

How to present oral history at a museum exhibition?

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Introduction

Oral History and Ethnology / Anthropology

The method of oral history (according to Louis Starr (Starr; 1996:39) the term “oral history” is actually a misnomer for the process of oral data collection”) had to undergo a long journey before becoming recognized among historians. For an ethnologist/anthropologist, it is hard to understand that the data obtained in a verbal way from informants can be underestimated in relation to those written in the historical documents. In ethnology, the method of obtaining data by verbal questioning (a typical method of an interview) is one of the basic ways of working; besides, a lot of historical documents have been unmasked as forgeries (Donation of Constantine, in Croatia for example documents of Andrija II from 1209 A.D. v. CD III, 95), etc.

The ethnologist's/anthropologist's fieldwork is based on interview methods and usually registered by Dictaphone or camera. Although audio recording has been an innovation of modern times, some ethnologists even nowadays prefer to write down the data obtained from informants, mainly because informants often experience uneasiness while being recorded.

Oral history in museums

A museum is a non-profit making permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, the tangible and intangible evidence of people and their environment (ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums - 2004 Edition, <http://icom.museum/ethics.html>)

In Croatia, making a decision about the policy of keeping the collected transcripts or records of interviews at museums depends on the opinion of a curator or project researcher, or on the policy of a museum; for sure there is no such thing as a center or a place for keeping this kind of data. So, museums, institutions, institutes and university departments usually solve this problem according to their own opinion and on the employers' professional ethics. The Ethnographic museum of Istria, as any other museum in Croatia, collects and uses this kind of documentation. Any research worker would find it useful and very logical to keep the collected data.

In the case of collecting objects, every museum worker tries to obtain as much information as possible about the object, its owner(s), producer(s), place of origin, production techniques. The museum worker documents all data, enters it into the records base of the museum, so it could be used by somebody else.

Museum workers usually consider "the object with a story and a history" (i.e. with data related to it) more intriguing than the object without such additional information. This doesn't imply the most beautiful or the most precious objects; they are just objects with stories that make the information transfer to a visitor much easier.

Of course, objects without any "story" are also used at exhibitions. In this case the museum ethnologist mainly gets data through interviews with informants, describing the way the object was used, some interesting stories, proverbs, sayings or anything else connected to the object... All this data collected in a direct or indirect way enable the exhibited object to communicate with visitors.

In my opinion, the basic difference between principles of collecting data by oral history methodology and an ethnologist's work is that the ethnologist tries to focus the conversation with the informant, mostly on the topic interesting to his/hers project or research. By the method of oral history data is collected also for documentation purposes i.e. future researches. Although in both cases certain selection process are made, I think it is more emphasized in the work of the ethnologist/anthropologist, because he/she is eager to inquire into the interesting topic. The most interesting data is often obtained during the interview when informants "digress from the topic"; so besides the data on the topic ethnologists are interested in they often collect a lot of information on some other topics. Transcripts of conversations/interviews, as well as the recorded tapes are mainly kept for some future investigations/researches or future projects.

Results obtained by the ethnologist/anthropologist working in museums on the basis of interviews, observations and research work on other written sources can be published in an article or a book. But the most frequent way of expressing the museum ethnologist's work is an exhibition or the permanent exhibition.

“Weavers in Istria”

or how data collected by the interview method/oral history method have been used for making an exhibition

In 2001 the Ethnographic museum of Istria started the project on researching textile handicraft in Istria.

D.Sc. Tihana Petrovic Leš from the Ethnology Department at the Faculty of Arts in Zagreb started the project of researching the textile handicraft in Croatia. The

Ethnographic museum of Istria accepted the part of this project in its part considering Istria quite willingly and continued with systematic work on this topic. This is the background for starting the longtime project including, of course, data collecting by the method of oral history, or what is more usual term in our profession, by the method of an interview.

To make an interview with weavers we had to “find” them in the first place. Shortly after the World War II the weaving handcraft in Istria faded away, and it became obvious it wouldn't be possible to interview no one of the so called “last weavers” in the near future.

For the purposes of “finding” weavers we used the book of inventories with entries about sellers. It happened that one of the weavers, the very same man who in 1964 sold the loom to the museum, lived not far from the town of Pazin and it was no problem to contact him. After first contact, he was interviewed many times. Luckily, during the research I had the opportunity to interview more than few hale and hearty weavers (males, with no exceptions). They all told me that there were no trained masters to continue this handcraft. When weaving became unprofitable and unnecessary, male weavers ceased practicing their handcraft and switched to some other industrial activities – mining, textile industry, knitting industry etc. ...

Data obtained from weavers were compared and combined with information given by other people that witnessed the activities of the weaver. Of course, certain kinds of information can be provided only by the weaver.... And so, listening to them, to members of their family or neighbors, our knowledge about the method of weaving and weavers and their place in society was becoming deeper and deeper.

