

MUSEUMS CONNECT WITHOUT BORDERS

WEBINAR 2 · ETHICAL COMMUNICATION & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Navigating Risk, Building Trust

Two stories of risk, trust, and consequence from the field.

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ABOUT ICME

A global committee for ethnographic and cultural museums

~80 YEARS



WHO WE ARE

One of ICOM's oldest international committees, with nearly 1,000 members across ethnographic and cultural museums worldwide.

WHAT WE WORK ON

Decolonisation and community-centred practice — including how museums build relationships with the communities whose stories they hold.

ICME CONTRIBUTION TO THIS SESSION

As Supporting Partner of this webinar, ICME is a natural collaborator for the theme of ethical, non-extractive community engagement.



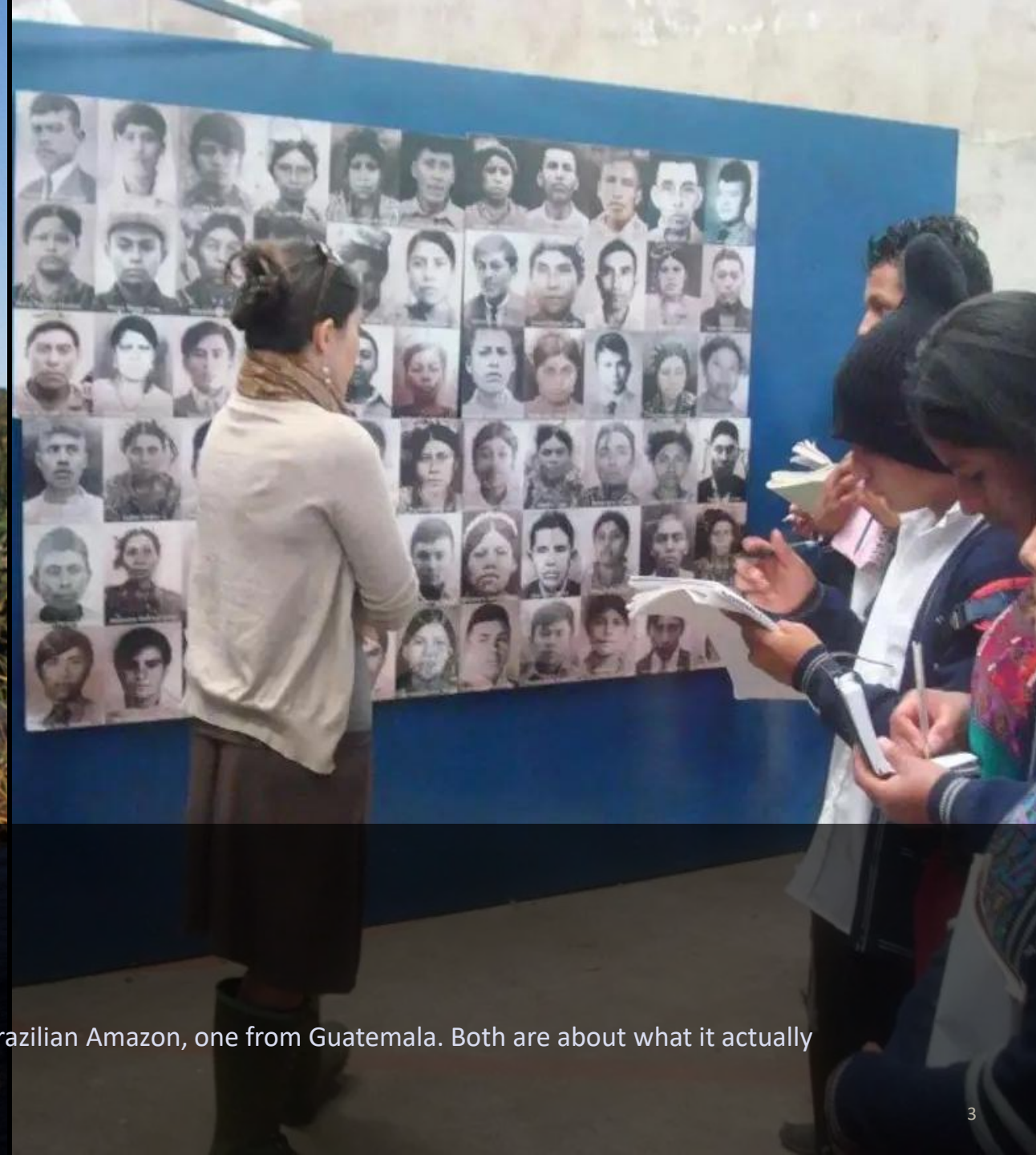
ICME Annual Conference, Mexico City, 2024



A NOTE BEFORE WE BEGIN

Two stories of risk and trust

This session reviews two specific projects from my career: one from the Brazilian Amazon, one from Guatemala. Both are about what it actually takes to build trust under real constraint.



