting the diverse ethnic groups of Sarawak, leading to their successful and harmonious well-being. The establishment of the Borneo Cultures Museum, a new landmark of Sarawak, demonstrates the success of this method. In accordance with its policy, this department is continually outlining a long-term plan for modernizing museums around the state, including the Sarawak Islamic Heritage Museum. Recognizing this, this

department is actively seeking any potential collaborative effort with stakeholders who share a similar objective to benefit all museums in Sarawak.

This paper aims to assist the Sarawak Museum Department in identifying its roles in preserving Sarawak's Islamic legacy, specifically the Sarawak Islamic Heritage Museum, from the perspectives of information professionals, researchers and visitors. With these roles well addressed, it could help the Sarawak Museum Department to see what aspect of improvement needs to be taken seriously and methods to sustain its relevancy in parallel to the changing preferences of museum visitors. This paper explores the strategies for enhancing the Sarawak Islamic Heritage Museum's local content through innovation, collaboration and digital transformation, examining how these efforts can help the museum stay relevant while pursuing its roles to preserve and promote the heritage of Sarawak's diverse Islamic history. This strategy is not just about the integration of new technologies and conservative methods but also about reimagining how local content is presented, ensuring that it reflects contemporary interests while remaining deeply rooted in the cultural traditions of Sarawak.

Sarawak Islamic Heritage Museum at Glance



Figure 1: Sarawak Islamic Heritage Museum building

A museum reflects a country's history, culture, traditions, customs, and society through its exhibits. Museums are responsible for preserving valuable cultural artifacts that play a key role in shaping a nation's identity. The Sarawak Islamic Heritage Museum, originally the James Brooke Malay College, was established in 1930 as the Malay Sarawak Madrasah. It was later renovated to serve as a museum and is located on P. Ramlee Road. The building was designed to train Malay teachers and promote the active involvement of Malay people in the development of their society. (Sarawak Gazette, 2 Mac, 1931). At that time, there was a shortage of qualified Malay teachers, even though schools were proficient in English.

The museum's purpose is to highlight the unique contributions of Islamic civilization in Sarawak and Malaysia, both for local and global visitors. The museum aims to increase public understanding of Islam's impact on human culture. Its key objectives include:

1. Collecting, preserving, and displaying historical and cultural Islamic artifacts from Sarawak, Malaysia, and other Islamic nations.
2. Publishing research and providing educational resources on Islam.
3. Assisting the Sarawak government in educating the public about the history of Islam, from the Prophet Muhammad's era to the present.
4. Contributing to the development of tourism by making the museum a key attraction.

The museum was officially opened by Chief Minister Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri (Dr.) Haji Abdul Taib Mahmud on May 22, 1992, consists of seven galleries, each focused on a specific theme:

- Gallery 1: History of Islam in Sarawak
- Gallery 2: Art of Islam
- Gallery 3: Science, Technology, Economics, Education, and Literature
- Gallery 4: Costumes, Musical Instruments, and Personal Items
- Gallery 5: Self-Defence Tools and Weapons
- Gallery 6: Decorative Art and Domestic Tools
- Gallery 7: Collection of The Holy Qur'an (Closed)

Literature Review

Preserving cultural heritage is important, especially in places like Sarawak, Malaysia, which is rich in local history. Museums, like the Sarawak Islamic Museum, help preserve artifacts and reflect the community's identity. The Sarawak Museum Department oversees local Islamic content through educational programs and exhibitions while fostering community engagement and knowledge sharing (Ugong & Bee, 2023). Museums also contribute to nation-building and tourism by showcasing shared experiences. Local researchers play a key role in preserving heritage by enriching its interpretation (Samsinas, 2020).

Curators, with their expertise, help shape a museum's reputation and enhance its collections. Museums acquire artifacts through purchases, donations, exchanges, and fieldwork, all of which help grow their collections (Miller, 2020). They follow policies to acquire, store, and preserve artifacts while ensuring accessibility. Museums are also major tourist attractions, showcasing both local and international content. Islamic museums preserve and highlight Islamic civilization, balancing regional identity with global influence (Mohamed Atef, 2021). Local artifacts, such as those at the Sarawak Islamic Museum, strengthen community pride and bridge the past with the present.

