Multicultural Documenting of Brazilian religious material

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1. Helinä Rautavaara Ethnographic Museum

My starting point for discussing museum documentation is a small ethnographic museum in Espoo, in the capital area of Helsinki. The museum consists of a collection with mostly 20th century material with a strong bias in Africa and Brazil. Besides museum objects, the collections consists of photographic and audiovisual material from these fields. When opened in 1998 it was the only ethnographic museum in Finland.

The eight functioning years of the museum have been contesting what could be called a paradigmatic idea of ethnographic museums. The museum first has been trying to establish itself as a Multicultural center, a meeting point or a "museological laboratory" where the carriers of the traditions whose material is exposed participate in the construction of exhibitions. Because of the haste that the museum project took in its realization, the permanent exhibition became the core product, which was a rather conventional solution. As the museological personnel was appointed only after the museum and the permanent exhibition had been opened, the outcome became most of all an artistic experience, set up by the architect. The multicultural aspect was not forgotten, but it was subservient to other aspects.

End concert of a series of musical and dance workshops, year 2000

I was the other half of the full time personnel, and was appointed as researcher one month after the opening. But before that I had had the opportunity of work as assistant to the collector, Helinä Rautavaara. It had happened in 1995, three years before the death of the collector and three and half years of the museum's opening. Regardless of my position as a curator, my statements in this presentation are not the official opinion of the museum. They are written with a pinch of salt, trying to keep an analytical distance to the museum, and yet in daily practice of a museum profession.

Currently, Helinä Rautavaara Ethnographic Museum has a permanent exhibition and approximately three temporary exhibitions per year. The personnel has grown from a director and one researcher plus four part-time guides into four full time employees plus four trainees and project people plus part-time guides. The accessioning of the objects was made in the level of the whole collection shortly after the opening of the museum, because of the relatively small amount of objects in the collection. At the time, the collection was made up by 2000 pieces of numbered and initially documented museum objects. In addition to that, the collection consisted of a vague amount of non-documented objects plus thousands if not tens of thousands of two-dimensional documents in the archive.

On the basis of my experience as a newly appointed curator in a newly opened museum, gaining the reputation of a professionally curated museum tends to be a process of petrification, citing Henrietta Riegel in the book 'Theorizing Museums'. What could be organic and susceptible to putrification in the collections, is cleaned away. Open climates are substituted with controlled micro-climates. Ways of seeing tend to be more controlled, also. Objects that used to stand in architectonically or artistically pleasing settings are gathered in more concise and more framed groupings. Settings are broken into individual items. They are provided with name tags that make a clear reference to ethnography instead of giving a freedom of choice between art, design, handicraft or ethnography.

In the Handbook of Curatorship three major points are mentioned where identity is fixed to an object: the entering to the museum when an initial accession number is given. Giving a name according to a standardized vocabulary is a crucial stage in converting an object into a museum object. For a cultural historical museum or for a personal history museum the most interesting point is when the relevant context information is included in the permanent record of the object.

2. The collection from Africa, Asia, Middle East and Latin America

The collector, Ms. Helinä Rautavaara was a free-lance journalist with a major in psychology. She became famous in Finland in 1954 - in her mid thirties - after publishing two sets of witty and entertaining travel accounts in a popular weekly magazine. The journals of her hitch-hiking alone across North Africa, Middle East, Ceylon and India rightly brought her the reputation of an adventuress. She continued her academic career, accomplishing extensive field-work in Brazil for a doctorate in Science of religion, but ended up adopting umbanda religion as an initiated priestess. Instead of doctor in Science of Religion she became a traveller, free-lance journalist and a popular educationist. She converted into Rastafarianism and, later, into Baye-Fall mouridism. Her ambitions bear the biggest and most beautiful fruit as documentarist. The last collecting trip, to Tunis, was made one year before the collector's death and the museum's opening. The private, foundation-based museum takes care of and exhibits her collections of artefacts from Africa, Latin America, Asia and Islamic cultures.

Henrietta Riegel writes about what an ethnographic museum does to its objects: It "transforms the participative aspect of ethnographic fieldwork into observation", … where "The anthropologist thus becomes a viewer of another culture, a culture that 'holds still like tableau vivant'", and where …"Participation is converted into observation, classification and order, resulting in a 'petrified relation'." In my opinion, Riegel has hit the point. It has been difficult to keep Ms Rautavaara's field experiences alive and be true to her way of participating and interacting with the field, instead of just exposing the dead objects. Rautavaara herself told: Perhaps I'm different from the other researchers, because I don't investigate, but instead I

participate in the life down there. But during all that, I keep learning - well, haven't we all been given eyes in the head – I learn and I compare and I evolve and I learn more."

