

<b>Institution: University College London</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment: 17A – Geography, Environmental Studies &amp; Archaeology: Archaeology</b>
<b>Title of case study: Reanimating cultural heritage in Sierra Leone</b>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Research led by Paul Basu at UCL has explored cultural heritage in post-conflict development in Sierra Leone. The 2009–12 Reanimating Cultural Heritage project (RCH) has engaged in a sustained programme of outreach, advocacy, and capacity building in Sierra Leone’s cultural and educational sectors. With partners in the UK and Sierra Leone, it has developed an innovative digital resource connecting diasporas of museum objects, images and sounds with diasporas of people, and provides new access to collections. RCH has contributed to the reanimation of Sierra Leone’s National Museum and has mobilised cultural heritage as a wider social resource.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Paul Basu (Reader in Material Culture and Museum Studies since January 2009) has been engaged in a long-term research project mapping Sierra Leone’s ‘cultural memoryscape’. This extends beyond sites and practices in the country’s rural interior to encompass a diversity of mnemonic locales, including the cultural imaginings of diasporic populations [a, b]. An important museological dimension is the exploration of the status, value and affordances of Sierra Leonean objects dispersed in museum collections and colonial archives around the world, and consideration of the relationship between these ‘object diasporas’ and corresponding ‘human diasporas’ [c].</p> <p>Within this context, the Reanimating Cultural Heritage project (RCH) – set up by Basu in February 2009 – sought to investigate the potential of museum collections to contribute to Sierra Leone’s post-conflict recovery and challenge negative stereotypes associated with the country internationally. The project was informed by ‘action research’ methods drawn from development practice, which engages a wide range of stakeholders in a shared learning process. It brought together key institutions including Sierra Leone’s Ministry of Tourism and Cultural Affairs, Monuments and Relics Commission and National Museum with local NGOs, civil society groups, and UK museums/archives in a sustained programme of participative research, outreach, advocacy and capacity-building with different partners, stakeholders and publics.</p> <p>An important aspect of RCH was its testing of recent museological theory. In particular, the project drew upon interdisciplinary work on transnationalism and diaspora to think beyond essentialised ‘nativist’ sensibilities that frequently underpin debates over cultural patrimony to consider the ‘migratory’ nature of material culture. Applying recent debates on the economic value of ‘remittances’ by diasporic populations to erstwhile homelands, the project considered what value (economic, symbolic, and so on) may be returned by Sierra Leonean objects dispersed in European and North American museums [c]. Through its participatory and process-orientated approach, the project demonstrated how working with historical collections can reanimate heritage institutions in the present, and develop their capacity to contribute to a wider societal reanimation in the future [d].</p> <p>A key output of RCH was an innovative digital heritage resource, <a href="http://www.sierraleoneheritage.org">www.sierraleoneheritage.org</a> [e], which provides free public access to hitherto inaccessible Sierra Leonean collections held by project partners including the Sierra Leone National Museum (SLNM) itself. One objective was to explore how museum collections could be brought to life by juxtaposing them with contextualising media, including video, sound and images: thus, for example, a static wooden mask is reanimated by juxtaposing it with footage of associated performances. Between 2010 and 2011 more than 60 videos were produced collaboratively with Sierra Leonean NGOs. The resource was developed in partnership with Sussex University Department of Informatics and uses social media to create a virtual meeting space for a scattered community. Dr Martin White (Reader in Computer Science, University of Sussex) was the Co-Investigator and collaborated on the technical development of the website, which included innovative approaches to the integration of social network platforms.</p>
<p><b>3. References to the research</b> (indicative maximum of six references)</p> <p><u>Selection of peer-reviewed articles and chapters:</u></p>

## Impact case study (REF3b)

[a] Basu, P. 2013. 'Recasting the National Narrative: Postcolonial Pastiche and the new Sierra Leone Peace and Cultural Monument', *African Arts* 46(1): 10–25. DOI: [10.1162/AFAR\\_a\\_00085](https://doi.org/10.1162/AFAR_a_00085).

[b] Basu, P. 2013. 'Memoryscapes and Multi-Sited Methods: Researching Cultural Memory in Sierra Leone' in E. Keightley and M. Pickering (eds) *Research Methods for Memory Studies*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp.115–131. Available on request.

