

# MuseumsForward

## Assessing participatory practice: A case study of community engagement by museums in Japan.

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### Abstract

Frameworks of new museology have reshaped perceptions about the societal role of museums, proliferating attempts to facilitate more active engagement and participation by communities in order to enhance an institution's social impact and relevance. However, measurements of participatory practice and institutional and social impact have been based predominantly on case studies of museums in western-centric contexts and locales. To more fully assess the societal role of museums globally, this research examines case studies involving current practices of community engagement by three museum institutions in Japan: the National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku) in Osaka, Art Tower Mito (ATM) in Ibaraki, and Upopoy National Ainu Museum and Park in Hokkaido. An analysis of the intentions, methodology, and outcomes of these community engagement practices contextualized within international museology, national cultural policy, and local contexts reveals that museums in Japan are initiating projects of community participation with varying degrees of intentionality towards the facilitation of social impact. Strategies of community agency, an investment in building relationships, and collaboration with external organizations are helping Japanese museums facilitate community engagement practices that are fostering a sense of purpose and belonging within staff and communities, but are challenged by limited resources and funding to support the unquantifiable values of community engagement work in museums.

### Keywords

Community engagement; Social participation; Japanese museums

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## Introduction

Frameworks of new museology have reshaped perceptions about the societal role of museums, positioning them as active institutions of civic engagement that have a responsibility to meaningfully contribute to society and develop egalitarian relationships with communities (Vergo, 1989; McCall & Gray, 2014; Karp et al., 1992). The unidirectionality of traditional, authoritative structures of cultural knowledge production and transfer has, moreover, evolved into attempts at democratized, multidirectional learning and engagement and inclusive polyvocality (Golding & Modest, 2013)—establishing the importance of community perspectives, participation, and agency in carrying out these fundamental shifts to the museum’s relationship to society. In relation to communities, the museum has been described as a contact zone of ongoing and transformative historical, political, and moral relationships (Clifford, 1997), a forum that invites dialogue and exchange which transcends differences in culture and society (Cameron, 1972; Yoshida, 1995, 2017), and an agent of social inclusion that can bring about social cohesion and narrow social inequalities (Sandell, 1992, 2002). The various intentions, methodologies, and impact of community participation for museums express and reproduce different cultures of participation—but rather than framing a museum’s social context as an obligation or guarantee, Eriksson examines the forms of participation offered by museums as determinants of a museum’s non-neutral positionality and value in relation to society (Eriksson et al., 2020).

Existing museology, however, has predominantly focused on case studies of museums in western-centric contexts and locales. Although the institutional model of a museum originated from Eurocentric frameworks, museums globally have adapted to serve different purposes and positionalities, involving culturally and regionally specific participatory practices. To more fully assess the extent to which the societal role of museums is being transformed internationally and diversify our understanding of the impact and practice of community participation, non-western pedagogies, methodologies, and developments should be more closely examined.

Contemporaneously to the proliferation of new museology discourse and the rise of community participation in museological activities,

cultural policy directives in Japan have since the 1990s incentivized institutions of culture to build relationships with audiences, positioning cultural policy in connection with other public policy areas such as education, health, welfare, local revitalization, tourism, and technological innovation (Kawashima, 2017). Within this context and in response to various cultural and regional developments, museums in Japan are building community engagement policies and practices around strategies that emphasize a defined area of sociocultural involvement with their communities, constituting localized case studies of the adaptive relationship between museum institutions and society. To what extent are new museology frameworks of community engagement being enacted in museums in Japan, and how can Japanese methodologies of community participation better inform global understandings of the societal role of museums?

The purpose of this study is to understand recent initiatives of community engagement conducted by museums in Japan in relation to assessments of participatory practice and institutional and community impact, using a case study approach.

The following research questions will guide this study:

1. What are or were the institutional motivations in developing the museum's community engagement activities?
2. To what extent is participatory practice and collaboration involved in the planning and implementation of the community engagement activities?
3. What are the perceived institutional and community outcomes as a result of the community engagement activities?

## Literature Review

### **The positionality of museums in Japan**

Museums formed in Japan based on the interaction between Western models and ideologies and existing Japanese practices and objectives during the Meiji period (1868-1912), and were structured as institutions that facilitated the nation's administration of knowledge and culture in the context of the development of the Japanese nation-state (Satō, 2011). Their earliest forms thereby emulated Western paradigms that held the museum's fundamental operation to be object-based epistemology. After World War II, Japanese museums were positioned as facilities of social education, and the 1952 Japanese Museum Act established the definition of museums as organizations with the

purpose of collecting, preserving, and exhibiting materials, with the goals of public education and research (Japanese Association of Museums, 2008). Whether a museum was established by the state (national), local governments (prefectures, municipalities), general incorporated associations or foundations, or private entities has further implications for a museum's funding, mission, defined communities, and management.