CASE STUDY ONE

Brazil: We Came to Gather Strength

Terra Indígena Alto Turiaçu, Maranhão

Photo: João Paulo Barbosa



Building with, not about

Developed content for the permanent exhibitions Our Peoples and Our Lives in collaboration with the communities whose stories they told.

One of the earliest co-curatorial exhibitions developed with the Ka'apor and Tapirapé communities of Brazil, in collaboration with a trusted anthropologist and friend of the community.

Community curators were invited to Washington, DC regularly and our team visited with them— a sustained, iterative relationship developed, rather than a one-time consultation.



Ka'apor Co-curators and NMAI Curatorial Team

Photo: Heidi McKinnon

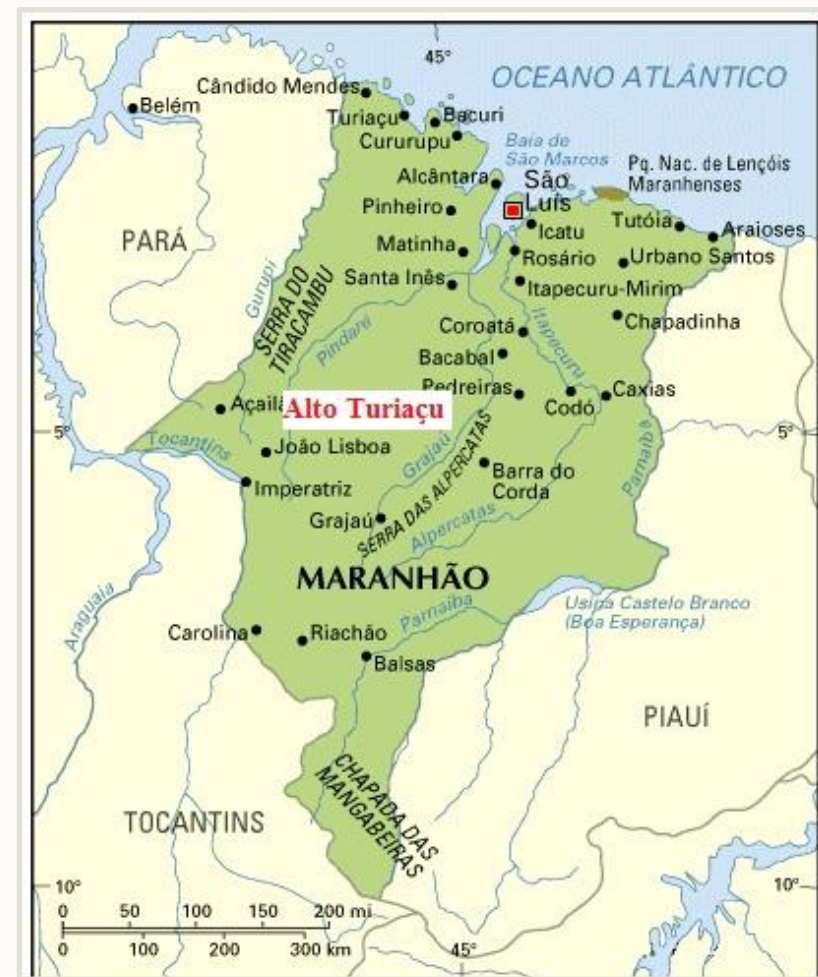
THE TERRITORY

Legally demarcated. Not fully protected.

TI Alto Turiacu is legally recognised Ka'apor territory under Brazilian law — demarcation alone does not stop incursion.

Illegal loggers regularly extract hardwoods from land to which the Ka'apor hold formal legal title.

Legal recognition without enforcement left the community to defend the border themselves.



Alto Turiacu territory, Maranhão state

Loggers had invaded Ka'apor territory. Our Ka'apor co-curators told us they did not know whether they would end up killing the loggers — or being killed by them.

