

Knowledge and Artifacts – People and Objects, on Cultural Traditions and Researched Based Collecting

By

Dr. Tom G. Svensson
Ethnographic Museum, Oslo, Norway
t.g.svensson@ukm.uio.no

Paper presented at the conference *Cultural Traditions in Danger of Disappearing in Contemporary Society - A Challenge for Museums*
Sibiu, Romania. September 26-30, 2003

Introduction

Ethnographic museums have a special mission in handling cultural traditions, mainly because of their broad approach to the perspective of culture often based on comparison. In different ways Ethnographic museums reflect the discipline of Anthropology, not only in terms of diverse material manifestations but also in connection to knowledge and traditions. **Artifacts** are essential to any museum, on the other hand objects do not speak for themselves. There is, in my view, a clear connection between artifacts and **knowledge**, and they are equally important. The knowledge we are talking about derive primarily from people, the indigenous voice if you wish, based on the researcher's first hand observations. It is impossible to contextualize objects in a satisfactory way unless one combines **objects** and **words**; which, according to Julie Cruikshank (1992), points to **physical manifestations of ideas** paired with **linguistic expression of ideas**.

Only then is it possible to view objects in different cultural settings, i.e. contextualizing the objects.



Museums have recently been referred to as **knowledge-making institutions** (Pat Erikson, 2002). The collection of artifacts once obtained and the knowledge attached to them gathered through research processes produce new knowledge and insight. Ethnographic museums have a special obligation getting engaged in such knowledge-generating processes. This is part of the challenge Ethnographic museums are facing today, in particular as the traditional knowledge related to various objects rapidly disappear when people managing traditional knowledge, frequently called elders, pass away. This is the reason why elders' oral history generally is so crucial as it helps to bring artifacts to life. Oral history reveals memory and perception, essential aspects in adding culture-specific **meaning** to the objects.

All peoples, or cultures, have traditions/customs which serve as guiding elements for commonly accepted conduct. Consequently, **tradition** can be viewed as a native category, as the Nisga'a says "we are strong in our traditions", at the same time it is an analytic construct. It should, however, be stressed that there is nothing static, conservative about traditions, they are dynamic and in constant flux, repeated, but also modified over time, meeting new conditions. So if cultural traditions presently are in danger of disappearing this statement may be somewhat rephrased; cultural traditions of certain age should be rescued before they disappear; parallel with this activity recreated, partly modified, old traditions ought to be continuously recorded. We are not so interested in dying traditions, and some traditions will eventually disappear, what concerns us are traditions which live in peoples' memory and are constantly practiced in everyday life. We should focus on continuity and change of cultural traditions, a most urgent objective for Ethnographic museums.

The issue of traditional knowledge needs to be problematized further. Recording such knowledge is not always simple and unproblematic. According to both research ethics among anthropologists and museums ethics generally (referring to the ICOM code of ethics for museums, 2002) we have to take the question "who owns the knowledge" seriously. Not all knowledge, which certainly would be of interest to Ethnographic museums, is accessible and consequently justifiable to collect. Some tribal knowledge is highly secret and should not be shared by external interest parties. Among many First Nations people on the Northwest Coast, BC, such secret knowledge is guarded and shared only with select family members, knowledge which is transmitted orally to particular heirs, inheritable Chiefs/Matriarchs, who are considered worthy in retaining the knowledge. Other kinds of knowledge, equally traditional without being secret, can be recorded, not infrequently governed by the precondition of mutual understanding and respect between a museum collecting the

knowledge/cultural tradition and the community from which it emerges.

Newly established native/tribal museums can meet this challenge of ownership of knowledge. These museums are **reflexive institutions**, they are on their own home ground (Ira Jacknis, 2002) and give primarily one culture's view of itself to itself, only secondarily conveying a message to the outside world. **The Makah Cultural and Research Center**, Washington State and **U'mista Cultural Center**, Kwakiutl, BC are two well functioning examples of such institutions. The two Sámi museums/cultural centers - **Ájtte** in Jokkmokk and **Árran** in Tysfjord - are recent establishments serving the same purpose. Increasing collaboration with ordinary mainstream museums is another factor in this development of the "indigenous voice" to be listened to and regarded in various spheres of museum activities, not only in terms of presentation by means of exhibits, but considering diverse activities characteristic for museums, not the least including collecting, and the critical issue of repatriation.