Until the 1990s, however, the Japanese government invested little in cultural policy, allowing the arts and cultures to operate almost entirely within the market economy and without state recognition of their significance to society at large (Kawashima, 2017). As a point of contrast, Kawashima articulates data that shows that the non-economic, "publicly desirable" values of cultural, educational, and social services offered by museums require government support to flourish, as was the framework of cultural policy outside of Japan, in other developed nations. With the rise of cultural policy changes in conjunction with public policy agendas, the 1990s witnessed the development of museum facilities at an unprecedented pace (Yoshimoto, 2008).

In 2019, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) annual conference convened in Kyoto, Japan, and proposed the model of "museums as cultural hubs" and recommendations for ICOM's definition of a museum to be amended to include the importance of community participation (ICOM Define, 2022). In 2022, the Japanese Museum Act was revised to extend the role of museums to include contributions to culture, tourism, and civic development; and in 2024, the director of the Japanese Association of Museums discussed the implications of this revision in a lecture about the evolution of museums in Japan and around the world, and declared that, "The era of the number of visitors is over" (Hanada, 2024)—alluding to a fundamental shift in the justifications for which museological programming and activities may be conducted.

Contemporaneously, decolonizing methodologies have destabilized traditional paradigms of museological practices globally, democratizing the ways in which museums of art, culture, and ethnology interact with communities (Lonetree, 2012; Center for the Future of Museums, 2019). Within this context and to different extents, many museums in Japan have been designing multifaceted activities to build diverse forms of public agency with the cooperation and participation of communities. Japanese museums of art have become hosts and collaborators of "art projects," a collaborative form of artistic activity in Japan which emphasizes the processes of local engagement through community

participation and social relevance through the conception of collaborative art activities which address or respond to current local issues (Kumakura, 2015; Jesty, 2017; Takehisa, 2021); and Japanese museums of ethnology are re-evaluating and diversifying their exhibitions, collections, and knowledge-sharing practices by integrating community participation and collaboration as a policy of social contribution and the empowerment of minority and indigenous cultures (Clifford et al., 2020; Suzuki et al., 2024).

### **Models of community engagement**

In *The Participatory Museum*, Simon provides frameworks to assess how cultural institutions can transform into places for participatory engagement, based on the enhanced relevance of audience-centered institutions, the agency of visitors in constructing their own meaning from cultural experiences, and the importance of polyvocality in informing and invigorating both project design and public facing programs (Simon, 2010). According to Simon's models for participatory practice, museums can facilitate four models of public participation: in contributory projects, visitors provide limited actions or ideas to an institutionally controlled practice; in collaborative projects, visitors serve as active partners in the creation of projects which are controlled by the institution; in co-creative projects, community members work together with the institution to generate projects based on community interests; and in hosted projects, the institution concedes its facilities or resources to present projects and programs developed by the community.

Moreover, in assessing the impact of community participation in museum activities, the extents of participatory practice and community engagement facilitate the creation of diverse forms of mutually beneficial relationships in which communities (and individuals therein) benefit from museums as "community infrastructure" and hubs of civic, sociocultural, and educational development, and museums benefit from the ways in which community contexts revitalize an institution's mission and purpose, while enriching the possibilities for what it is able to accomplish (Center for the Future of Museums, 2020; Hirzy, 2008). Social impact can be viewed as a metric of success for community-based projects, defining projects beyond traditional quantifiable metrics, and emphasizing the desired benefits to the community rather than the benefits to the museum institution. The Measurement of Museum Social Impact (MOMSI) project defines social impact as the effect of an activity on the social fabric and well-being of a community,

and measures social impact based on four areas: health and wellbeing, increased intercultural competence, continued education and engagement, and strengthened relationships (Mileham et al., 2022).

### **Challenges of participation**

In determining the extent to which community engagement is perceived as real as opposed to symbolic, Modest recommends assessing whether the museum or the community benefits from or initiates the engagement, and who in the community is represented in participation (Golding & Modest, 2013). The process of community engagement within museums operates as negotiations of certain kinds of cultural exchange and social transactions, which have the potential to form asymmetrical benefits that privilege the museum as the dominant negotiator, especially when the museums is the facilitator and initiator, and considered within the historical positionality of museums as institutions of power (Boast, 2011). The power imbalances which inherently exist between the museum as an insular organization and the community as external participants and collaborators can be counterbalanced by the extent to which authority and agency is retained, ceded, or shared (Hutchinson, 2013).

While evaluating an institution's methodologies of community participation, it is also important to understand the multifaceted definitions, contexts, and expressions of community—ranging from audience and visitors, source communities, local citizens, and the general public or even specialists at a national and international level. In an examination of the language of community engagement across museum institutions, Morse describes how the term “community engagement” lacks a shared understanding within organizations, and that terms used to refer to communities, such as visitor or participant, map onto the recipients of each community engagement project, allowing for (and impeding) different forms of work and leading to potentially asynchronous approaches from different departments within an institution (Morse, 2020). Moreover, while polyvocal representation and participatory and co-creative community engagement have become recognized tools in interpretive planning and educational programming, lasting institutional change requires the integration of community participation into other aspects of museological activities, including collections and curation (Golding & Modest, 2013; Anila, 2017).