One of the main reasons the Ka'apor came to Washington, DC was to gather strength for a fight over their legally demarcated territory, TI Alto Turiaçu.

Constraint as leverage, not passivity

Two million visitors a year would see this exhibition on the National Mall. What version of the Ka'apor's story would that be?

Over multiple conversations with the Brazilian embassy, they understood the story that would be told from the Ka'apor perspective.



NMAI, National Mall, Washington, D.C.

Photo: National Museum of the American Indian

Families from 13 villages moved to found a new border village



Over the following year, the Brazilian federal police entered the territory. Loggers were driven out. In response, the Ka'apor sent one family from each of thirteen villages to found and guard a new village, Gurupiuna, on their southern border.

Photo: families of Gurupiuna village, Terra Indígena Alto Turiaçu · João Paulo Barbosa

A photograph of a man with dark hair and a necklace of white teeth, sitting on a large log. He is shirtless and wearing a dark wrap around his waist. In the background, there are several traditional thatched-roof houses and a dense forest under a clear blue sky.

Did trust and relationships save a rainforest?

Temporarily. The danger hasn't ended. It's gotten worse.

CASE STUDY TWO

Guatemala: Difficult Stories, Institutional Friction

THE EXHIBITION

Agua, Ríos y Pueblos Water, Rivers and People

A touring exhibition about the human right to water.

La Asociación Agua, Ríos y Pueblos y la Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala a través del Programa de Centros Culturales Mayas Se complacen en invitarle a la exposición

K'utb'al uwachib'al ja',
b'inel ja' rachi'l Tinamit.

**AGUA,
RÍOS
Y PUEBLOS**

del
8 de julio
al
18 de julio
2011

Plaza K'iche' Popol'ja
Centro Cultural de la
Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala

Caserío Buena Vista, Xatuna So. Santa Cruz del Quiché
(Km. 160.5 entrada a El Quiché)

Rogativa para la Lluvia
Laguna Chikabal
Guatemala
Fotografía: Santiago Albert Pons

AGUA
RÍOS
Y PUEBLOS

ALMG

EMBAJADA DE NORUEGA

Rogativa para la Lluvia, Laguna Chikabal · Photo: Santiago Albert Pons

THE CASE

Chixoy Dam

Guatemala's largest hydroelectric facility, supplying nearly 40% of the country's electricity — built across the Chixoy River basin, ancestral home of the Maya Achí. Its construction, and the massacres tied to community resistance against it, became the subject the exhibition would carry.



The Chixoy River Basin



Chixoy Dam · Photos: James Rodríguez / mimundo.org

A Civil society-led response

ADIVIMA — the Association for the Integral Development of the Victims of Violence of the Verapaces, Maya Achí — organized survivors and led the demand for exhumations, memorials, and reparations for over a decade before this exhibition existed. The exhibition did not create this movement. It joined one already underway.



*ADIVIMA memorial march · Photo: James Rodríguez /
mimundo.org*

The fieldwork behind the exhibition and real risk

Interviewing both Maya Achí genocide survivors and people involved in the dam's construction — this fieldwork became the exhibition content, not separate from it.

Working with artisans across more than thirty displaced communities to develop an economic plan and a memorial museum plan that directly supported ADIVIMA's reparations negotiation with the government.

Leading a memorial quilt project with Río Negro survivors, each panel naming a family member lost in the massacre — the completed quilt later toured to the United Nations as part of a global Advocacy Project exhibition on memorial quilts.



One panel from the memorial quilt, later exhibited at the United Nations. The weaver lost a close family member in the massacre, and wove this panel in his memory.

A FRACTURE

When an institution quietly withdraws

1

ACCEPTED

A museum associated with an embassy in Antigua initially agreed to host the exhibition.

2

WITHDREW

The museum reversed course — the Chixoy/Río Negro material was judged too controversial for their space.

3

PIVOTED

The exhibition opened instead through the Vice President's office, in the National Palace, then as an open-air installation in Antigua.

4

RELATIONSHIP HELD

The same museum still provided install/deinstall staff and the introduction to the Vice President's office — a fracture managed, not a relationship severed.



The open-air installation in Antigua, Guatemala.

Nine cities, every kind of institution

The exhibition traveled to roughly nine cities across Guatemala — working across museums, embassies, the military, civil society, churches, and academies, alongside the Vice President's office. It opened at the National Palace, then reached Antigua as an open-air installation. The museum that had withdrawn its space still sent staff to install and deinstall it — a silent partnership.