Knowledge and tradition should, moreover, be viewed as process, constantly changeable, non-static, but with striking connections to something primordial, rooted, which, furthermore, has to do with activation of memory. Emphasizing the processual perspective, part of the dynamic also relates to political strategy and action, indicating in part what is called "the politics of difference", in part "the politics of recognition".

The meaning of traditional, locally anchored culture-specific knowledge is, for example, to lay stress upon and show difference, people's own distinctiveness, that which makes them unique in the world. This is vital for the internal discourse, it is, however, of decisive significance also in diverse arenas for cross-cultural interactions. To be meaningful such distinctiveness, ethnically defined, requires recognition from the outside, only then can ethno-political results necessary for cultural viability be attained, a most decisive issue for very many indigenous minority groups. Management of knowledge in this perspective emphasizes the political aspect, it is a kind of ideology, which is quite common among many indigenous peoples at present. And Native museums are instrumental in pursuing such endeavour. These museums often play a crucial role in cultural political actions, they function as efficient supplements to ordinary Ethnographic museums, which continuous existence ought not to be questioned.

In the following I will discuss further the interrelationship between knowledge and objects with empirical examples from own research among three different Sub-Arctic peoples: the **Sámi** in Fennoscandia, which will be presented in greater detail, briefly supplemented by the cases from the **Nisga'a** in BC, Canada and the **Ainu** in Hokkaido, Japan. The account will then end with some general comments on researched based collecting.

Knowledge and objects

What kind of knowledge can be perceived through objects, artifacts? As already stated, museums are especially qualified to answer such a question. In the recent book "Museums and Memory" (Susan Crane ed., 2000) the pertinent question is raised; "in what way do museums contribute with specific information concerning knowledge or traditions?" In other words, what processes can be identified in which museums provide objects with meaning. Museums are far more than cultural institutions with an explicit obligation to collect, store, preserve and display accumulated artifacts; in Crane's words they are places for ongoing interaction between personal and collective identities, between memory and history, and between information and the production of knowledge, the latter process more or less never ending, as I see it. (This point may become more clear later on with concrete case material)

Moreover, objects serve as material signs - memorial documents which gives meaning. Memory is created in a process focusing on **representation** and **communication**, which points both to which documents are used and to how they are used to bring about shared experience and knowledge.

One type of objects are those that build bridges between craftwork and art, items manufactured for practical use on the one hand, and objects exclusively made for aesthetical value and appreciation on the other. In North America, Indian craftwork was quite early placed in the category of "fine art". An exhibition in New York in 1931 propagated for the thesis "Indian art was art, not ethnology", which was sensational at the time not the least considering the way it was marketed as "the first truly American art exhibition" (Mullen, 2002).

This brings us to the conception of **duodje** in the Sámi culture. Duodje represents a specific design of high quality based on great skill in craftwork. The objects produced are based on diverse natural material - wood, birch roots, reindeer antler, reindeer hides, but even some prefabricated materials, such as textile and tin threads, which together makes up the original Sámi scale of materials used for traditional craft production. All objects made are distinct representations of traditional Sámi way of life, even if the objects have gone through an appreciable transformation as a result of modern life conditions. Duodje is well anchored in social traditions and closely attached to fields of knowledge based on experience. Lately duodje has, moreover, been developed into an academic discipline; two Sámi women have already completed their Dr degrees in duodje, emerging as a Sámi-specific discipline supplementary to the conventional Western History of Art (University of Tromsø). We can regard this academic involvement as parallel to the establishment of indigenous museums, and for sake of information the two dissertations are titled: "South Sámi ornamentation" (M. Dunfjeld, 2001), and "Duodje. Handicraft as visual experience of an indigenous people" (G. Guttorm, 2003).