## Methodology

This study used a case study design to understand the motivations, impact, and methodology of community participation in Japanese museums through empirical evidence. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with museum professionals and collaborators who have directed or organized community engagement activities by museum institutions in Japan. Collaborators will be defined as professionals who are not employed by the museum institution, but serve in a leadership role related to a museum's community participation project, and may be employed by another institution. Fourteen individuals participated in the interview process; thirteen interviews were conducted in Japanese on-site at one of three participating research sites, and one interview was conducted virtually over Zoom in English. Participants were identified and recruited through the researcher's academic networks, and constitute museum professionals and collaborators involved in the facilitation of community engagement projects at their respective institutions. Automatically generated interview transcripts were edited for accuracy, translated from Japanese into English by the researcher, and analyzed to identify emergent themes contextualized within existing scholarship and measures of community participation. In addition, the researcher collected supplemental data through document analysis and on-site observations of community-based projects, workshops, and outcomes.

This case study focuses on three research sites in Japan which have conducted community engagement projects that integrate participatory practice and agency: The National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku) in Osaka, Art Tower Mito (ATM) in Ibaraki, and Upopoy National Ainu Museum and Park in Hokkaido. The three research sites each conduct community participatory and engagement activities through a museum facility that is supported by at least one other function—Minpaku is simultaneously a museum and a research institute for cultural anthropology and ethnology; ATM is a multimedia cultural facility that hosts both a concert hall and a theater in addition to its museum gallery of contemporary art, and Upopoy serves as a base for the revival and development of Ainu culture through a museum, memorial site, and a park that acts as an open-air cultural center. Each site integrates community engagement from multifaceted perspectives, owing to their multitudinous operations and inclusive of their missions as museums open to the public. Three different community-based participatory projects were selected for study at each site, and four to five individuals were interviewed from each site. This sampling allows for an understanding of the institutions through

different community projects and leadership perspectives, but does not presume to offer a comprehensive assessment of the participant museums overall or their many activities and perspectives that are not herein represented.

### **The National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku), Osaka**

The National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku, 国立民族学博物館) was founded in 1974 and opened to the public in 1977 as an Inter-University Research Institute in cultural anthropology and ethnology, under the “Law to amend part of the National School Establishment Law”; in 2004, Minpaku became a member of the National Institute for the Humanities, under the “National University Corporation Act.” Its museum facility serves as a point of contact with society wherein research is publicized and disseminated through exhibits and educational programs. While emphasizing academic research, Minpaku has been exploring ways to democratize its processes of knowledge production and share authority with communities, including source communities and the general public, with varying degrees of intentionality and community participation.

For the fiscal year 2022-2023, Minpaku’s annual budget was 3,350 million yen, and its annual number of visitors was reported to be 183,810 visitors (National Museum of Ethnology, 2024). Many of Minpaku’s projects are funded by grants from foundations and other sources, including grants-in-aid for scientific research. It is located in the large metropolitan city of Osaka, the capital city of Osaka Prefecture and one of Japan’s largest cities.

Five participants, including two researchers, one collaborator, and two volunteer coordinators, participated in interviews related to three community participatory projects. All of these participants are defined as contributing museum staff perspectives.

- “Minpaku Museum Partners (MMP)” was established in 2004 as a community-based volunteer organization that operates a range of visitor services and educational programs in collaboration with Minpaku, including programs geared towards the visually impaired, elementary school children, and general visitors. MMP demonstrates community agency over the planning and implementation of museum activities, and acts as a bridge between Minpaku’s researchers, staff, and the public. Its total membership is currently about 130 individuals, and new members are recruited annually.

- Minpaku hosts various projects to support its academic research and collections of Ainu culture. Many of these activities are facilitated by Dr. Reiko SAITO (齋藤玲子) of Minpaku in cooperation with community partners and organizations such as the Ainu Association of Hokkaido. These include Minpaku's hosting of an annual *Kamuynomi* rite and its reception of traditional craftsmen dispatched by the Ainu Institute, representing collaborative efforts to co-create cultural knowledge and activities with the community.
- The Info-Forum Museum Project aims to widely share Minpaku's collections through online databases that act as multidirectional forums of knowledge production. This project produces multiple iterations related to the museum's collections, but was initiated by the intentionality and community agency demonstrated in the pilot project, "RECONNECTING Source Communities with Museum Collections." This project was led by Dr. Atsunori ITO (伊藤敦規) of Minpaku and facilitated through the cooperation of 22 indigenous American Hopi community members and 14 museum institutions.

