

KNOWLEDGE AND CONTEXT – THE SOCIAL LIFE OF OBJECTS

By

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The intangible heritage which seems to have the greatest bearing on objects/artefacts are *knowledge systems* and *life ways* related to the specific objects but not part thereof. Objects do not speak for culture, or are instrumental reflections thereof unless an extensive body of knowledge/intangible heritage is attached to them. The question remains; what kind of intangible heritage/traditional knowledge should, and must, be added to reach the objective of telling fairly complete and appropriate stories through objects, thereby making objects speak for culture?

Two questions are pertinent:

1. In what *life ways* do the objects fit in?
2. What *knowledge system* is reflected in a set of specific objects?

In terms of museum exhibitions these questions seem crucial concerning the aspect of *presentation* paired with that of *representation*, the latter pointing to a reflection of culture-specific distinctiveness, i.e. underscoring a clear cultural identification.

For long my interest has been focused upon the revival and transformation of craft/handicraft work into what adequately can be referred to as *ethnic art*. **Sámi basketry** and **Hopi pottery** are cases in point. In both instances the development into refined æsthetical manifestations is apparent. Equally important is the unequivocal attachment to tradition, the cultural roots of these objects. In this interest I have not constrained myself to concentrating on the objects, my approach is broader than so. By means of identifying certain families with leading positions in the activity of specific craft production, i.e. a simple kinship perspective following several generations and building in part on life histories, the stylistic transformation, as well as original sustenance of the objects, are unfolded. The knowledge, the intangible heritage, and how it is practiced, give social life to the objects, a knowledge quite complex but mostly orally sustained and transmitted.

In some cases it may be the initiative of an individual person that make the story to work out for presentation exiting. *Asa Kitok* among the Sámi and *Nampeyo* among the Hopi are women who, perhaps accidentally, came to revive and establish a new era for craft tradition which for certain time had been dormant, more or less forgotten. They both developed what formerly was an ordinary craft, a skill as crafters once shared by many, into new frontiers inspiring especially members within their own families, but also others. Referring to Asa Kitok, d. 1986, we can now see traces of activity and growing concern for the tradition in the third descending generation, whereas when it comes to Nampeyo, d. 1942, a fourth generation descending from her is making its way showing drastic innovative designs in their ceramics, but still related to a common origin, that of Nampeyo and her role as a leading Hopi potter.

Why these particular cases to illustrate a general argument? In collecting for the Ethnografic Museum, University of Oslo (1971) a piece of traditional Sámi basketry, *deivo*, originally used for the keeping of reindeer cheese, now commonly converted to wall decorations, made by one of Asa Kitok's daughters, I was asked by the same daughter to do a study focusing in particular on Asa Kitok. The research turned out to be quite urgent as Asa Kitok was fairly old (79) and about to retire. She was still making basketry but on a small scale, her knowledge, on the other hand, was still actively retained to be recorded. From this rather unexpected engagement followed two things, in 1972 on the first encounter I managed to order two large items, *kohpo korja*, commonly used by the Sámi in the nomadic reindeer pastoralist era, and based on intensive fieldwork I eventually wrote a monograph titled "Asa Kitok and her daughters – a study of Sámi basketry craft" (1985). Incidentally, the order I made was historical in a sense; first it was the first time ever a museum had ordered any artefact from her, second it turned out to be her last large objects made. Her long career as handiworker was closing at the time I came around, but her extensive knowledge related to the craft tradition and her versatile and most fascinating life history could still be recorded.

Recently a new, highly refined piece of art based on Sámi basketry traditions has been collected from one of the daughters (2003). And the story can go on, but my point is that a continual writing down of life histories etc., adding insight and flavour to the specific objects, are required. And, obviously, it is here the notion of intangible heritage comes in, i.e. relevant knowledge basically stored in the head of living people. In all focused, or researched based, collecting museums

have an obligation to meet this new challenge, we are per definition appropriate institutions to combine the management of material objects with that of intangible heritage. However, museums should not be expected to undertake responsibility for all intangible heritage, the undertaking is large enough concentrating primarily on that which closely relates to objects.

My second empirical case will illustrate further the need to take this challenge seriously. In 1904 Ole Solberg, research associate at the Ethnographic Museum, later on its Director and Professor of Ethnography, on doing research among the Hopi collected a huge collection, including some noticeable ceramics of which 14 items by Nampeyo are prominent. They are from the period when Nampeyo's skill and creative strength was at her peak, i.e. 1900 - 1910. It is today uncertain to what extent Solberg was aware of the historical uniqueness of these ceramics and there is no recording of any knowledge beyond the obvious more technical ones, describing the items giving certain hints at function as well as ornamentation and how the latter should be interpreted. Neither did he publish anything relating to this collection and his field observations in general. The collection is still there, though, and in many ways fairly representative of the traditional Hopi culture at the time.

In all fairness Solberg could not be aware of the extraordinary position of Nampeyo, as the full impact of her works evolved much later. Now we know so much more and her descendants actively involved in pottery number more than 60 people, 10 of which are men. So far the museum has collected one item each from one of Nampeyo's daughters, from a grand daughter and from a great grand daughter, collected at my initiative but by non-academic staff at the museum. Now the plan is to pursue this programmatic collecting by continuing to focus on the Nampeyo descendants, but this time by means of collecting as much as possible also of intangible heritage. I want to know to what extent the substantial knowledge once sustained and transmitted orally by Nampeyo is still retained as living knowledge among the contemporary potters. Their life situation generally and their role as Hopi potters, carrying the famous legendary name Nampeyo, or only referring to the kin-based connection, ought to be documented. This points to the significant strength of traditional knowledge, and most of it is intangible. By focusing on one family group the scope of inquiry becomes more limited, identifying more readily what is relevant in terms of intangible heritage associated with the material objects. Moreover, the story which can be told, using the objects in display, i.e. *presentation*, becomes more complete and give life to the objects.