National Palace, Guatemala City



Open-air installation, Antigua Guatemala

THE OTHER PARTNERS

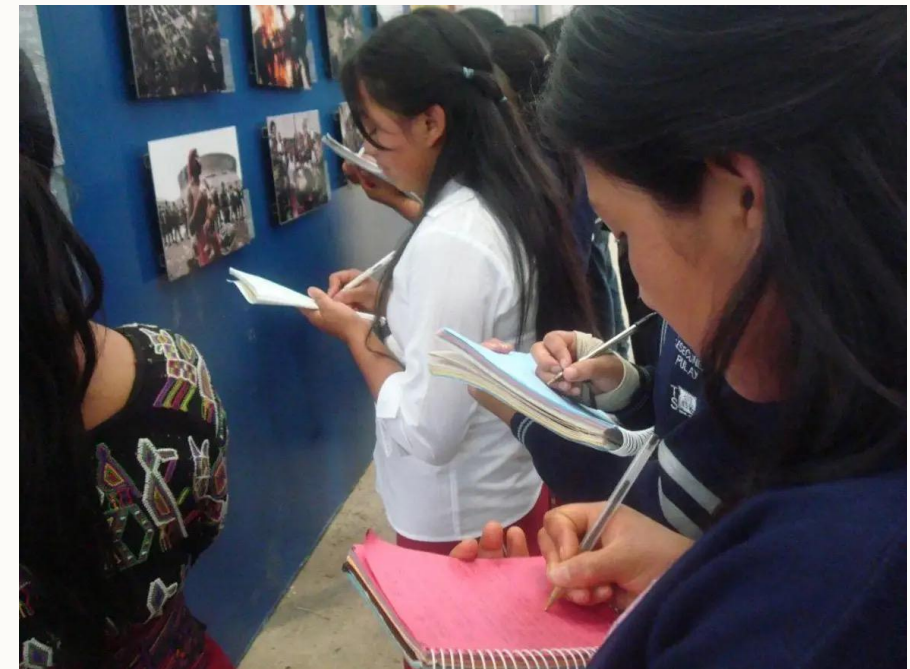
Civil society alone wasn't enough

The tour was supported by three embassies — the Netherlands, Spain, and Norway, by FAO, a United Nations agency, and the Academy of Mayan Languages.

Diplomatic and multilateral relationships were part of what made it possible to do this work safely.



Results of an MOU with the Ministry of Education brought over 5,000 students to the exhibition in rural areas of Guatemala.



Relationship building means solidarity, risk and trust

During the national tour of *Water, Rivers and People* we visited San Miguel Ixtahuacán, a mining town housing the largest gold mine in Guatemala at the time. For my safety, I was confined to church property for three weeks, leaving only to eat and attend clandestine public programming events.

Relationship-building requires solidarity and risk in a dangerous context, not just trust, but real physical safety infrastructure, built with people who know the terrain.



Water, Rivers and People exhibition in the patio of the church in San Miguel Ixtahuacán. Bottles were thrown at me after installation. The Goldcorp Mining Company installed their own exhibition the following day at the mine to counteract the content of our exhibition.

The whole community came anyway

In Las Escobas, we held a clandestine screening of documentaries on the effects of mining in other communities across Guatemala and Peru — followed by a discussion, and an activity where children drew their own concerns about their rivers, water, and environment. Despite the risk, everyone attended.



Community film night and discussion, Las Escobas

What actually holds a relationship together

1 Build before the crisis

In post-conflict or uncertain contexts, develop your external relationships and trusted networks over time and in many directions — diplomatic, civil society, multilateral agencies, expanded government contacts. It is impossible to anticipate what risks you will encounter, where you will need support, and when.

2 Trust is earned through specific acts

Build time into your processes and collaborations to ensure trust relationships are properly developed with the communities you serve. If a crisis occurs, you will have consent to take action.

3 Cultural capital is real

Use it wisely, and spend it deliberately when you know it is necessary.

4 Let silence have a cost

When you cannot advocate directly, ensure institutional partners are aware of the cost of their silence or inaction — and let them make their decision.

5 Plan for fracture

With sensitive subject matter, plans can change quickly. Seeking common ground and alternate paths will be part of the process with your community partners and stakeholders.

Individual relationships are at the heart of everything.