### **Art Tower Mito, Ibaraki**

Art Tower Mito (ATM, 水戸芸術館) is a multimedia arts and museum complex that was founded in 1990 to commemorate the centennial celebrations of Mito city, and serves as a base for locally-produced artistic and cultural activities. In conjunction with city revitalization and development efforts and supported at times by municipal governing bodies, including the Mito Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Mito City Board of Education, and the Mito Tourism Association, ATM is governed by the Mito Arts Foundation for the Promotion of the Arts. ATM develops site-specific exhibits, workshops, and community-based programs in collaboration with artists and local citizens, while emphasizing co-creative participation and the development of connections between people in the community.

For the fiscal year 2022-2023, the Mito Arts Foundation's annual budget was 1,023 million yen, and ATM's annual number of visitors was reported to be over 60,000 visitors (Art Tower Mito, 2024). ATM's contemporary art museum gallery received over 25,000 visitors. Many of ATM's projects are supported by foundation and government support allocated from one percent of the city's annual budget. It is

located in the metropolitan city of Mito, the capital city of Ibaraki Prefecture.

Five participants, including one artistic director, one collaborator, one education coordinator, and two community participant collaborators, participated in interviews related to three community participatory projects. Three of these participants are defined as contributing museum staff perspectives, and two of these participants are defined as contributing community participant perspectives.

- The “Home Moving!” project was carried out in collaboration with the digital archive project “AHA!,” organized by Atsushi MATSUMOTO (松本篤) from the non-profit organization “remo,” and constitutes a community-based, co-creative initiative that collected 8mm film “home movies” from local citizens of Mito, and hosted community viewings of the footage in different venues. This project positions the museum to facilitate community participation, connections, and relational meaning-making in small group gatherings.
- The annual educational program “*Koukousei* Week (High School Student Week)” creates a temporary cafe space within the museum’s galleries, where various workshops and activities are carried out through the management of 30-45 volunteer staff working different shifts. The organizers over the years have included youth volunteers from local high schools, community participants, and the educational program coordinators, including Junko MORIYAMA (森山純子). This community-led program aims to enhance access by younger generations, while encouraging creative and social use of the galleries by over 600 participants annually.

The *Asatte Asagao* (The Day After Tomorrow Morning Glory) Project is a seasonally structured and recurring community participation project that facilitates the planting and cultivation of morning glory flowers, in collaboration with the artist Katsuhiko HIBINO (日比野克彦) and over 200 community participants annually. As a project that started in 2005, *Asatte Asagao* produces a co-creative community experience that fosters the development of long-lasting connections within the local community.

## Upopoy National Ainu Museum and Park, Hokkaido

Upopoy National Ainu Museum and Park (Upopoy, ウポポイ民族共生象徴空間) was opened to the public in 2020 as a base for the revitalization of Ainu culture—a diverse indigenous culture of Hokkaido—and as a symbolic space for “a society of mutual respect and coexistence.” Upopoy is managed by the Foundation for Ainu Culture through the support of the national government, including advisory boards and councils, and the Hokkaido government. From its inception, Upopoy was created together with the participation of Ainu community members, emphasizing shared authority and collaboration with the Ainu community. Upopoy’s National Ainu Museum aims to promote appreciation and research of Ainu culture through traditional museological functions, and Upopoy’s National Ainu Park constitutes an open air cultural museum with more involved community participatory programs.

For the fiscal year 2022-2023, the Foundation for Ainu Culture’s budget was 5,854 million yen (including activities outside of Upopoy), and Upopoy’s annual number of visitors was reported to be over 350,000 visitors (The Foundation for Ainu Culture, 2024). The Foundation for Ainu Culture’s operational fund is provided by subsidies and consignment fees from the national government (the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) and the Hokkaido Government. Upopoy is located in Shiraoi Town in the Shiraoi District of Hokkaido Prefecture.

Four participants, including one executive director, one staff member from the public relations division, one staff member from the planning department, and one collaborator, participated in interviews related to three community participatory projects. All of these participants are defined as contributing museum staff perspectives.

- The Ainu culture and history exhibits at the Upopoy National Ainu Museum were developed through the cooperation of working groups involving five Ainu community members. These efforts produced co-creative exhibits and shared authority with community members, while contributing to the sustainable promotion of Ainu artistic practices and relationships within the community.
- The annual Ainu Art Show at Upopoy National Ainu Park hosts Ainu artists and craftsmen from the community who hold exhibition sales and programming, providing opportunities for direct engagements between Ainu communities and the general

public, while supporting the continuance of Ainu artistic traditions. Through this program, Upopoy hosts a community-led space created through voluntary participation by Ainu community participants consisting of around sixteen individuals and four groups from five different regions.

- Upopoy holds workshops and a crafts studio, *ikari usi*, which guide the general public to learn about and experience making traditional Ainu crafts, including embroidery and woodcarving. These programs produce participatory educational experiences for visitors, and regularly invite Ainu craftsmen to demonstrate their expertise, creating collaborative experiences that represent the diversity of Ainu culture.

## Results and Discussion

### Institutional Motivations

Institutional motivations define the intentionality and purposes of a museum's community engagement projects, and set expectations for the methodologies and outcomes. Motivations, then, establish parameters and justifications for what an institution is able to accomplish, affecting the language used to express a project, including the definition of participant communities, and the level of support and resources that are made available. Moreover, institutional motivations reveal a museum's awareness of community needs and interests, and what they are able to offer and improve upon as an organization.