Preserving local content maintains cultural identity and attracts tourism, while broader content focuses on wider themes (Dong, 2024). However, museums face challenges like limited funding, expertise, and public interest, which require collaboration to overcome (Hamdi, 2018). Frameworks and digital platforms can address ethical concerns in acquiring and preserving artifacts. The Sarawak Museum Department plays a key role in raising awareness and supporting preservation efforts, but ongoing support is needed to sustain these initiatives.

Methodology

This study has selected the Sarawak Islamic Museum as the subject. It aims to investigate the artifacts on display and the operational strategies employed to attract visitors. A qualitative research methodology was adopted to facilitate this investigation, incorporating systematic

observation, documentation, and data collection through interviews. These interviews were conducted with various staff members responsible for the museum's operations. Furthermore, the researcher consulted several books and journals to support further and validate the collected data.

Findings and Discussions

Table 1 presents the findings accumulated from interviews and a visit to the Sarawak Islamic Heritage Museum (SIHM).

Table 1

List of categories and findings

No.	Category	Findings
1.	General Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of artifacts (manuscripts) about the arrival of Islam in Sarawak. Most of the materials are about the history of Islam in Malaysia and Islamic countries such as Brunei Darussalam, Turkey and Indonesia. Information regarding the history of the Museum is placed outside the building but is not displayed inside. The use of a different museum name when the building name is Sarawak Islamic Museum, but in promotional printed materials such as brochures, Sarawak Islamic Heritage Museum. There is no special space for dynamic (non-static) exhibitions according to different themes.
2.	Exhibition materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exhibition materials, such as pictures of mosques in Sarawak, have not been updated. The framed picture is in a shabby condition, unlabelled and lacking information. The exhibition materials are not arranged systematically (according to time chronology, etc). The exhibition materials are presented in a rather gloomy and boring manner. The atmosphere is not interactive, and almost all the materials lack an element of "realistic experience." Limitation of technology that provides sensory experiences to visitors, such as audio, visual, and multimedia elements. Several artifacts are not accompanied by informational content, which can confuse visitors. There are no unique labels such as DO NOT TOUCH on artifacts that are not placed in a glass. Some labels use one language, either Malay or English, and there is no standardization in their use.
3.	Ventilation System and Lighting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a gallery where the room temperature is quite hot because the air conditioning is not working correctly due to a damaged and old wiring system. Inconsistent use of lighting style where it is either too dim or bright and makes it difficult to read.
4.	Promotion and media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of attraction to Sarawak Islamic Heritage Museum
5.	Information Counter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The location of the customer service counter is quite hidden and difficult for visitors to see.

Category 1 shows that most of the SIHM exhibits are about the history of Islam, generally in Malaysia and some Islamic countries such as Brunei, Turkey, Indonesia, and certain Middle Eastern countries, and there was an insufficient number of artifacts about the arrival of Islam in Sarawak. The history of the museum building is placed outside of the building but not displayed inside the building, and thus, not all visitors will get the same information. It is difficult for visitors to see clear connections among galleries when there is no systematic chronological arrangement of artifacts. There appeared to be no standardization in the use of the name for this museum in both the physical building and in any promotional publications such as on the website, brochures, and user feedback forms. Furthermore, this museum does not allocate any spaces for thematic exhibitions which can be used to educate the public on current issues in the world of Islam.

From the table, findings show that in Category 2, the illustrations presented are of poor quality, such as photographs and pictures. Some of the framed images that are displayed in specific galleries have a hazy quality to them. In contrast, others are unlabelled, and details about the subject matter are absent. In other words, there was less of an attempt required to prevent these photographs from deterioration, which may have been caused by an inconsistent level of humidity and temperature in the space. The exhibition materials are one of the most significant variables when assessing how successful a museum will be. The museum could see an increase in the number of visitors if it had worthwhile display items that were presented innovatively. For the SIHM, the exhibition of museum artifacts only makes use of time-honoured methods and does not incorporate any form of digital technology. The limitation of the adoption of interactive elements that can provide a realistic visitor experience to practically all display materials results in the creation of an environment that is rather gloomy because of this absence. Most of the things on exhibit do not include any pertinent background information, such as the story of the substance that is referred to as an archery of arrows or a duplicate of the prophet's sword (the actual weight of the sword). In addition to this, the display material has not been revised or updated to reflect the most recent information or photos, such as those of mosques in Sarawak.