Duodje is a collective term, what we call an emic term, for the æstetical practice within the Sámi culture; among the active practitioners it presumes adequate knowledge of skill as well as of cultural familiarity. In other words, it is necessary to possess enough talent pointing to the æstetic expression and extensive insight of basic frameworks for action and thought structure related to the Sámi culture. The knowledge we are talking about is to a large extent non-written, silent knowledge, which is the very foundation for a special cultural competence concerning practitioners of duodje on full-time or on part-time basis.

For those active in duodje it is essential to be able to interpret, or read, different signs in nature, in the landscape. Such know-how is required when looking for and selecting the material, the very foundation on which a successful career as craftworker/handicrafter, eventually artist, rests, appropriately translating and encompassing the concept duodje. My concrete case derives from Sámi basketry, a craft tradition based on birch roots named **taí'vé**, or **taí'vé duodje**.

I have been preoccupied with this subject matter for about 30 years, starting in 1972. In this study I chose to focus on one particular family group, "Asa Kitok and her daughters", who at the time was noticeably active and a driving force when it came to both revival and innovation within this manifestation of Sámi material culture. In this manner I was also able to capture and record the flow of knowledge connected to this activity. An apparent interconnection between practice on one side and knowledge on the other could be discerned. To collect roots is founded both on long time experience and of knowledge about the landscape; in what kind of grounds is the most suitable raw material for craft manufacturing found. Furthermore, seasonal variations may be decisive, which roots, for instance, are appropriate to collect when the birch trees are in sap, which should be taken later on in the year, etc.? Preparing and assorting the root materials are also important work tasks, as well as the way in which they are stored before being used. Finally, the craft production with its specific, greatly varying, coiled techniques, represents an essential piece of knowledge. This multitudinous knowledge is obtained through own practice, but also by means of listening and observing those who are experienced. By far the best way of acquiring knowledge is to join an experienced handicrafter and learn how to read the landscape in order to gather roots of optimal quality appropriate for duodje production, in addition to this also learn how to prepare the newly collected material. The latter are situations where work is combined with talking, exchange of traditional knowledge and memories as well as thoughts about new ideas, bold innovations. Here ideas flow in a natural setting, either out in the landscape around the coffee fire, or at home in the kitchen.

The process of development uncovered regarding this special craft tradition can be summed up in three stages: 1) **craftwork of utility items**; followed by 2) **handicraft** proper, i.e. refinement and beautification of items of same or similar shape but with new, usually non-practical functions; and, finally, 3) **art**, creative refinement towards pure æsthetics. All three phases are reflections of Sámi culture, all are included in the concept duodje.

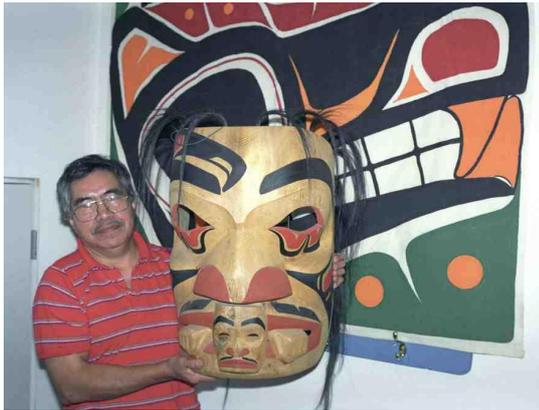
As I said, I started in 1972 when Asa Kitok was approaching the age of 80. Therefore I saw this as an urgent task, she was still active but was soon to retire. Her extensive knowledge and experience were orally sustained, as she was completely illiterate. Her two active daughters were well established handicraft manufacturers, consequently the timing for research was most appropriate. I was more interested in the everyday life situation of these people and the way it was reflected in narratives than the specific objects they produced. Undoubtedly knowledge about the specific artifacts was enriched based on the fairly long term fieldwork I conducted. In 1985 a book was published on this limited subject, which aim was to shed light on one specific expression of Sámi material culture, and the story could end there. While doing the research I also collected two items to the museum, now shown in the permanent exhibition on Circumpolar Cultures. The year after publishing the monograph Asa Kitok passed away, age 93 but clear in her head to the end. Her versatile and rich knowledge had been preserved and made available to Sámi and non-Sámi readers through this focused study.