#### *Service to community*

Multiple respondents across all three sites described the motivations for their community engagement activities in terms of social impact, as services to communities or contributions to society that aligned with at least one of the four areas defined by the Measurement of Museum Social Impact—wellbeing, interculturalism, education, and relationships (Mileham et al., 2022). Intentionality, however, varied by project and individual, and were affected by an individual's perspective of how their project fit into the institution's overall mission and purpose.

In cases where intentionality was high, respondents identified that community engagement was important to the museum overall and included in the institutional mission statement or goals. Staff members at Art Tower Mito, for example, referred to the institutional goals—which include serving as a base for citizens' artistic and cultural activities and civic revitalization—when explaining the motivations

behind their community-based projects as fostering community wellbeing, creativity, and connections. A participant involved in planning the Ainu Art Show at Upopoy described their project as building interculturalism, education, and connections, and emphasized that community participation is a founding core value of the institution which precedes the project: “Even before we were able to do this [project], it was extremely important to engage with the community... We listened to opinions from the local community, and received advice from the local community... all while opening Upopoy.” As Morse describes, a recognition of community engagement in the institutional language helps museum professionals articulate a project’s social impact (Morse, 2020).

In cases where the intentionality of social impact was initially lower, participants did not reference institutional mission statements, and expressed project motivations in terms of balanced benefits to both the museum and to participants. However, awareness of a project's social impact increased exponentially as individuals gained more experience working with community members over longer periods of time. A focus on community benefit rather than institutional benefit was something that could originate from personal experience rather than institutional values, as described by a researcher at Minpaku: "I realized that this isn't about me. I hope that [the community] will find usefulness that will be good for the community."

### *Expanding audiences and perspectives*

A primary motivation to implement community engagement projects is to diversify and expand a museum’s voice and audience, which contributes to enhanced relevance, representation, engagement, and adaptability for an institution (Simon, 2020). Across all three sites, several participants spoke about community participation projects as methods to diversify their institution’s interpretative voice and perspective; and at least one participant from each site was motivated by a desire to expand their institution’s audience and attendance.

The Home Moving!, *Koukousei* Week, and *Asatte Asagao* project by ATM each aspire for collaborative participation from a different demographic of community members in the city of Mito. One of the reasons ATM is concerned with representing a diverse group is explained in terms of ongoing trends towards social inclusion in the field of contemporary art: “I think of [contemporary art] as a container... We want everyone to have a variety of values, and it’s important for everyone to bring their ideas to create something.”

Upopoy, as a museum dedicated to Ainu culture, is concerned with equitably representing the diversity of Ainu people and practices, which involves relationship-building, outreach, and consultation with Ainu communities from different regions across Hokkaido and beyond. The executive director expressed the incorporation of community perspectives into the museum's voice as a fundamental prerequisite for a cultural museum, saying, "When we try to create a museum for indigenous peoples, it would be nonsense in this modern age to create a museum without the perspective of the indigenous people themselves." Minpaku, as the largest site with diverse ethnological collections, is interested in connecting to a greater variety of community groups. While Minpaku Museum Partners (MMP) is one facet of its programming that collaborates with the general public, individual researchers within Minpaku facilitate participatory projects with different cultural groups, and also collaborate with a community of international scholars on various, specialized research projects. Although the constituencies of community for each site varies, each institution has been working towards the inclusion of diverse perspectives in their community programming.

### *Bridging divides*

Studies have shown that museums face difficulties in connecting to communities because of public perceptions that associate them with a homogenous and exclusionary cultural elite (Hirzy, 2008). At least one respondent from all three sites described museums in general as difficult to connect to, although each institution differed in terms of its positionality in relationship to its communities. Fundamentally, however, respondents described community engagement as a "bridge," "medium," or "tool" that proactively "connects" the museum with communities.

A volunteer coordinator of MMP describes their community-based project as a way to overcome the fact that "researchers and the general public don't have much contact with each other." Generally, Minpaku's researchers are engaged in participatory projects involving source communities, constituting a controlled knowledge sharing process between the expertise of scholars and the expertise of indigenous knowledge, in silo to the general public. Moreover, a researcher at Minpaku pointed out that a museum's relationship with a local community differs (and is constrained) depending on whether it is affiliated with the city, prefecture, or nation, saying, "This is a national museum, so it's not as if we have to do anything directly related to the

local community, although it'd be nice. Our mission doesn't obligate us to." The executive director of Upopoy shared similar sentiments, saying, "I think it is a bit difficult for this museum to directly connect the community and general visitors. It's easier to do that in a park than in a museum." In Upopoy's organizational structure, the public relations department is housed entirely within Upopoy's National Ainu Park, where a variety of hands-on visitor experiences are carried out. Upopoy's National Ainu Museum, meanwhile, focuses on knowledge-based projects in collaboration with Ainu communities specifically. These testimonies reveal that many community engagement projects are specialized efforts that are conducted in silo to the other sorts of community work conducted by the museum.

