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Ethnographic Museums and the Challenges of Open Access

Openness and inclusiveness in museums are hallmarks of the developmental direction expected of such institutions as part of their social role and responsibility. In Croatia in particular, these tendencies are welcome, given that until recently many museums were mostly inward-looking. This shift is the result of social democratization and new definitions of museum missions that emphasize sustainability, accessibility, and participation. Museums thus demonstrate and affirm their role in society.

The Covid-19 crisis highlighted (and in part accelerated) this development globally, while digital possibilities provide the technical support that enables direct online connections and the communication of information and data encompassed by the term “open science.”

The principle of open access is also advocated by key global museum associations. NEMO (Network of European Museum Organizations) promotes open access by emphasizing the need for digital engagement and education (NEMO 2023). Likewise, ICOM (International Council of Museums) considers open access a powerful tool for fulfilling the social role of museums, one that fosters connections with audiences and the public while enabling participation and co-creation processes (ICOM 2023). This principle is also reflected in UNESCO policies. The European Commission has likewise expressed its commitment to open access. Moreover, it was one of the criteria in the European Commission’s Horizon Europe 2025 call titled “Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society.” This also applied to the goal called “innovative approaches to intangible cultural heritage for social resilience.”

Ethnographic museums in particular provide significant opportunities for engaging broader audiences through open access. Ethnographic objects especially offer various possibilities for diverse interpretations that lead to new and different understandings. Objects held in museum storage can, in this way, gain visibility through discussions about their meaning, purpose and value: they represent a kind of reservoir of unused possibilities, alternatives, contradictions, and forgotten stories (Kaufmann 2019: 92).

Many ethnographic museums today also engage with intangible cultural heritage, that is, with culture itself. The data collected by such museums provide information on how things are produced and created, as well as on the social and symbolic roles that particular objects and practices once had and still have. They collect stories, songs, dance recordings, descriptions of customs, life stories, and everything else that constitutes intangible cultural heritage. The Ethnographic Museum of

Istria, for example, follows such practices, including through its Centre for Intangible Culture, which functions as its separate unit. In practice, it often happens that other organizations or individuals request access to materials that are the result of field research. The museum, however, has concluded that much of the data contained in such material may compromise the personal privacy of interlocutors, and therefore they take the position that the best solution for protecting interlocutors may be not to share this material at all.

This is an understandable decision, especially if interlocutors did not give written consent during interviews specifying how their statements could be used, for what purposes, and in what context. During particularly sensitive research on a topic belonging to the sphere of “difficult heritage,” there were cases in which interlocutors withdrew previously granted consent. Interestingly, the research also led to unexpected reactions from interlocutors who insisted that the results of their conversations with the researcher, no matter how personal, be shared with a wider audience, so that more people could learn the “truth,” that is, their story. In these cases, as well as in general, written consent is key in deciding the accessibility of the data. However, it is difficult to escape the impression that research results are often protected for various other reasons as well. Within the context of regular museum work, discerning which data collected in the past (when written consent was not yet required) is suitable for sharing and which is not, which data is “hard” and which is “soft” is an enormous task, and in the everyday practice of museums there is often not enough time to undertake it. On the other hand, an essential prerequisite for such work is the consistency of researchers’ criteria. For example, is it overly revealing for an interlocutor when speaking about a life of poverty and scarcity? Or about growing up in a patriarchal family where children were beaten? There are also cases where researchers become exceptionally protective because they are aware that they have developed a close, specific relationship with their interlocutors (which is, of course, always shaped by the personality and characteristics of the researcher), and they feel that the interlocutors’ openness obliges them to safeguard the data collected during the conversations.

Olga Orlić provides us with an excellent analysis of the issues surrounding open access, while also sharing certain guidelines and procedures for approaching this topic in the context of anthropological research. And yet, our reality remains marked by many dilemmas that give rise to somewhat contradictory situations we encounter. One such situation was produced by the mentioned call of the European Commission within Horizon Europe 2025 under the title “Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society”, specifically the goal “innovative approaches to intangible cultural heritage for social resilience.” It emphasizes the imperative of open science and open access, while at the same time insisting on full compliance with the GDPR. Reconciling and combining these two principles undoubtedly remains one of the major skills and responsibilities of researchers.