

Oral History, Museums and Communities: a view from the Cape of Good Hope

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Abstract:

My address opens with thoughts on the Conference Programme reflecting the responses of ICOM-ICME members to the call for papers on the Conference theme, 'Can Oral History Make Objects Speak?'. This is followed by a philosophical discussion on the role of oral history in Africa, as it emerged within post-colonial Africanist historiography, placed in counterpoint to the role of museums in Africa, recognizing that the museum concept originated in Europe, with deep roots in classical Greece. This forms the backdrop to a contextualization of the recent UNESCO-funded publication, Transformation and Challenge: Museums in Cape Town and Sydney, highlighting the significance of Iziko national museums, including the oldest museum in sub-Saharan Africa.

The focus of the paper then narrows to the Iziko Bo-Kaap Museum in dialogue with its source community. The Bo-Kaap Museum is situated in the historically significant upper part of the city of Cape Town, in the heart of a predominantly Muslim community. Photographs taken in the 1950s of members of this community in their local setting now form part of the Social History Collections of Iziko. The paper outlines the process of developing a paradigm of dialogue between Iziko curators and Bo-Kaap senior citizens, who interpreted these images some fifty years later in a post-apartheid social context. Museum objects, in this case photographic images, were given 'voices' and new meaning in relation to oral histories and memory.

The paper concludes with a statement about the relationship between the cited Iziko Bo-Kaap Museum initiatives and the Iziko mission of managing and promoting its unique combination of South Africa's heritage collections, sites and services for the benefit of present and future generations.

We are gathered here in Greece to engage with and enjoy, among other things, the tangible and intangible heritage of a country where the lexical root of museums originated. The very word *museum*, derived from *Mouseion* – seat of the muses - alludes in its genesis to the spirit of Greek mythology and draws upon the inspirational notion of the *muses* or nymphs. In Greek mythology, we know, they represent the nine goddess-daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne (Memory) elevated to be custodians of the arts in the spheres of history, flute-playing, comedy, tragedy, dancing, love-poetry, hymns, epic poetry, and even astronomy. In a further development of its meaning, the word *mouseion* referred in the 3rd century BC specifically to that part of the palace of kings in the African Egyptian city of Alexandria where they housed the library of Alexander the Great, which also served as a place of learning.

This is also why we are meeting here in *Nafplio*: to learn, in a conference context, more about the practice of our profession and the art and culture of our host country. Reflecting on the first objective I now proceed to open my address with two introductory remarks related to the conference theme ‘Can Oral History make objects speak?’ It will then be followed by a reflection from an African perspective on the ideology, methodology and practice of Oral History. I end of with a brief discussion on how one of our Iziko Museums in Cape Town is developing a dialogical paradigm with representatives of its Muslim community.

Reflections on the ICOM-ICME Conference Programme 2005

Firstly, a comment on the mode in which the conference theme has been phrased. The theme of this year’s ICOM-ICME annual meeting is phrased in the form of a question. It reminds me of a tradition of intellectual practice rooted in Greek philosophy. The philosopher Socrates introduced to the world of reason in the 4th century BC the concept of philosophical dialogue known as the Socratic Question. His truth-seeking strategy was to start a philosophical debate by presenting himself as the ignorant seeker of knowledge posing targeted questions with a view to persuade his interlocutor to adopt a critical view of the topic under discussion. Unlike the 5th century BC Sophists’ art of disputation, which was aimed at winning the argument, Socrates aim was to guide the interlocutor to

discard his shyness and enter into a conversation that would enable the interlocutor to reflect with Socrates on the contradictions in his theoretical and practical convictions. The usefulness of dialogues, based on posing questions, was their value in bringing clarity to the philosophical problem under discussion and interlocutors closer to a solution on how to tackle it.¹ Dialogues were not conducted in Socrates' 4th century BC Athens to produce unambiguous results. This seems also to be the purpose with the choice of theme for this Conference: 'Can Oral History make objects speak?' Here, on Greek soil we'll be engaging as museum professionals in dialogue over four days about this conference theme in the spirit of the Socratic Question.

This leads us to my second introductory comment, which relates to the response of ICOM-ICME members to the organizing committee's call for papers as reflected in the final programme. The committee, I assume, made the call for papers last year 'on the ideology, methodology and practice of Oral History in Museums'² in the Socratic spirit of knowledge production. The outcome of the responses to their request are the ±40 papers to be presented here, none of which addresses the main theme in isolation from the context of the sub-themes of the Conference.