Additionally, applying concise and precise signage and guidelines is essential to ensure that museum visitors enjoy their experience. This does not apply to SIHMs, where neither the label nor visible direction signs are applied, resulting in a somewhat dull gallery ambience. Some displayed artifacts are neither marked with a do not touch label nor arranged conventionally. It may leave an unpleasant impression on the artifact to the visitors. Several labels on the artifacts were lacking both Malay and English, making it difficult for visitors from other countries to understand the displayed information. When information about the artifacts is not well presented with the artifacts themselves, it can cause misinterpretation among visitors.

The further finding shows that Category 3 was the amount of humidity present in the room, in addition to the temperature, which is one of the important aspects that need to be taken into consideration when preserving museum artifacts. In the case of the SIHM, it was discovered that there are some galleries where the room temperature is quite warm because air coolers are not functioning correctly. Correspondingly, there is a string of damaged and outdated flow systems that are still attached to the building, which need immediate action for repairs. In addition, the lighting in certain sections of the galleries, as well as the glass case

that was used to display the SIHM item, was inadequate and broken, rendering it challenging to read the pieces of information accompanied by the artifacts displayed.

Category 4 highlights that the SIHM lacks proper media promotion. Without sufficient media coverage, the museum may struggle to reach a broader audience and remain less visible to potential visitors. As a result, this could lead to missed opportunities for collaboration with other cultural institutions, tourism organizations, or educational programs, all of which could benefit from greater exposure.

As for Category 5, it shows that the positioning of the information counter is an essential component in determining the level of satisfaction experienced by visitors. It is essential for the visitor's experience that this information counter is easily observable. In contrast to SIHM, its information counter has been inexplicably placed behind the main entrance, which is completely obscured from the view of the patrons. In addition to this, the information counter gives visitors insufficient information about the museum, such as opening hours, and the staff member in charge is mistakenly identified as a security guard rather than an Information Officer.

Recommendations

The Sarawak Museum Department should take a proactive approach to engaging researchers by organizing and hosting knowledge transfer programs such as workshops, seminars, and forums, both locally and internationally. These programs should focus on facilitating the exchange of knowledge and expertise, helping to create a platform where researchers can collaborate and share their findings on Islamic heritage in Sarawak. Inviting researchers from around the world will not only promote the importance of preserving Islamic culture in the region but also open opportunities for networking, partnerships, and cross-cultural collaborations and exchanges. This approach would strengthen the museum's role as a hub for academic research and a leader in preserving and promoting Islamic heritage in Sarawak. Besides that, the Sarawak Museum Department should provide more significant support and incentives for researchers and individuals who are interested in publishing scholarly work on Islamic heritage in Sarawak. This could include offering grants, fellowships, or recognition awards for those who contribute significant academic or cultural insights. Additionally, the department could partner with local and international publishing houses to create opportunities for researchers to publish their work and discoveries. Providing these incentives would encourage more scholars to focus on the Islamic heritage of Sarawak, increasing the visibility of the museum and establishing it as a leading institution for research on Islamic culture. This initiative would also help document and preserve the rich and diverse history of Islam in Sarawak for future generations.

To expand its reach and foster stronger connections with local communities, the Sarawak Museum Department should implement an effective social media strategy and outreach programs. By utilizing popular social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, the museum can engage a wider audience, especially younger generations who are increasingly using these digital spaces to learn. Through these platforms, the department can share educational content, promote upcoming events, and engage the public with interactive campaigns related to Islam in Sarawak. Outreach programs could include partnerships with local schools, universities, and community-based agencies to organize events and activities

that promote a deeper understanding of Islamic heritage. By building a robust digital presence and fostering stronger community engagement, the museum will enhance its role as a central cultural institution while encouraging local pride and interest in preserving Sarawak's Islamic legacy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Sarawak Museum Department plays a crucial role as the guardian of Islamic heritage in Sarawak, actively preserving, promoting, and showcasing the rich cultural and historical legacy of Islam in the region. By adopting strategies such as engaging researchers through knowledge transfer programs, offering incentives for scholarly work, and leveraging modern digital platforms and outreach initiatives, the department can ensure the continual growth of interest in Sarawak's Islamic heritage both locally and internationally. With these efforts, the museum can further establish itself as a leading institution, not only in preserving Islamic culture but also in fostering more profound connections with the local community, ensuring that Sarawak's Islamic legacy remains vibrant and relevant for future generations.

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