Weavers were not able to explain why weaving in Istria was an exclusively male job (if we neglect some extraordinary situations like men absence for a war reasons, when a woman, usually the one experienced through helping the weaver, was obliged to finish the work) as distinguished from other Croatian regions where weavers were women (excepting some regions along the border with Slovenia, where, men also did the weaving). (Male) weavers in Istria find female weavers extremely unusual. One of the interviewed weavers gave me very interesting explanation why was it “natural the weaving work was done by men”. He explained that in the past time women used to be pregnant more frequently than nowadays and in their condition it would be very hard and dangerous for them to work in a bent position, beating the weft towards belly!” In this particular case the data obtained by oral history was combined with those found in record offices, testaments, notary books and other documents about frequent permanent or provisional migrations and settlement of weavers from Carnia and Friuli in Istrian regions; in this way the phenomena of male weavers got more clearer context.

Some interviews have been filmed by video-camera. Not all informants cooperated willingly, not all of them were “good” informants (the term used for informant presenting events or objects of our interest very well), but anyway, step by step, out of the conversations and interviews their story started to reveal...

It should always been taken into consideration that elderly people are not always ready for filming, that they may be afraid or shy ... which brings us to the problem of the anonymity of the source. That is to say, if you want to use anything from the recorded material you can do it only with the permission of the source... This problem in Croatia has not been legally regulated, but people usually are willing to

take part in museum projects. The majority of people do not hesitate to cooperate, because they find museum activities and exhibitions valid, and something they can identify with.

So, life stories of the weavers, their knowledge and memories became the skeleton of the exhibition, enabling objects to talk ...

How were the memories and experience transformed into the exhibition?

I believe the majority of elusiveness about weaving and all preparation phases have been recorded during filming the process of making the loom, the heddles and the process of weaving. And this is how it happened: knowledge, a flow of information given by spoken words got a new, visual dimension. (I am sure) we succeeded to transfer narration and description in something totally visible and clear (because weaving is a complex skill not necessarily understandable to everybody). So, the film became an integral part of the exhibition. It was displayed nearby the loom, designing frame, weaver's box, to help the visitor to compare with these old devices and see how they were used. This museum "weaving workshop" was accompanied by the sound of the working loom, providing the visitor with extra information and experience.

Photo No. 1



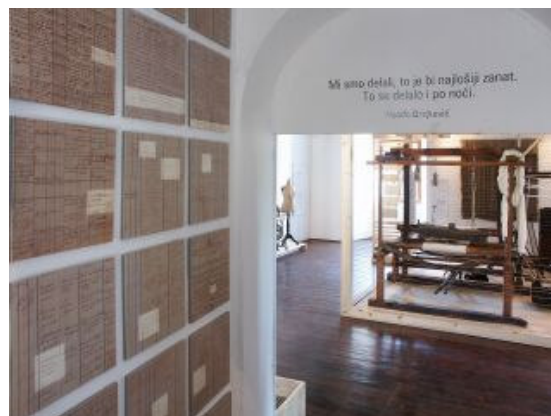
Photo No. 2



To present conversations with weavers at the exhibition no film was used. Their life stories were shown in a different way, by a little bit cheaper museum means ... photos, prints etc.

Their statements which I found essential and important were written down and stacked on the wall or a part of the exhibit, to talk about objects or photos...

Photo No. 3



Data on processes of preparations for weaving, such as sowing, pulling out, braking, combing etc. were put into context by objects used in these processes, by photos and other means of presentation.

Photo No. 4



During the fieldwork about weavers in Istria I interviewed informants (mainly elder one) about topics that were very high at the scale of my priorities. Nevertheless, sometimes during the interviews one topic followed the other turning into a pleasant chat. But, doing the transcribing of the recorded material I noticed some stories from their past were quite long. Informants were very comfortable talking about events from their childhood, about old fashioned styles of doing up one's hair, or telling some anecdotes or maybe a gossiping about neighbors. And researching the ways of weaving in Istria I learned much more. Of course I didn't "use" all this information in articles or for the exhibition, but filed it in a form of transcription or tape, in my office. I hope to use it as the source of data in some future projects.

Conclusion

And of course, the answer to the question from the title of this year' s ICME conference is with no doubt YES, by the method of oral history we got the object talking much more in many different ways. The performance depends on the ingenuity of the author, on imagination of the designer, and finally, on the funds available. Side by side with literature and the researcher's observation, verbal contacts (as a part of oral history method) are the basis on which the ethnologist working in a museum prepares exhibitions or texts.

Probably the best application of oral history is found in documentary films; they can be incorporated in exhibitions or be shown independently on TV ...

In Croatia there should be established a kind of center for keeping transcripts or original audio records where they will be kept in the adequate way and at available to the public. The other solution would be to regulate the ways and standards of keeping this kind of data within every institution that is collecting verbal data. Until then, this will be on the single institution to find the best way.