Art Tower Mito, however, is different in that its various community projects generally involve the same staff, who build up experience working with different community groups. As a contemporary art gallery with no permanent collections, ATM also works with a different genre of content, in which specialized knowledge is less of a prerequisite for co-creative community engagement. Its staff and collaborators generally expressed less difficulty in terms of their ability to bridge divides with communities. A collaborator from a nonprofit organization described how holding events outside of the museum's galleries, in spaces around the city of Mito, contributes towards expanding the program's audience and bridging divides between the museum and the community:

When the museum is open to the public, it's good for Mito residents, but I feel that only people who are interested in art in particular will come. On the other hand, when we change the location and hold the event somewhere other than the museum, there may be people who cannot go to museums that often.

### **Extent of Participatory Practice and Collaboration**

The extent to which participatory practice and collaboration is involved in the planning and implementation of community participatory projects determines the level of autonomy and agency that community members achieve as well as the boundaries of institutional control. Participatory techniques are design strategies that help institutions better serve, represent, and invite their communities, with implications for the transformative power of community participation to enhance or sustain an institution's social relevance and civic value.

### *Facilitating community agency*

Across all three sites, community members exercised varying degrees of agency and authority over the planning and implementation of community-based projects. These projects range from collaborative, co-creative, and hosted models according to Simon's models of participatory practice (Simon, 2010). ATM's projects involved greater measures of participatory practice—*Koukousei* Week, for example, is a hosted event organized entirely by community members, who determine what activities to carry out. The educational coordinator elaborates, "We create all the skeletons, but the content is created by everyone. We'll ask them to tell us if they have any trouble, but basically we want them to act independently." The artistic director, in describing projects overall, likens the museum's role to an administrative "hub" that connects community members and collaborators who do the actual work of organizing and carrying out the projects. In a similar way, respondents from Minpaku described the museum as performing administrative functions to support community-based projects, as the volunteer coordinator describes, "Rather than doing it ourselves, we do things like prepare the tools and other preparations, and give advice." A researcher elaborated, "We provide money from Minpaku's budget, so a lot of administrative staff are involved in the preparations." Most of Minpaku's research activities are collaborative or co-creative processes of "shared authority," which leverages both academic authority and the authority of communities' lived experience and cultural knowledge as distinct forms of expertise (Hutchinson 2013). Community participatory projects have contributed to the renovation of Minpaku's exhibits in recent years to include polyvocal curation, including a renewal of the exhibits on Ainu culture in 2016. At Upopoy, also, shared authority informs its exhibit design. However, the executive director describes how they were constrained in how much authority they could concede, because of Japanese legal standards that requires curators to be academically certified specialists:

There are fourteen people in the working group, but five people identify as from the Ainu community... Now, there are six major themes in the exhibition... For five themes, the five members of the community took the lead in deciding the exhibit design. The one thing they couldn't take the lead on was [the exhibit on history], because they didn't have any [curators], so almost everything there had to be designed by specialists.

This structural tension reinforces studies which have found that complex challenges arise for community collaborative projects in relation to issues of control and representation, and museums struggle

with balancing a strong ethos of collaboration with curatorial integrity (Golding & Modest, 2013). In circumvention of these struggles, in the park space outside of the traditional museum galleries and constraints, Upopoy's National Ainu Park conducts highly participatory hosted projects, wherein the institution contributes its facilities and resources to present community-developed events that promote artists and craftsmen in the community.

### *Long-term relationship building*

When explaining the background behind participatory projects, participants in leadership positions across all three sites emphasized that projects are designed through the support and trust of long-term relationships which were built over time with communities. A volunteer coordinator of MMP describes inheriting a process that was established by staff members who came before them:

It has been twenty years since this MMP was created. In the first year or within the first ten years, [MMP and Minpaku] both had different things they wanted to do... so they exchanged various opinions, and there were times when it was difficult, but now... We've started to understand the basics of what MMP can do at Minpaku, and what MMP wants to do.

Several researchers who coordinate participatory projects at Minpaku also have a long history of working with their specific communities for over ten years. An educational coordinator who has worked at ATM for thirty years described the longevity of local community relationships as intergenerational: "They used to come here when they were little, and these little kids who were babies are now grown up and coming here, and people who were high school students are bringing their adult children, and so on." Community participants who worked as collaborators to help organize ATM's participatory projects also described their commitments as long-lasting and motivated by the creation of sustained relationships to the museum and other participants. Upopoy, as a museum that only recently opened in 2020, relied on the existing, long-term relationships that staff have had with community members, as well as the relationships that community participants have shared with the museum, to facilitate community working groups and participatory workflows for the museum's co-creative exhibit design and programming projects. Within Upopoy's nascent annual event, the Ainu Art Show, moreover, staff members

described witnessing the beginnings of new relationships with the community that they hope will continue.