An assumption is that the object serves as a reflection of cultural tradition, although in most cases it is recently made. Its message is loaded with information about cultural tradition, which only can be adequately assembled and secured through fieldwork; observation in the natural setting, recording and interpreting peoples' narratives related to the object and to their life situation in general. Thereby, and thereby only, can the object talk, it conveys a culture-specific message. The narrative method combined with field observations are essential.

To summarize this brief, highly tentative discussion let me state:

- 1) I advocate for a *kin-based* approach, preferably restrained to one family group, extended or not, covering several generations which facilitates in-depth study.
- 2) As far as possible I suggest capturing of peoples' life histories, i.e. a *narrative approach*, which goes far beyond that which is concretely related to the objects. Focusing on people, we must keep in mind that people live a full life and recording a reasonable insight about that will shed light also on the objects.
- 3) *Ecological knowledge* is essential, i.e. what kind of natural material being used is best fit and has the highest quality for various culture-specific objects; birch tree roots in the Sámi case and clay in the Hopi case? How to read the landscape to know where the material looked for can be found and in what season of the annual cycle are related aspects.
- 4) *Technical knowledge*, which has to do with preparing the material before the objects are shaped, manufactured into a piece of art, or refined handicraft, is also an important feature. This knowledge is based on ancient tradition, mostly orally retained and shared in various social settings. One of our aims is to capture and observe these settings, i.e. identifying the *proper context* for the transmittance of traditionally anchored knowledge.
- 5) Even if it is appropriate to question the use of the word art/ethnic art, as most indigenous peoples do not have such a word in their language, we must look at *ideas* and *perceptions* concerning what we may call æsthetical manifestations, that which has a beautiful quality in a possibly neutral sense. People have thoughts about moving the frontier in their craftwork, thus indicating what can be made by birch roots among the Sámi, i.e. the innovative approach. The same may be valid for Hopi potters, who expand on the intricate possibilities regarding clay. The discourse leading to creative art work is extremely important, aside from the attractive objects themselves.

Let me finally add a few points which are reflections both on what I recently experienced in Hokkaido among the Ainu on a short revisit before attending this conference, and partly what I have heard these days here at the same conference.

Since I was in Hokkaido last time in 1994 the Ainu have established an *Association for the Promotion of Ainu Intangible Culture*, focusing primarily on dancing, music, also story telling through rhythmic singing called *yukar*. *Ceremonial practice*, which is immensely rich among the Ainu, and *belief systems* are also part of the objective. This is, as I see it, in line with the ICOM recommendations, but furthermore to a large degree meeting Ainu aspirations, strengthening and

acknowledging essential elements of their cultural repertoire.

Most of the objects used in a ceremony are intimately related to Ainu beliefs, which very much possess their fundamental power by means of remaining oral. Young Ainu learn the proper conduct by attending regularly recurring ceremonial events, on which occasion they can attain cultural competence by frequently practicing the intricate knowledge required. The same is valid for traditional dancing, singing, examples of intangible heritage firmly promoted by the Ainu and heavily supported by Japanese authorities, especially as a follow up to the intents and purposes derived from the new Ainu Culture Promotion Law (Ainu Shinpo) of 1997.

Ainu *place names*, as well as knowledge about *wild plants* to be used either for food or medicine, represent important knowledge systems of clearly intangible character. In some instances such knowledge may even be considered as secret, e.g. plants used as poison while hunting. Plants especially effective in that sense will usually not be common knowledge but kept secret within small groups. As to Ainu place names, it can be mentioned that the *Ainu Research Center*, founded in 1994, which has done extensive studies on that theme will open an exhibition for the first time ever based on recent research at the Museum of Literature in Sapporo in October 2004. As we find, then, the intangible cultural heritage is more and more put on display, not the least to show the Ainu themselves about their uniqueness, strengthening their self-respect, but moreover to convey to the general Japanese public the cultural distinctiveness of the Ainu. Since the Ainu have not formally been recognized as indigenous people in Japan, although internationally they are fully acknowledged as such, this kind of exhibition can serve as one of a set of proofs of their undeniable indigeneity in Hokkaido. Consequently, an exhibition about place names can function as a political statement.

Finally I wish to say a few words about *customary law*. As a legal anthropologist working for many years in an Ethnographic Museum, it was encouraging to hear from Professor Matsuzono, the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, the first plenary day that customary law definitely is an example of significant intangible cultural heritage. Going back to the Sámi, in connection to a comprehensive Sámi rights process, still ongoing, they have recently decided to recapture the insight of their customary law, to a large extent lost due to assimilation policy. Now it is believed that Sámi indigenous rights cannot be adequately defined and properly recognized as a legal fact unless their customs and their own legal perceptions are considered. Focusing on the legal aspect of intangible heritage may certainly strengthen representativity, although presentation in the form of exhibitions may still be very hard to accomplish in an effective way. On the other hand, difficult tasks and challenges are what keep museums alive!

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