

The Mobile Museum Pilot Project

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The stores of Queensland museums are laden with ethnographic collections from Papua New Guinea, many of which originate from northern New Ireland. Few people there are able to gain access to these treasures even though New Irelanders hold great interest in learning more about their own cultural heritage through the artefacts museums hold on to.

The Mobile Museum project has been developed to partly redress this issue by utilising newly available digital technologies and resources. The project seeks to develop remote access to museum collections to objects physically located in Queensland and so offer the opportunity for New Irelanders to view their own cultural heritage as 3D digital objects. 3D digital objects offer the most complete documentation possible and allow for an analytical form of engagement using zooming, panning and rotation tools [in comparison to 2D images]. The roll out of Digicel mobile telecommunications in remote villages across rural and remote Papua New Guinea has made this development possible and provides the opportunity to explore the cultural and technical challenges of remote access via mobile phones and laptop computers. In 2011, the Mobile Museum project received 12-month funding to support the development of a digital toolkit in collaboration with people in New Ireland.

The pilot project utilises a participatory design methodology to develop an interactive toolkit to allow remote access to ten 3D digital objects held in the Queensland Museum and the University of Queensland Anthropology Museum. The aim is to test a proof-of-concept interactive tool designed in consultation with New Ireland communities to access and analyse their cultural objects via mobile phones and laptop computers. The project is the first of its kind as its methodology relies on consultation with a community in the Pacific in the development of a 3D imaging application.

Phase one of the project involved developing pilot 3D images of three malangan carvings from the Queensland Museum. These three carvings were collected by the colonial administrator H. H. Romilly in the late 19th century from northern New Ireland. In June 2012, myself and [Ortelia](#) software developer Lazaros Kastanis visited the Nalik speaking area of New Ireland and ran a series of consultation workshops with local people. We were able to test the pilot application, gather feedback and subsequently enhance the software in response to local requirements.

Later this year, we have organised for a small team of Nalik people to visit Brisbane and select key objects for scanning from the Queensland Museum and University of Queensland Anthropology Museum. We then aim to develop content so that people in the rural communities will be able to access relevant collections.

A future phase of this research will be to investigate the operations and effects of networks of digital images of ethnographic objects on the social and political economy in Melanesia. Employing ethnographic methodologies and survey techniques, the proposed research will document and analyse how people access, use and apply digital images in the course of their lives. The intention is that this research will lead to new understandings of how ethnographic collections play a significant role in identity building, community development and civil society strengthening in the Asia-Pacific region. It will inform the political and social values at stake in terms of cultural restitution policies in the 21st century ethnographic museum.



Adam Hant working with the Ortelia 3d toolkit, June 2012. Photograph: Graeme Were