A cursory glance at the programme suggests that for members of ICOM-ICME the sub-theme 'Integrating Oral History in exhibitions: from concept to implementation' was the most popular choice. Perhaps these 16, or so, papers on the topic to be presented all day tomorrow suggest that most museum practitioners still regard the setting up of exhibitions as the core purpose or business of their institutions, though realizing more than ever before the challenge of incorporating oral history as a vital component of some exhibitions. The second most popular choice of sub-theme on the programme is 'Education and Oral History: how can it benefit museum outreach programmes?' Its popularity of choice by participants suggests that, after exhibitions, education is still considered one of the foremost purposes of any museum, which cannot be accomplished 'without research work by its staff on its own collections, as well as on material it wishes to acquire'.³ Yes, the museum is indeed a place of learning.

¹ Christoph Delius *et al*, *The Story of Philosophy* (Colognr: Könenmann, 2000), p.9

² <http://museumssnett.no/icme2005/index.html>

³ *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Vol. 15 (London: William Benton Publishers, 1967), p.1037

Another interesting observation about the programme relates to the last sub-theme listed in the call for papers, 'Ethical aspects of oral traditions: intellectual property and cultural heritage institutions'. For the purpose of the concluding session of the Annual Meeting and because of its far-reaching implications for good governance and risk management at museums in this time and age, this particular sub-theme appears understandably in the onference programme as almost another main theme within its own right.

Equally interestingly is the fact that two sub-themes crucial to a clearer understanding of the conference theme feature hardly at all in the programme: 'Museums, oral history and source communities developing dialogical paradigms' and 'Audience research on oral history. How do we assess museum visitor impact?' With regards to the first one, defining within a post-modernist paradigm the notion of community and/or a people is no longer as simple as it might have seemed some decades ago. Perhaps this explains why most of us preferred rather not to submit a proposal on 'Museums, oral history and source communities developing dialogical paradigms'. On the other hand it could reveal something about the intellectual discomfort within the professional museum fraternity with oral history due to the elitist nature of museums as heritage institutions rooted in European Renaissance and Enlightenment culture. In this respect, African museums of excellence are perhaps not that different from their European and American counterparts. Nonetheless, one has to acknowledge that some ICME members present here would have been conducting fieldwork and using oral interviews for decades. In fact, from the 1920s face to face dialogues with communities have been standard practice and many museum collections – including Iziko's own – have been acquired in this context. Indeed, every object has the potential to tell a story relating to its context of use and value.⁴

However Africanist museologists are presently faced with the challenge of how to apply oral history in a museum environment in ideologically defensible, methodologically sound and practical ways.

⁴ I thank Patricia Davison of Iziko for this insight into museum practice.

Reflections on the ideology, methodology and practice of OH

Whichever way one looks at the conference programme, Oral History in a museum context is what this Annual Meeting of ICOM-ICME is all about. From our vantage point at the southern tip of Africa, known from colonial times as the Cape of Good Hope, we see museums in the African century paradigm of President Mbeki⁵ as an elitist institution which took shape in Europe some centuries ago and was transplanted to Africa in a colonial context from the early 1800s. In fact, the South African Museum, established in 1825 and now part of Iziko, is the oldest museum in Africa.

Paradigm shifts in post-colonial African historiography many many decades later, which has, in recent times, also impacted on museum studies, may have contributed in some way to the choice of theme for this conference.

How did this shift come about? In the mid-twentieth century, while we at the southern tip of Africa were subjected to the humiliation of apartheid, the rest of the continent and the Third World celebrated euphorically the victory of decolonization. With great optimism a new generation of Africanist historians was searching for an alternative Africanist historiography that would assert the African factor in the continent's history; one that would constitute 'an ideological response to colonial historiography'⁶ and no longer represent their continent's past as 'but a branch of bourgeois history as it is practiced in metropolitan countries'.⁷ However, theoretical terms and concepts employed in their postcolonial Africanist historiographical discourse revealed an ideological preference for materialist or Marxian epistemology. Trained mainly in the universities of colonial metropolises and exposed to radical post-World War II Marxian discourse, they soon realized the methodological crisis African historiography found itself in. In form and content the archival data at home and abroad were largely biased towards the non-African in Africa. A way out of the crisis was to rely more on the collection of *data* from oral traditions. The extensive use of a Marxian orientated Africanist paradigm in tandem with mainly an oral traditions or oral history methodology to make lost voices of history heard, made the two eminent Africanist historians of the