Even if a museum would endeavour an exhibition policy where interpretations have not been selected and imposed upon visitors, I of course admit that the documentation and cataloguing process are a necessary endeavour. Strict cataloguing of all the objects is an absolute necessity, and thus, as a result, each object is fixed with one specific identity. But meaningful relations to other objects and the evolving creatures, like human beings, are part of the identity, too. I would argue it's the curatorial personnel's task to find out a solution, how could they be explicit in the documentation system.

3. Documentation

Finnish National Board of Antiquities recently launched new guidelines for self-evaluation, where they gave nice definitions for museological concepts, such as documentation. In the guidelines is reminded that documentation is a broader concept than just catalogue keeping. The other meaning is museum research, which, uses museum's artefacts as research material, but which also uses various other sources than the museum objects. In this presentation 'documentation' is considered to refer to both of these practises.

3.1. Documentation Process

In Helinä Rautavaara Museum the broad aim of the documentation is to reach further, recognizing the aid, which a database catalogue can offer in the caretaking of the collection, and the aid in procedures related to displaying. When joining archival information with the objects and photographs, a travel account of the collector's trips can be generated. It will enable us to find the points of convergence in Helinä Rautavaara's and each item's life history. In a hermeneutical process the aim is to fill in the missing gaps left by incomplete initial documentation. The archival documents offer lively and interesting context information concerning the objects. As the field trips by Ms. Rautavaara became shorter and the background

studies by her changed into "armchair anthropology", more gaps to fill appear also in the catalogue. The information on the objects given by the collector during the last ten years of her life seems to originate from "African Arts", "Aramco World", Encyclopedia Britannica and "Lonely Planet" travel guides and the kind. Se also had an impressive network of researcher and artist friends, whom she did not hesitate to contact and interview, when necessary.

3.2. Cataloguing media: Musketti software

In 2000 it was time to for Helinä Rautavaara museum to go with the flow of the big current of the European Museum Tradition and adapt the museum's documentation system to Dublin core. This was encouraged by the EU funded meetings in Finland around the 'Digital Heritage and Cultural Content' project. I started converting the initial documentation, originally written in 1995-96 in word processing format, into a database, after the museum had bought and installed the programme "Musketti". It is a relational database programme, which is built on a SQL server substrate. The Musketti database programme is menu-driven, it guides the catalogue-keeper (or "musketeer") in his or her thinking process by offering menu selections for minutiae in naming, numbering, material information, fabrication, context (different kinds of) etcetera. The programme is rather comprehensive, it includes also a system to define each item's location in the museum or in the deposit, and some other interconnected data tables.

In our museum's case, practically every piece of information in the old catalogue has to be checked, and thereafter, documented again. The old acquisition information is especially rudimentary, material information is very approximate and the rest of the catalogue compiled during Helinä Rautavaara's lifetime is also incomplete. Most of the time only one employee has been responsible for database cataloguing, among other varying responsibilities. Last autumn the museum hired one person for cataloguing work. The investment in personnel gave as result was 454 new catalogued objects. This spring one person more was hired to speed up the work.

Musketti is also a powerful search engine. Most of the fields serve as targets for search words, but there are spaces for freely formulated text, which do not. To make the programme as searchable as

possible the information is divided into small fields that use authorized terminology. This often results in the impoverishment of the info on broader cultural content.

3.3. Context in Acquisition information

Acquisitions can be filed as one acquisition per several object or it can be added individually to each item's object information. Because of the shortage of personnel in the museum field, many museums only fill the acquisition tables and leave the rest for the future. As I said earlier, acquisition information was very meagre when the documenting in the database started. As it seems, the questions concerning if an item was bought or donated, if it was acquired through middlemen or directly, are quite intimate and politically loaded. Helinä Rautavaara was silent on all the details of acquisitions that would contest her self-image as a collector-cum-field-worker.

This is one example again where the archival documents have been of help for the documentation of objects.

Example: An item from a Brazilian umbanda altar:
Name: Jar (fin: ruukku), entered in the files in 2006.