[c] Basu, P. 2011. 'Object Diasporas, Resourcing Communities: Sierra Leonean Collections in the Global Museumscape', *Museum Anthropology* 34(1): 28–42. DOI: [10.1111/j.1548-1379.2010.01105.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1379.2010.01105.x).

[d] Basu, P. 2013. 'Reanimating Cultural Heritage: Digital Curatorship, Knowledge Networks and Social Transformation in Sierra Leone' in A. Coombes & R. Phillips (eds.) *Museum Transformations*. Oxford: Blackwell. Available on request.

[e] Digital Output: [www.sierraleoneheritage.org](http://www.sierraleoneheritage.org), launched 27 April 2011; Positively reviewed in *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, vol.26 (2013), pp.196–201.

Key research grant demonstrating quality of underpinning research.

'Reanimating Cultural Heritage: Digital Repatriation, Knowledge Networks and Civil Society Strengthening in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone'. AHRC Large Research Grant (AH/G013691/1). 1 February 2009 to 17 February 2012. Award holder: Paul Basu. £484,087 (+ PhD studentship).

#### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world; unsurprisingly, cultural heritage is not a high priority there, and institutions such as the Sierra Leone National Museum (SLNM) are desperately under-resourced and lacking in expertise. While schools are aware of the importance of incorporating culture and history into their teaching, there is an almost total lack of educational resources to facilitate this. Outside the country, by contrast, an abundance of Sierra Leonean artefacts, photographs, sound recordings, and associated knowledges are dispersed in museums and archives around the world. Through participatory action research and the development of an innovative digital resource [1] RCH has 'virtually repatriated' and reanimated these collections. Through this website and a sustained programme of associated outreach, advocacy and capacity-building in Sierra Leone's heritage and education sectors, the project has contributed to the preservation and conservation of Sierra Leonean cultural resources; supported the development of the country's museums sector offering; created new and improved existing educational resources; and engaged Sierra Leonean and international audiences with the country's cultural heritage.

**Providing new access to museum collections, images and sound archives:** Launched in October 2011, [www.sierraleoneheritage.org](http://www.sierraleoneheritage.org) was a key output of the RCH project. The resource provides global digital access to over 4,000 Sierra Leonean objects, images and sound recordings from the British Museum (BM), Brighton Museum, Glasgow Museum, World Museum Liverpool, British Library Sound Archive, and Cootje van Oven ethnomusicological collection. This material was largely hidden away in museum stores and low on museums' priority lists. Participation in the project meant that these museums prioritised the digitisation of these collections, providing access to much of the material for the first time [1]. Additionally, c. 2,000 objects from SLNM collections – which previously had no accurate record of its collection – were digitised. Beyond providing access to the objects, this complete written and visual record of the collection significantly improved its security [2]. It not only provides access to images and information, but reanimates objects by juxtaposing them with contextualising video and sound media showing them in use, being made, or discussed [3, 4]. From January 2012, when visitor statistics began to be recorded, to date the digital resource received 99,470 page views from 19,288 unique visitors. Related project videos on YouTube have been particularly popular, with examples receiving 9,776 and 5,622 views each [6].

**Enhancing the profile of the Sierra Leone National Museum and cultural heritage sector, both within and beyond Sierra Leone:** Whereas SLNM was previously regarded by many, including some within Sierra Leone's Ministry of Tourism and Cultural Affairs, as moribund and of little interest, the activities of RCH and its various partnerships transformed the Museum into a vibrant hub of activity, with new displays and outreach activities [2]. This has had a significant impact on its perception among the Sierra Leone Government and public. The Director of Cultural Affairs acknowledged that his understanding of the Museum has been changed through

**Impact case study (REF3b)**

participation in the project, and that he has come to recognise the importance of its collections and the contribution it can make to national development [5]. There is increased press coverage of the Museum [8], more high level functionaries at openings and events, and a change in employment conditions for SLNM staff, the Museum's higher profile having resulted in a change to the way in which they are paid. Previously, staff received a subvention included as an undifferentiated part of the museum's annual funding, which typically meant that they went unpaid for months at a time. This was changed in 2012, such that the Museum's 16 staff are now paid salaries directly from Government, as any other civil servant. More widely, an annual week-long Cultural Festival was instituted in April 2011, and the President has indicated that the Ministry of Tourism and Cultural Affairs will receive additional funding to develop cultural tourism [5].