⁵ See Allan Boesak, *The Tenderness of Conscience: African Renaissance and the Spirituality of Politics* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2005)

⁶ A Themu and B Swai, *Historians and Africanist History: A Critique* (London: ZedPress, 1981), p. x

⁷. *Ibid.*, p. 5

last quarter of the 20th century, Arnold Themu and Bonaventure Swai, see this development as an African historiographical revolution.⁸

If the revolutionary materialist philosophy of Karl Marx provided postcolonial Africanist historians with ideological ammunition to dislodge the hegemony of imperialist bourgeois historiography, the seminal work by the distinguished anthropologist Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, published in 1961, should be appreciated equally for providing Africanists with a historical methodology that revolutionized the practice of history in postcolonial Africa. The very Jan Vansina reminded readers of the *Journal of African History* in 1974 that in the mid 1950s 'oral traditions were neglected by nearly all historians'.⁹ For him it was all about a methodology by which memories of oral traditions via the spoken word, song or other forms of music could be gathered, transcribed and compared to produce material for the construction of indigenous African history. It was and is however qualitatively different from conventional use of oral history in the First World; a discourse I presume this Conference will engage with in a Socratic spirit.

A radical materialist orientated researcher of the Wits University's African Studies Institute, Paul la Hausse, stated correctly in his contribution of 1990 to the *Radical History Review* that Vansina's work, translated into English in 1965, 'captured the imagination and helped mould the concerns of a new generation of historians working in Africa at a time when large parts of the continent had only recently achieved independence from colonial rule.'¹⁰ In due course by the turn of the century it led to an official South African understanding of oral history.

Drawing on the experiences of over half a century of devoted scholarly endeavour in the recording and analysis of oral accounts of the past, a task group of the South African National Oral History and Indigenous Music Programme, set up by the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, defined oral history and oral tradition in relation to each other in 2001:

as the recording of oral memories by way of various means, which included identifying, documenting, protecting and promoting oral traditions (history

⁸ *Ibid*, pp.98-9

⁹ Jan Vansina, 'Comment: Traditions of Genesis' *Journal of African History*, vol/ xv, 2 (1974), p.317

¹⁰ Paul la Hausse, 'Oral History and South African *Historians*' *Radical History Review* Vol. 46 (7), 1990, p.346

handed down from generation to generation) and oral testimonies (history which occurred during the informant's lifetime) of communities.¹¹

This customized South African definition of Oral History should be seen against the backdrop of Paul la Hausse scholarly contribution mentioned. In it he noted, according to the anthropologist Carolyn Hamilton of the post-New Marxist school of thought at Wits University,

that oral traditions have been less drawn upon by South African historians than by their colleagues further north and suggested that this is because oral traditions among African communities 'bore traces of written historical sources to a degree seldom encountered elsewhere in Africa', one of the 'intractable problems associated with oral traditions'.¹²

In her postmodernist reading of the article, Hamilton experienced a discomfort with the contrast La Hausse's made between the authenticity and objectivity of the academic historian compared with the subjectivity of the oral testimony of the ordinary person in their reconstructing of the past. As she sees it, the radical academics of the 1970s and 1980s associated with the Wits History Workshop initiative are presented as producers of knowledge whilst the ordinary people associated with it were merely the consumers. Whatever the power relationships at the time between interviewee and interviewer, Hamilton nonetheless acknowledges with reference to a paper by Belinda Bozzoli that the History Workshop movement of the University of the Witwatersrand did promote in apartheid South Africa after the Soweto student revolt the writing of academic studies of hidden histories, the preparation of accessible histories for non-academic audiences and the provision of training to non-academics for the writing of their own histories. I submit, their community oriented research outputs and comparable initiatives at other universities in the region could be utilized effectively by African museums to make objects speak.

¹¹ Cited in Henry C. Jatti Bredekamp, 'The South African National Oral History and Indigenous Music Programmes in a Decade of Democracy, 1994-2004' in *International Congress on Archives 2004 23 – 29 August – Vienna – Austria: Archives, Memory and Knowledge*
http://www.wien2004.icaorg/imagesUpload/pres_315_BREDEKAMP_COT01.PDF

¹² Carolyn Hamilton, "Living by Fluidity": Oral Histories, Material Custodies and Politics of Archiving' in Carolyn Hamilton et al, eds., *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 2002). p. 214