I could not leave the topic entirely, however, and over the years I have been in recurring contacts with the daughters and their families. Last December I went to Jokkmokk to order a new highly innovative item for our museum, a "mini kisa", made by one of the daughters, **Ellen Kitok**. The daughters are now both well over 70 so the time was ripe to continue collecting, also recording more knowledge. Last week I went back to Jokkmokk to bring the newly made object to the museum and for recording of additional, relevant knowledge. A fourth generation of active basketry makers within the same family is now about to evolve, a grandchild of one of Asa Kitok's daughters. This means on my part that the last word may not be said yet concerning this particular research topic.

Back to the object collected (see ill. 1) This "mini kisa" (kisa, an oval chest originally made of wood to store valuables in the tent and during migrations, ill. 2) mirrors a Sámi way of life, partly due to its shape, partly from materials and techniques applied. The wooden kisa has served as a means of inspiration in designing the same shape in birch root basketry, either full size or, as in this case, on minimal scale. It is an example of most advanced Sámi specific æsthetics, at the same time it has a clearly practical function. Even if this object is recently made it is loaded with information about cultural traditions, which can only be adequately collected and secured through fieldwork - observing, recording and interpreting people's narratives related to the object. Thereby the object can talk, it conveys a culture-specific message. And



since the Sámi way of life has changed so much, adapting to modernity, it is quite natural that Sámi craftwork has changed and will continue to change meeting new, more challenging, demands, especially in terms of artistic refinements.



Before finishing the empirical section let me briefly mention two more examples. In doing fieldwork among the Nisga'a, BC focusing on customary law discourse referring to indigenous peoples comparatively, I collected to the museum one transformation mask made by the local artist **Alver Tait**. He had made the mask for himself and used it in various ceremonies, potlatches, etc., for about ten years. Now he had completed his status transformation, moving from ordinary fisherman to a full-time artist in carving, therefore he did not need the mask anylonger. His ordinary life situation and his present role as a Nisga'a master carver was important to record. His knowledge, orally maintained, referring to carving traditions as well as ceremonial practice, in which latter occasions knowledge about custom and customary law was orally transmitted, give informative strength to the object (ill. 3).

My second case emanates from fieldwork among the Ainu in Hokkaido, primarily dealing with issues of indigenous rights. **Sanea Ogawa** is the leading bearer of knowledge concerning Ainu textile traditions, in particular referring to Ainu styled embroidery. She is also ethnopolitically active, and highly committed when it comes to reviving and strengthening the Ainu language. She was taught and inspired by her grandmother, she now has developed her own studio in Sapporo, where several young Ainu women are employed, including her own daughter. Her life situation, the knowledge she possesses, and her commitment regarding the Ainu movement generally, enriches the knowledge of the objects she produces as original, traditional, as well as innovative, pieces of art (ill. 4).

In the same fashion as the Sámi basketry case, this example when it comes to sustaining and developing Ainu embroidery is very much a family affair. Sanea Ogawa learnt from her mother but is especially inspired by her grandmother, **Upopoan**. Each family has its own distinct patterns of ornament, knowledge which is handed down within the family. It took several years to learn all decorative patterns, and it is stressed that a mother should leave behind to her daughters the same number of patterns as she once obtained.

Currently it is important to use diverse patterns to preserve the treasure this bulk of ornamental patterns represents, otherwise it may disappear. Besides learning within one's own family, quite a few things/ideas can be picked up and learnt from museum collections. Consequently, Sanea Ogawa frequently visits museums to carry out in-depth studies, at the same time she is a handicrafter who delivers her finished products to museums. The case of Ogawa reminds us of the active program developed at ASTRA, Sibiu.