Prior to their participation in RCH, there was relatively little interest in the Sierra Leonean collections held by the project's international partner museums, including the British Museum; the project has encouraged these museums to reassess the significance of their collections. As a direct outcome of the collaboration, the BM held a 3-month exhibition focusing exclusively on Sierra Leonean collections which attracted approximately 67,000 visitors between 14 February and 28 April 2013, and received much positive feedback [3]. The display was selected in 2013 for the BM's 'History of the World' tour to Abu Dhabi, Japan and Taiwan in 2014 [3, 11]. In January and February 2012, the BM and SLNM were partners in a larger, multi-sited exhibition at UCL, which focused on different aspects of the RCH project. This included the loan of 19 Sierra Leonean objects from the BM, and the first ever international loan of objects from SLNM [12].

Research has thus made an important contribution to challenging negative stereotypes about Sierra Leone by engaging international communities, as well as Sierra Leoneans themselves, with the country's history and heritage beyond the dominant images of child soldiers, 'blood diamonds' and poverty. As the Director of Cultural Affairs described the digital resource, this is a 'powerful tool in changing perceptions of Sierra Leone', with the ability to 'change the mindsets of people' [5].

**Capacity-building in the museum and heritage sector in Sierra Leone:** From March 2009, as part of the digitisation process, the project provided a sustained programme of training and capacity-building at SLNM for a museum 'working party' of 8–10 staff members from SLNM, the Monuments and Relics Commission, and Ministry of Tourism and Cultural Affairs. This developed capacity in a wide range of museum skills including conducting a collections audit, cataloguing the objects using a computerised collections management system, setting up a photographic studio and taking high quality digital photographs of objects, and improving preventative conservation and storage techniques. As the senior curator at SLNM explains, 'what was especially valuable about the training and capacity building work we undertook as part of [RCH] was that it was based in our own institution and took into consideration the constraints with which we are daily faced. The activities...strengthened the professional capacity of the museum staff by adapting international standards of best practice in the context of our own work' [2]. This training was enhanced through a partnership brokered by RCH with the British Museum's Africa Programme, for which Paul Basu acted as consultant. This ongoing programme of workshops and collaborative initiatives on site included the redisplay of SLNM's permanent galleries, museum education programmes, collaborative exhibitions, and knowledge-exchange visits [2, 3, 5].

**Developing resources for teaching and educational outreach:** Although school groups sometimes visited SLNM, little attempt was previously made to enhance their use of the Museum as a learning space. This was particularly unfortunate since there is no provision for the teaching of Sierra Leonean culture or heritage within the national curriculum and no existing teaching resources [4, 9]. Through RCH, various initiatives were developed to strengthen the relationship between schools and SLNM: 200 stand-alone DVD versions of the digital heritage resource were distributed to schools, colleges, universities and community 'access points' in Freetown and other towns where computers were available but internet access was inadequate. In October 2011 a workshop was organised in association with the British Council's 'Connecting Classrooms' initiative at which c. 60 Sierra Leonean teachers and 30 British teachers explored the educational value of the resource, which was very positively received and has since been extensively used [4, 9]. Prompted by the availability of this high-quality teaching resource, several teachers have gone on to establish 'history clubs' at their schools [4, 9]. Following on from this initial educational outreach, a Teachers' Forum was launched at SLNM in June 2012. At a workshop for 25 teachers, led in

## Impact case study (REF3b)

collaboration with the BM Africa Programme, teachers and museum staff explored ways in which the Sierra Leone National Museum could support the teaching of culture and history in schools. A steering committee was formed and future meetings of the Forum arranged [4, 7, 9]. This was a significant step in building effective relationships between teachers and museum staff, opening up the Museum to a wider range of educational uses [2, 3, 4, 9].