Interestingly, in the 1980s historians working with local communities doing 'history from below', as it were, were moving closer to the field methods of social anthropologists while many anthropologists were moving away from an ahistorical ethnographic approach. As already acknowledged in this address, for decades museum ethnographers have used oral interviews to document the social significance of objects. Their methodological limitations of memory are lessened when using tangible object as a trigger to remembering, especially in cultures that use material expressions as ways of recording history.¹³

For its world acclaimed exhibition Democracy X of last year Iziko drew heavily on the work of the popular historian Luli Callinicos and the Wits History Workshop to interpret the exhibits in the section on mining and migrancy. In a way, by doing this, Iziko was giving due credit to their achievements in transforming the false consciousness of the oppressed of the 1970s and 1980s when those museums which had to merge by a post-apartheid act of law into Iziko were museums controlled by the apartheid regime. For academics of particularly the radical neo-Marxist school of thought at Wits University the focus of oral history research was 'African working-class formation, culture and resistance in the two main sites of South African industrialization, Kimberley and the Rand,¹⁴ whereas the focus of the Africanist orientated liberal school of thought at UCT tended more on understanding the living memories of communities in and around Cape Town destroyed under the apartheid regime's Group Areas Act of 1950. In both instances their regionally-based oral history projects were 'concerned to document aspects of popular experience in industrializing South Africa'¹⁵ not recorded in the official archival records.

From these initiatives of the late 1900s museum professionals can draw on the resources of oral history in the construction of a culturally sensitive understanding of the life history of a museum's source community in relation to class and ethnic formations, gender, youth and family. They can utilize oral history knowledge produced by researchers of the universities mentioned and through creatively designed displays and

¹³ Another insight gained from a dialogue with Patricia Davison in October 2005

¹⁴ Vivian Bickford-Smith et al, 'The Western Cape Oral History Project: the 1990ss' *African Studies* Vol. 60 (1), July 2001, p.9

¹⁵ Paul la Hausse, 'Oral History and South African Historians' *Radical History Review* Vol. 46 (7), 1990, p.350

exhibitions of visual, audio and memorabilia make objects gathered speak to a generation more distanced from life under apartheid than us. This suggestion does not preclude museums to initiate and develop their own dialogical paradigms with source communities in their pursuit of oral history research, like some are doing already anyhow. I suspect however that as the distance of time between past and present increases for people of the Cape of Good Hope and the rest of the country the focus of oral history research and exhibits will shift from its earlier emphasis on a resistance paradigm to people's memory narratives reminiscing about a world that is no more; thus representing history as the making of nostalgia and therapy.

In the Cape of Good Hope this is already manifesting itself in Memory Projects using the methodology of oral history as toolkit to produce knowledge on a past threatened with forgetting. Museum institutions like the District Six and the Robben Island Museums are continuing, in a way, with projects initiated respectively by UCT's Western Cape Oral History Project in the mid 1980s, without reinventing what had already been done, and the UWC's Mayibuye Centre's oral history work from the mid 1990s. At provincial level in the Cape of Good Hope scores of provincial-aided museums are as from this year also embarking on historical memory projects focusing on dialogue with their local communities though coordinated under the banner of the Department of Cultural Affairs and Sport as Oral History Projects.

Developing a 'Sharing Memories' dialogue with Iziko Bo-Kaap Museum¹⁶

Independent of these developments Iziko, as national heritage institution, started a dialogue recently with members of the Bo-Kaap community exploring the possibility of making objects speak through an oral history methodology. The museum, which derives its name from a locality close to the centre of the city of Cape Town on the slopes of the Vlaeberg hill, is but one of Iziko's 15 national museum sites. It is also the only Iziko

¹⁶ I wish to thank Dr Heléne Vollgraaf, Curator of Iziko's Social History Collections, for providing most of the empirical information in this section of the keynote address.

managed house museum located within a living urban community of mainly slave descent.¹⁷

Their part of the city, popularly known from the Dutch colonial period of the 1700s as the *Bo-Kaap*, is a well-known tourist destination associated with the “Malay culture” in respect of its food, crafts and music. At political level however the museum and its environment are ambivalently associated with contested Malay identity issues relating to the city’s apartheid history. As alluded to in the UNESCO sponsored publication *Transformation and Challenge*, based on a study completed in 2001, and to be released in February next year in London, a serious dilemma of this Museum is its contested past and divisions within the faith-based community about its ownership.

