

TAKING STOCK AND REFLECTING ON SHS's POSITION

A flash-back and reflexion on the **past journey of SHS, its achievements, challenges faced and convictions forged**, presented by Dato Sri Robert RIDU, SHS President of the last 4 years, on behalf of the outgoing Committee at the occasion of the November 2019 AGM.



*Advocacy for a **strengthened cultural heritage governance** in Sarawak has remained one of our core thrusts. This has largely been a “behind the scenes” effort. The recommendations we presented to the Government over the last two years were a response to an invitation to do so from the Chief Minister and the Minister of Tourism Arts, Culture, Youth and Sports. Our analysis led us to a key conviction that a significant transformation of the Government’s **institutional set up for heritage management** was needed. We also proposed that upgraded legislation be developed with expert inputs on heritage law. Our suggestions however appeared not to be convincing enough. Although it addresses some needs that we had expressed, the **2019 Heritage Ordinance** that was voted by the State Legislative Assembly on 5 November is largely derived from the 1993 Ordinance. Responsibility for the management of out-of-museum cultural heritage remains entrusted to the Sarawak Museum Department. We persevered and highlighted to the Minister what we saw as shortcomings of the Bill before it was presented to the DUN. The onus now is on the implementation of the new ordinance with, in particular, the mobilisation of the required human and budgets resources, the crafting of subsidiary regulations and proactive enforcement.*

*However it remains SHS’s considered viewpoint that **out-of-museum heritage matters ought to be handled by a dedicated, competent and fully resourced body** to ensure effective and sustainable heritage management. There is therefore a rationale for the Society to continue advocating for the Sarawak Government to set up such purposeful and dedicated entity.*

*SHS also believes that for **Kuching**, there remains a need for a **baseline cultural mapping** exercise to lay a sound foundation for a heritage sensitive regeneration program to enhance the quality of life, the business environment and the tourism potential, beyond piecemeal ‘beautification’ projects. This is also something that we have advocated for repeatedly. We are glad to hear recently that a cultural mapping initiative has emerged for the Kuching Old Bazaar area.*

*On our internal management, it is to be noted that 2019/2020 saw a sizeable turnover in the our **Committee** members, reflecting the perennial challenges SHS faces in its quest of volunteers passionate about heritage protection work and by the time constraints faced by people with busy professional lives.*

At this juncture, it may be worthwhile to take a look back and reflect on SHS' journey as an organisation. It has been an eventful 14 years, with many achievements and setbacks, peaks and troughs.

*A broader view at what SHS has achieved since its creation, and at the patterns of membership over the years, suggest that there are **multiple perceptions** of what a society like ours is for. Motivations to join SHS appear to range from access to heritage-related **information** circulated on the niceties of our heritage and expressions of pride for them, to expectations of active **advocacy** for strengthened conservation of our heritage, capable of influencing the powers that be, notably the Government. Midway between these two understandings is a view that the main focus should be on **awareness building** at the grassroots level. This is not to say that any of these positions are wrong, but simply to highlight the spectrum of different expectations.*

*Other ambiguities complicate perceptions. The mandate that SHS has given itself is to promote the conservation and management of our heritage assets, tangible or intangible. Firstly, there is here the fragile **notion of value**. Some heritage items have unquestioned 'universal' value, as testimonies to extraordinary human achievements recognized by all, in the UNESCO sense. But, in many cases, the value of a given heritage item is strongly **culturally-based**: it may be precious for some and almost value-less (i.e. not in need for protection) for others, even if it is **significant** in a cultural context. This is an especially difficult issue to deal with in a multi-cultural society such as Sarawak. Second, there is the '**Heritage vs History**' debate. Some heritage societies may be perceived as history societies. Naturally, history is one of the determinants of heritage significance; it contributes to explain the value of heritage assets. But societies like ours need to keep in view that, beyond historical research, our core mandate is the **conservation** of "things", material things or immaterial practices – that are left to us by our forefathers, for the benefit of future generations.*

*We continue to see **destruction of or damage to valuable heritage for the sake of economic development, or just "modernity"**. We even seem to see Government listed heritage suffering from inadequate conservation. A Society like ours cannot limit itself to just "feel good" activities highlighting the beauties of our heritage. Awareness building activities, the next level of pro-activeness, is key. But **changing perceptions is a long term effort**, perhaps even a generational process. Too slow to ensure timely heritage protection. Sarawak has seen some laudable independent efforts by the private sector players to protect heritage assets. But these tend to be piecemeal and will not, in themselves, create a wave of positive change. To achieve its goals, SHS needs therefore to look at ongoing engagement with the Government, through **advocacy for stronger heritage management, in all its dimensions: policy, strategy, institutional, regulatory, budgetary and enforcement**.*

*Over the years, SHS's successive management teams have approached their mandates in different ways but overall, it is safe to say that **SHS's impact**, as a stakeholder, has remained constrained by the above factors. Assessment of the Society's performance is mixed, but we can probably claim to have made a modest mark in the local heritage landscape. We need to continue to strive to be one of the vocal champions of heritage protection in Sarawak and to do that we need even stronger support from the public and for more individuals to step up and volunteer their time and energy for SHS.*