**Engaging Sierra Leonean and diasporic communities in the value of cultural heritage:** As part of RCH, much community outreach work was undertaken, collecting oral histories, exploring local understandings of the value of history and cultural heritage, and discussing sustainable approaches to safeguarding heritage sites. This on-going work was used to advise the Monuments and Relics Commission on locally-appropriate forms of cultural heritage management. In the UK, RCH collaborated with the BM Communities Team in a week-long object-based workshop as part of its 'Talking Objects' programme (Sep 2011). Working with 18 young members of the diaspora in London, this used objects from the BM collection to facilitate explorations of their cultural heritage and identity [3, 10]. Community participation was also key to the development of exhibitions and events programmes at the BM and UCL: the *Sowei mask: spirit of Sierra Leone* display (Feb–April 2013, with community involvement from July 2012) at the BM involved close collaboration with a London-based Sierra Leonean cultural group, who performed a traditional mask naming ceremony at the Museum prior to its exhibition [11]. At the opening, members of the diaspora community performed dances and masquerades at a free public event attended by over 1,000 people. The closing event was co-hosted with the Sierra Leonean High Commission as an Independence Day celebration, introducing this cultural heritage to a wider diplomatic community [3].

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- [1] Benefits of the digital resource in bringing together little-used museums and archival material; see review in *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, vol. 26 (2013), pp. 196–201. Available on request.
- [2] Statement from its Acting Curator (15 Apr 2013) about benefits to the SNLM of the digitisation of collections and of provision of training to museum staff, available on request.
- [3] Statement from Coordinator of Africa Programme and Curator, African Collections, The British Museum (Jun 2013) about British Museum engagement with its Sierra Leonean collection and collaboration with SLNM available on request.
- [4] Statement from the Head of History Department, Prince of Wales Senior Secondary School, Freetown (18 Apr 2013) about educational benefits of the project to pupils, available on request.
- [5] Statement from Director of Cultural Affairs, Ministry of Tourism and Cultural Affairs, Government of Sierra Leone (16 Apr 2013) about the project's contribution to enhancing understanding and appreciation of national heritage, available on request.
- [6] 'Kongoli Mask: Curator's Notes with Bill Hart' (<http://youtu.be/sa8KKdhoS4I>, 9,776 views); 'Reanimating Sierra Leone's Cultural Heritage' ([http://youtu.be/Swg\\_IG-G8RY](http://youtu.be/Swg_IG-G8RY), 5,622 views). Google Analytics report generated 22 Nov 13.
- [7] Training delivered in collaboration with the British Museum's Africa Programme: 'Building capacity through partnership in Sierra Leone', *British Museum Africa Programme Newsletter*, No. 1 (2012), p. 3; 'Connecting with culture in Freetown', *British Museum Africa Programme Newsletter*, No. 4 (2013), p. 7, both available on request.
- [8] E.g. 'National Museum's Plans for Golden Jubilee', *The New Citizen*, 21 Mar 2011, pp.1–2; 'Sierra Leone Museum Will Go Digital', *Premier News*, 12 April 2011, p. 6; 'National Museum Launches Ultra Modern Website', *Awareness Times*, 2 November 2011, p. 8. Available on request.
- [9] Statement from Head of Curriculum, EducAid Sierra Leone, 19 Apr 2013 describing project impacts on teaching, available on request.
- [10] Talking Objects 'Sowei Mask' video – <http://bit.ly/1gxesud>.
- [11] 'The Spirit of Sierra Leone in London', British Museum blog, 4 Mar 2013: <http://bit.ly/1a6nMzF>; 'Sowei mask: spirit of Sierra Leone', <http://bit.ly/1d9PMpg>; also Hudson, J. and Basu, P. 2012. 'Between worlds: a mask from Sierra Leone links African and European cultures', *British Museum Magazine*, No.74, pp. 29–30 (circ. 43,000), available on request; 'Ethnography in Focus at the British Museum', Ministry of Curiosity blog, 13 Mar 2013: <http://bit.ly/H9O1Lr>.
- [12] Exhibition: Reanimating Cultural Heritage in Sierra Leone', UCL: <http://bit.ly/16pNmex>; reviewed in [1], pp. 174–175; 'Reanimating cultural heritage in Sierra Leone', *British Museum Africa Programme Newsletter*, No. 2 (2012), p. 5; available on request.