

"My voice in a glass box":

Objectifying processes in collecting practices at the National Museum of World Culture in Sweden

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In the fall 2001, I submitted a proposal to re-interpret the Abyssinian collection of the National Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg (NMWC), with a contextualization to be implemented in collaboration with consultants who migrated to Sweden from the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia). This collaborative exhibition project, partly funded by the Equal program of the European Social Fund, took place at the museum from April 2003 to December 2004. Twenty-four Göteborgians originating from the Horn of Africa were invited to document the collection through oral history. During these eighteen months various methodological issues around the traditional museum praxis arose, casting doubts over working culture's certainties.

For instance, a function inherent to the Museum's curriculum, its duty to collect material and ensure preservation and safeguarding was highly questioned if not criticized. During a working session one of the consultants declared: «It feels like it was not enough with the objects and now museums need people in their storage too, and they turn them into objects». This remark sounded like an echo of Michael Ames' statement when more than a decade earlier he wrote in his introduction to *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes, the Anthropology of Museums* that «Museums are cannibalistics in appropriating other peoples' material for their own study and interpretation and they confine their

representations to glass box display cases». Both cannibalistic appropriation and feeling of being objectified refer to the relation that museums established with the material collected in collaborative exhibition projects and raised issues encompassed in the protection of intellectual property of museum informants.

As a matter of fact, the main data and material, to be on display in the exhibition, took the form of «individual projects». Being the core of the contextualization of the collection, these productions have generated discussions about protection of the rights of the material, status of the informants and recognition of their expertise. Lack of transparency, equity and authority expressed as such brought about processes of reification and questioned obligations and responsibilities of the museum towards intellectual property. How can museological practices lead to the feeling of objectification by challenging institution transparency, sense of equity, and exert of authority? What innovative perspectives can emerge from the difficulties linked to the implementations of oral history projects? What are the needs in terms of working methods or tools to prevent such pitfalls? And therefore, can intellectual property contribute to the reinvention of museum praxis?

IS THE GLASS BOX REALLY TRANSPARENT?

The metaphor of the «voice in a glass box» refers to the capture of personal experiences from source communities, in this case the experiences of displacement and discrimination of the Horn community in Gothenburg, and to have them displayed in exhibition such as «Voices from the Horn of Africa» and, moreover, in the National Museum of World Culture which is known (at least in Sweden) for its famous large glass cube architecture. Such projects bring together museum professionals, and consultants from communities who by definition are aliens to the routines of the institution. What are the necessary tools for the Museum to provide transparency in their practices, build up trust and allow dialogue to take place?

As a matter of fact, the consultants' perception of museums of this kind is generally quite negative. The complex history of collecting is associated to looting and museums of ethnography bear the image of institutions that deprive people from their cultural heritage. Therefore the NMWC suffered from a lack of trust in its relation to the consultants. This image of a cannibalistic museum pervaded all relations and very early in the process the consultants manifested their worries about the future of the material

they were going to deliver to the museum. Long debates about the safety of the museum storage reflected these worries. The lack of trust in the institution's capacity to provide safety and prevent misuse of the material was increased by an atmosphere of suspicion towards the staff's agenda and consequently the institution's authority. All these concerns expressed a demand for more communication, openness and transparency on the Museum activities.

The fears were related to questions of safeguarding of the material for the future, conditions of use outside of the museum, but also its use by the museum staff itself. Because of the quite personal nature of the experiences to be shared, some consultants demanded further use of their project to be restricted by the museum. It became important to make sure that they would be consulted in the future so that they could decide upon the arena in which the project could be showed. Most of these projects were videos showing the consultants and members of their family, while very personal stories about family matters were dealt with. As the museum claimed all rights to the material, the consultants were rather reluctant for the museum to make use of their production for marketing purposes. For instance, some consultants decided that their project could be shown in the exhibition only during the two year period. All future use should further be submitted to their agreement. They kept all the raw material and only delivered the final product to the museum.

The impossibility for the consultants to anticipate on the ways their material could be used by the institution justified these restrictions and expressed an urgent need for a formal code and sui generis measures regulating the circulation of such productions.

IS THE GLASS BOX REALLY SQUARE?

The oral history project had a double perspective, first a museological one, namely the contextualization of the collection, and second a social one, which had been added to the proposal, addressing issues as unemployment and discrimination on the job market. As a result of this double perspective, the project required that the consultants spend eighteen months in the museum on a full time basis. Did this configuration provide all the conditions for equity between the museum staff and the consultants? What adaptation will have favor equilateral relations in the museum?