### *Support from external organizations*

To various extents, all three sites worked in collaboration with other organizations to perform outreach and facilitate community participation, strengthening the infrastructure and resources for their projects. Aside from funding considerations, institutional level cooperation from other organizations, such as government entities or nonprofits which might represent the community or be composed of community members, democratizes authority at the leadership level and lends legitimacy to community-based efforts.

Upopoy, with national support and ties to various Ainu communities, cultural groups, and foundations in Japan, leverages the support of external organizations for the planning and implementation of all of their projects—the Ainu Association of Hokkaido, the Ainu Crafts Union, and community groups in Akan and Nibutani, for example, have advised on projects and helped to facilitate the recruitment of community participants for the museum's programs. In addition to community groups, the Planning Division and the Public Relations Department developed Upopoy's annual Ainu Art Show with the help of academic consultants who had experience working with indigenous communities. For activities involving Ainu culture, Minpaku also works with the Ainu Association of Hokkaido, whose cooperation has resulted in agreements for the museum to facilitate various Ainu cultural activities. Furthermore, Minpaku's *RECONNECTING* project, which works in collaboration with Native American Hopi communities, involved various museum institutions in the United States to conduct community collections reviews. A collaborator from one of these partner museum institutions describes how the combination of expertise and sharing of social networks between different stakeholders allowed for community workshops, knowledge sharing, and an exhibit at New Mexico State University Museum, in an area accessible and geographically relevant to the Hopi community. ATM, moreover, works with different civic groups for its various projects. The Mito Chamber of Industry and Commerce, for example, financially supports several of its participatory projects, and helps the museum advertise and recruit its community participants. ATM's *Home Moving!* and *Asatte Asagao* projects involved collaboration with individuals who had prior experience conducting similar community-based projects in

other cities and contexts, lending their visions and methodology to the museum's participatory projects.

### **Institutional and Community Outcomes**

The impact of community engagement can be assessed through an understanding of the different outcomes that participatory projects produce for museum institutions and communities. Changes to institutional processes and values, improved societal perceptions and engagement, and strengthened relationships constitute processes of cultural evolution that can facilitate lasting changes to a museum's social existence. Moreover, the ways that museums define success and difficulties for community engagement projects have implications for their ability to sustain or expand efforts, and reveal the tensions and challenges inherent in community-based work.

#### *A sense of purpose*

All participants expressed a sense of purpose and value associated with community engagement work, achieved through an awareness of the benefits to community members or changes to personal ways of thinking. A staff member at ATM describes the effect of community engagement on her perspective, saying, "It can help us think about things more freely, have a new sense of values, and not just think about something from a different perspective, but also connect to the lives of others." ATM's artistic director elaborates on the ways that community engagement enriches people's lives:

I think the quality of a person's life will be completely different depending on the places they go and the people they meet. I think there's something about finding meaning or enjoyment. Museums actually have a role in that sense, and from the community's perspective, there are many benefits.

A staff member from Upopoy similarly describes, "Through the Ainu Art Show, we are introducing Ainu culture from various perspectives, such as selling the crafts, introducing management, and reading for participants. I feel like just being able to do that has some influence on me." Participants also felt that community engagement enriched their own work. In speaking of his experience learning from indigenous knowledge, a researcher at Minpaku describes how working with community members greatly expanded the museum's own understandings: "It was a big discovery. Scientific reports are completely different objectively and subjectively, but including

[community] allows you to get completely different [knowledge]." A staff member at Minpaku similarly describes how community projects enrich the ways she does work: "[Some] things are a little easier to understand from the customer's perspective. I also have the opportunity to ask [community members] for advice on how we provide guidance, which is very helpful for the museum." As Hirzy describes, community engagement invigorates a museum's purpose through its staff, by inspiring museum professionals' confidence in and enthusiasm for their work (Hirzy, 2008).

### *A sense of belonging*

Community collaboration and polyvocality are embedded into the spaces that these projects produce, whether in the form of community-informed exhibits, co-creative workshops and events, or community-led meaning making. When I visited the space of ATM's *Koukousei Week*, or participated in a workshop similar to *Home Moving!*, I felt a welcoming sense of community and invitation for open dialogue. The co-curated exhibits and workshops at Upopoy and the kiosks and publications which document community participatory projects at Minpaku exude the energetic outreach and hard work of collaboration between the museums and community members. These projects of community participation foster a sense of belonging among museum staff, collaborators, and participants.

A community participant who collaborates with ATM described how he has formed meaningful connections to and within the museum through their community-based projects:

Art Tower Mito isn't just a place to visit. It's a place where you can participate in events, and even if it's not a special event, there's a certain level of deep community connection... I guess that's what [ATM] is all about, [a place] where it's possible to make new friends in a public space.