Originally, the Bo-Kaap was a residential area for the working class of all races. After the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire in the 1830s, many Cape Town based emancipated slaves moved to this area with its affordable houses. Several mosques were built followed by an influx of Muslims into the Bo-Kaap. For instance, the Muslim population grew from 10% in 1810 to 75% by 1930. Most residents were tenants however, not home owners. And in 1952 under apartheid legislation the Bo-Kaap was proclaimed a residential area only for “Cape Malays”. All non-Muslims had to move elsewhere, including a significant number of adherents to the Christian faith who were classified “coloured” by apartheid legislation. The official apartheid notion of Cape Malay identity corresponding to Muslim identity was propagated by Dr ID Du Plessis, an Afrikaans poet and apartheid ideologue as well as bureaucrat and ethnographer. He was most instrumental in ensuring that the Bo-Kaap be declared a Malay residential enclave within the residential precincts of a whites only central Cape Town. The Muslim Youth Movement and other Cape-based Muslim groups that preferred to be associated with the anti-Apartheid struggle rejected outright Du Plessis’s notion of Malay identity.

Du Plessis was also the driving force behind the establishment of the Bo-Kaap Museum in the late 1970s. The photographs used in the exploratory oral history project referred to in this speech were taken by associates of Du Plessis. Their visual images of Muslim people of the Bo-Kaap were created apparently to validate Du Plessis’s research findings on Cape Malay-ness by showing how Cape Muslims were fulfilling, either as

¹⁷ Gillian Warren-Brown *et al*, *Cape Town uncovered: A People’s City* (Cape Town: Juta & Co, 2005), pp. 102-12

individuals or collectively, their religious duties and performing their stereotypical economic roles. They appear in the images as types of people without names, deprived of their individual identities. Even community leaders such as Imams were referred to as “an imam of the Chiappini Mosque”. Thus, the exotic *other* in Cape Town is a feature of the collection.

Within this context Iziko Museums wish to employ oral history, making visual objects speak by way of mediating in dialogues between photographic images of the forties and fifties and representatives of its Muslim source community of the present. Its *Sharing Memories Oral History Project* is a deliberate attempt to strengthen the Museum’s relationship with the Bo- Kaap community and to uncover through engagement with a dialogical paradigm complex relationships and life histories of individuals. This was done in a peculiar way. In December of last year on the eve of the festive season after Eid, the elderly of the Bo-Kaap were invited to a tea party. At the party the curator, Dr Heléne Vollgraaff, introduced them to the idea of sharing with Iziko and one another their individual memories of acquaintances from the Bo-Kaap appearing on photographs taken in the 1940s and 1950s. The people appearing in the photographs were adults, some of them quite advanced in years, at the time. The informants attending the party were elderly people who had childhood memories of those whom they recognized in the photographs. The interviewer had therefore to be discreetly wary of distortion of historical memory, as the radical historian, Tim Keegan, cautioned in 1988s: ‘human memory is given to error, misconception, elision, distortion, elaboration and downright fabrication’.¹⁸

Part of the methodology followed was to divide participants at the party into five groups, each with its own facilitator. The facilitators consisted of two museum staff members and three volunteers. All three volunteers were young Bo-Kaap residents with an interest in the heritage of their community. Each group was shown copies of the same set of photographs. The individual photographs were numbered to assist the facilitator in making notes. Using different groups to identify the same photographs enabled the researcher to compare findings and thereby to judge the reliability of the information. The exercise resulted in the following preliminary observations:

¹⁸ Cited in Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool, ‘Orality, memory and social history in South Africa’ in S. Nuttal and C. Coeyzee, eds., *Negotiating the Past: The making of memory in South Africa* (Oxford University Press, n.d.), p. 91

- Many participants were able to identify people on the photographs recognizing family members such as uncles, aunts and grandparents;
- Distance in terms of time allowed participants to speak more freely about people, e.g. ‘There have been stories that those two neighbours had an extramarital relationship’; and
- The information obtained seemed to be reliable as the separate groups, with the exception of one, provided the same information in all aspects.

Following from the anecdotal information gathered at the workshop party it is quite evident that much work in developing a dialogical oral history paradigm with the elderly of the Bo-Kaap community still needs to be done before the photographs will realize their full potential as tangible markers of intangible heritage. The photographs and information gathered are but only part of the source material for constructing eventually historical narratives to be put on exhibition at the Museum. Only when this happen the *Sharing Memories* oral history project would truly have made Bo-Kaap museum objects of this special photographic collection speak.

Conclusion

In conclusion my wish for this conference is that the forty or so papers to be presented here in the next few days will inspire many of us to gain much more clarity on the central question of the his conference about the voices inherent in museum objects and the stories they tell for the benefit of present and future generations.