If the project aimed at fighting against discrimination and exclusion in the society, the socio-cultural barriers were not abolished but instead reinforced by the artificial

proximity created by the project. The lack of relationships between people with different backgrounds outside the museum was reproduced identically inside. As a matter of fact the consultants were confronted with the intellectual horizon of the employees and the museum appeared to be a microcosm of the Swedish society. The lack of relations on a personal level between the staff and the consultants contrasted with the insistent demand and expectations on the sharing of intimate and personal experiences of displacement and discrimination. The distance put up by the staff on a personal level also generated this feeling of reification on the professional level and the consultants felt “ethnologized” and not existing apart from their «voices» to be captured for the glass box

This unwelcoming if not hostile environment created quite a strong reluctance to the record of personal experiences. Longterm productions such as the individual projects enhanced the need for a stronger definition and recognition of the role of the consultants by the institution and for specific status to be set up. The museum policy has not been able to adapt to the requirements of this new situation. Although the presence of the community consultants at the museum on a full time basis during eighteen months was planned, the museum team didn't anticipate the need for a specific status and a definite identity in the museum working environment. Being an “unemployed-Göteborgian-with-an-African-Horn-background” was not sufficient to characterise their role and contributions to the exhibition. For instance, the term participants was preferred to terms such as collaborators or consultants, while their co-workers in the museum staff were called supervisors. This semantic itself refers more to a hierarchical relation that contradicts the aim of empowerment and the ideal of equity.

The feeling of being objectified was then initiated by the social climate in the museum on one hand and reinforced by the lack of definite status for the consultants on the other hand. Equity being an issue in a project named “Equal” is quite ironical. It does bring a certain reality to our attention. That even if the museum policy claimed to promote spontaneous encounters, Such projects are set up because equity doesn't happen spontaneously in society and as we painfully discovered in this project, not even in institutions such as museums. The inclusion of other forms of knowledge and expertise requires official recognition, and here again there is the expression of a strong demand for the inclusion of intellectual property prospectives in such agenda.

IS THE GLASS BOX REALLY MINE?

The relation between cultural institutions and intellectual property is analyzed in a specific case connecting a museum of ethnography with non-western collections and the implementation of an oral history project with consultants with an immigrant background. Source of migration being generally linked to former colonial relations, the historical legacy of these institutions plays an important role. As recalled by Clifford, community consultants are usually «people whose contact history with museum has been one of exclusion and condescension». If oral history projects aimed at conquering new audiences, having to fight for regulation of the future use of their contribution and recognition of their statute didn't bring feelings of appropriation of the institution but instead favored detachment. Reinvention of relations called for the establishment of contracts to protect the rights of the producers towards their production. But the contracts raised the question of authority. Who were the producers? Who exerted control on these individual projects?

The «individual projects» were initiated to give each consultant the leadership on the production of their contribution to the exhibition and allow them also to decide upon the degree of personal implication and privacy to reveal. The projects was co-financed by both Exhibition budget and Equal budget and produced with assistance from the museum staff. While the Museum's intention by establishing the contracts was to formalize the funding of each individual project, the consultants intended to have their expertise recognized. On one hand the project coordinator claimed ownership by the museum of the project because the institution was financing the production. On the other hand the consultants claimed their authority on their personal experiences of displacement and discrimination.

The necessity for some of the consultants to engage in long and tense negotiations with the institution reveals this strong need for regulation of intellectual property in such cases. Ownership of products may be formally codified. An international code recognizing the authority of community consultants on their contribution would help the development of collaborative exhibits and would represent an important step in the attempt to establish a reciprocal relationship with community consultants.

CONCLUSION

Therefore the introduction of new paradigms aiming at self-representation develops a need to set forth standards and requires a formal codification to protect intellectual property. Going from personal experience recordings to these individual projects indicates the large scope of type of collaborations possible in oral history projects. If museums aim at changing the nature of the relationship with source community they have to be prepared to real partnerships going beyond sharing of knowledge and advice. Statutes of authors or consultants can become necessary to qualify these contributions. The recognition of creativeness through a specific code would then give impetus to these emerging practices breaking the one-way relationship pattern as much as it will provide a sense of equity between museum staff and their community collaborators.

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