A jar, a recipient made of clay, could be any of the jars sold on the streets of Salvador da Bahía, during the visit of Helinä Rautavaara there, in the sixties. The text "segunda" on it, however, gives us a hint that it is meant to be given to a yaó on her second "saida" in the initiation process to Candomblé. Perhaps it was given to the collector by her ritual supervisors or assistants. The place of these speculations would be in the context information related to acquisition. But since the exact provenience is not proofed by any archival document, it is not included in the

catalogues in this field. Instead, it could be added in the other field provided for contexts, the general context information.

3.4. Musketti: General context information

General context information is what I interpret background information. In Musketti programme's case, according to the built-in user's manual, context is:

- ideology or current, previous or original owner

- original or primary place of use, means of use

When first the type of context or provenience is chosen from a drop-down menu you can write your statement in the notes field. In the case of the Brazilian jar I would choose:

Context type: religion – Candomblé

Description: In the text field a mini-essay could be written about the importance of recipients, how these kinds of jars are put on a secluded room, *camarinha*, and devoted to special godly entities.

Context type: event – initiation, the second coming out from seclusion.

Description: In this kind of recipients, some of the iniciate's hair, which is cut off during seclusion period, is conserved. According to Helinä Rautavaara's initial documentation, this kind of jars were used in Padé de Exú, which is a separate worship in a longer Candomblé or Umbanda ritual. It's an offering to the entity who helps in the contact between men and the higher godly entities, such as Yemanjá or Omolú.

Time of the context: The reference concerning when and where these kinds of jars are or were used in initiation, would be provided here. Now we have to content ourselves with the decades, 60's and 70's.

Type: culture contact – I'm not sure whether I've understood this right, since the programme manual gives Wailing songs as an example. Constructing an altar at home is a good example of cultural contact between European and Afro-Brazilian cultures.

A jar is not anything of an interesting item without the context information, given when collected or afterwards. Speculation by a Finnish museum researcher can take us deeper in the pillows of an armchair for book-readers. But to bring the culture alive we would need to interview people who live with the tradition that uses these jars, a member of afro-Brazilian religious community. Objects have often contested meanings. A jar can be very sacred or it can be a misused object taken out of its religious environment and converted into a souvenir – this depends on the point of view of the interpreter.

There could be several descriptions of altar-making, at least two, because in the case of a contact there are at least two different points of view. Some Candomblé devotees could say that it is a misuse to have a home altar, alone, without a permanent contact to a specific Candomblé community, a terreiro. Another devotee thinks it's all right.

What about the altar in the permanent exhibition and at H. Rautavaara's home, then? Are the objects on it doomed to be just profane and worldly pieces of clay? Who is allowed to bring them alive?

3.5. Additional information

On some objects Helinä Rautavaara gave background information, and it is saved as context info. But when the data is susceptible, it is saved in a memo field for "bits and pieces". The field is called additional information. It is meant for informing museum's workers about additionaldetails, this field in the database is not going to be searchable for outside users. The value of this information in question is, thus, very restricted.

Rla 17 Ferramenta de Ogum

Photo from exhibition "Gift and obligation"

4. Cultures of documentation

Documentation does not mean fixing a petrified identity, despite a permanent ID field. Especially, a better use of context information can add new layers of meanings to the objects.

The norm in Finnish museology has been the simultaneity of collecting and interviewing. Revisiting the initial collecting information makes a curator feel like walking on a foreign ground. Had Helinä Rautavaara accomplished the cataloguing of her objects before her death, the later museum workers would probably take her documentation as highly respectable knowledge, which should not be touched upon. It would have become more petrified a set of information. But as the things went differently, we are now hoping to reach new informants who can, when interviewed, provide new context information. It would be added to the fields "religion", "cultural setting", or as description of the "place" of the context.

Should not mediators, standing both in a sub-culture's and the museum's camp, work systematically in the documentation process of museum collections, and not only pay visits to exhibition projects? What about adding new layers of interviews, to be taken as "contextual care-taking" of objects?

In many cases interviews with the carries of culture are informal or they happen in the contest of museum outreach programmes – at least this is the case in our museum's case. The memorandums created as outcome, are conserved separately and are often not considered as valid for object documentation. In the best case excerpts from informal interviews are added in the Additional information field. The formulated queries, and questionnaires that resemble formulae used by digital cataloguing, are more likely to end up as part of documentation. The conversion of open interviews and discussions with multiple view-points rises the old questions about cultural relativity.

HRE 417 Lembranca – an example of an item, that would require context information, and an item yielding to controversial interpretations.

Hre 520 Leque (eng. 'fan'; fin ' viuhka')