In attaining the body of knowledge I am arguing for, we may thus move from the usual anonymity of our informants to personal identification. This is only fair to the people who provide the indispensable knowledge, and, no doubt, in that way it will appear more authentic and possibly richer.

Concluding remarks

In discussing museum's role in saving cultural traditions, which are at the risk of disappearing, I have underscored the aspect of **knowledge** in relation to specific objects. Objects collected should not only be described in great detail, based on material used and technique, which is obvious; far more important, in my view, is the broader knowledge about the relevant cultural setting, which mainly can derive from people, either recording by means of observing people in their activities, or by talking to them bringing to life their memorial culture. In other words, collecting of knowledge, broadly defined, is equally significant for museums as the collection of artifacts. With such ambition, fieldwork, i.e. collecting in situ, is absolutely obligatory. And this is what I mean by researched based collecting.

Let me illustrate this point by referring to the recently formulated collecting policy at the Department of Anthropology at the University Museum of Cultural History in Oslo. First of all it ought to be a close connection between collecting policy and research policy. As much as possible collecting should be associated with research activity in relation to region and to thematics. Already existing strong collections should also be expanded showing continuity and change, at the same time thematic emphasis in research could lead to filling important gaps in the museum's collections. Pedagogical potential will always be kept in mind, and the scientific nature of the collections is equally stressed. In this document we state explicitly

that collecting is a matter of choice, deciding what should be collected at any given time, therefore, is an active process. Finally, collecting of artifacts is always related to collecting of knowledge.

This in itself is not so particularly new, but it must be repeated time and again, since the knowledge, or cultural tradition, which preoccupies our museum mind right now, derives mainly from people in their local milieu.

Franz Boas, a real pioneer in this sense, stated more than 100 years ago that "ethnographica should not primarily be collected with the purpose of making beautiful exhibitions. The artifacts are first hand material for ethnographic studies of peoples and customs." My plea is let's follow Franz Boas.

In collecting I believe **quality** surpasses quantity; it is not so much a question of numbers, how many artifacts, but a selection of objects loaded with substantial knowledge. And quality falls back on knowledge, which means the closer we get to the original setting when collecting, the more thorough and relevant knowledge can be obtained.

Finally, as tradition and knowledge become instrumental in the ongoing struggle for cultural survival of many indigenous peoples, we can point to the metaphor "the storage box of tradition", referring to many Northwest Coast Nations. To them the storage box, mainly for food, is a most traditional object; now in a rhetorical, symbolic sense their revived and reactualized traditions are placed in the same box. In a similar way the "mini kisa" by Ellen Kitok (2003) is also a "box of traditions"; you can read as a text the entire spectre of specific Sámi basketry techniques in one single object, they are all there, traditional as well as innovative ones. There are five techniques applied to this fairly small object, measuring 13,5 cm in breadth and 10.0 cm in height. It should also be underscored that basketry among the Sámi is exclusively made in coiled technique. From bottom of the kisa to top of the cover we find interchangeably appearing:

- 1) checkered pattern
- 2) knotted pattern
- 3) extra tight coiling, so called Sámi nettle
- 4) *sáiro* (technique known by many cultures and used by the Sámi ever since they began their basketry craft some time in the 1600's
- 5) double zigzag pattern, an innovation not used by older generations but since many years established as a Sámi specific pattern

It should also be pointed out that the cover has a salient, domed-shaped form precisely as the cover on the large wooden kisa (ill. 1).

Let me add a final remark concerning this newly collected mini kisa. The item from which I ordered the object claimed by the hand crafter Ellen Kitok to have all Sámi techniques brought together in one single object, which is not especially common. Looking closer at the object I discovered that one original technique was missing, *sáiro*, probably the one the Sámi first made use of. This technique had been dormant for some time as it was considered less suitable in refined handicraft, art. On my suggestion *sáiro* is now included, and the object as a silent text about Sámi basketry is now complete. From now on the proposed addition will appear also in other refined objects as a result of a spontaneous dialogue between hand crafter and researcher. Thereby my general argument, emphasizing the dynamics relating to objects and knowledge, is further supported empirically.

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