A staff member elaborates, describing the space created during *Koukousei Week*, "It's a place where one can feel at home, and it encourages us." Similarly, a longtime participant of MMP was quoted as saying, "I've made more friends through this. There are a number of community activities growing and expanding, and I wouldn't have known anyone if I hadn't joined." These sentiments illustrate the ability of community engagement to foster connections and a sense of community within museum spaces. For the comparatively new institution of Upopoy, a collaborator expressed hopes that the social

energy which animates Upopoy's community-based events would continue and expand, facilitating recurring encounters likened to a holiday gathering: "I think it would be great if events like this were held everywhere, such as Japanese people gathering at their parents' homes for the New Year and meeting people, or local people meeting for the Obon festival in August."

### *Limited resources*

The success of community engagement projects cannot be quantified by traditional metrics such as attendance or revenue, making it difficult for leadership to justify monetary and resource investments in a museum's community projects (Center for the Future of Museums, 2022). When considering the challenges associated with community-based work, at least one respondent across all sites described limited resources related to a lack of funding and competing priorities for staff.

The educational coordinator at ATM describes the situation at her institution, where the museum's community projects need to be validated at the leadership level, "[To leadership] it seems the most important thing for education is the number of visitors and income, but I don't think the important thing about education is its efficiency... To overcome this difficulty, we must have hard negotiations with leadership." Moreover, across all three sites, community collaborators were often unpaid, especially in volunteer positions, making it difficult for museums to expect consistent participation. In cases where community members were compensated for their collaboration, staff and organizers often had to seek external funding, as a collaborator at ATM elaborates, "We need to use resources from archive project budgets and human resources. Most of it will basically be used for exhibitions, so in that sense, I think the first difficult point is that it's difficult to find resources for this project." At Minpaku, a researcher expressed being stressed over the need to ensure new sources of grant funding for a long-term project, and worried whether communities would lose interest throughout the lengthy process:

I feared they would lose interest and say they're done with it... And then there's this: when it comes to getting funding, the beginning is always the end, and if you go too far along the road, you won't be able to make any more money.

Another researcher described the competitive process involved in Minpaku's budget decisions, saying, "Well, we don't always have the

budget to do so... and this museum holds a lot of events... You submit your work to be judged, give a presentation, and then decide whether or not it can be done." At Upopoy, however, respondents did not mention issues with funding, but spoke about the difficulty of allocating limited resources to participants and ensuring efficient management over an expanding program, saying, "There are so many people involved, and especially with the Ainu Art Show, the more booths there are, the happier we are, but the more there are, the more difficult it becomes to coordinate schedules, and to find space."

## Conclusion

The experiences of community engagement at The National Museum of Ethnology, Art Tower Mito, and Upopoy National Ainu Museum and Park are instances of an ongoing process of cultural evolution for museums—the increasing importance of community participation, polyvocality, and shared authority in their social existence. Although the sociocultural contexts, institutional histories, and ongoing work of each site varied, museological facilities across the broad spectrum of everything from art galleries to cultural centers are equipped with the potential to enrich, revitalize, and connect to communities.

The unifying experiences amongst these case studies reveals that museums in Japan are initiating projects of community participation with the goals of inclusion and outreach, as well as varying awareness of the potential for social impact. Strategies of community agency, an investment in building relationships, and collaboration with external organizations are helping Japanese museums facilitate community engagement practices that are fostering a sense of purpose and belonging within staff and communities. However, the shared difficulties of securing and allocating resources and funding demonstrate that community engagement is at times seen as less integral to or peripheral from more core institutional missions and goals, especially when compared to the more traditional museological functions of exhibiting, collecting, and educating. Moreover, an institution's size, origins, affiliations, content, and constituent or defined communities affect its positionality to engage more proactively in community collaboration. Art Tower Mito, for example, is implementing more advanced and proactive community participation programs throughout its educational activities as a result of movements in contemporary art that highly value co-creation with communities.

As the Japanese Museum Act is being revised for the first time in decades to integrate the importance of civic contribution, Japanese museums may benefit from an evaluation of the alignment between institutional motivations, methodologies, and outcomes of community engagement. In order to support community engagement as valuable and necessary work, museum institutions should integrate community engagement and social impact within institutional mission statements and goals—to assist organizers in outlining their community projects and securing institutional support and resources. The multiple stakeholders, external organizations, and changing participants who support community engagement processes can complicate workflows, so it helps to have designated staff who build experience working with communities and are able to create inheritable structures and values. Beyond this, it is also important to ensure that community engagement is actual rather than symbolic, as something valued throughout the different departments and functions of a museum.

This research has attempted to center the impressions of lived experiences, constituting empirical evidence of the motivations, methodologies, and impact of community engagement. However, it has been structured according to frameworks and definitions of community engagement defined mostly by Western scholars working in contexts of diverse populations and Eurocentric histories, and it has centered museum staff perspectives over community participant perspectives. New museology and the rise of audience-centered institutions have universal relevance, but an expansion of this research could contribute to the documentation and creation of unique frameworks, categorizations, and understandings of community engagement based on the workflows and experiences of Japanese museum professionals, scholars, and community participants.

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