

Between Pride and Polemic: Challenges of Interpreting Sensitive Topics in the Context of Sinjska Alka

The paper analyzes the experiences and challenges of museological interpretation of sensitive historical topics in the context of the Sinjska Alka – one of the most important traditions of Croatian cultural identity. The author, curator of the Museum of Sinjska Alka, uses his own professional experiences to examine how to balance the authenticity of historical narratives with community expectations, how to select relevant content, and how contemporary museological tools can help shape socially sensitive and scientifically based presentations. Special attention is paid to methodological approaches in examining controversial topics and the importance of including the local community in the museological discourse.

Keywords: Sinjska Alka, heritage, cultural identity, curatorial ethics, local community, museological interpretation, sensitive topics

INTRODUCTION

The Sinjska Alka is a unique equestrian knightly tournament in Europe held every August in Sinj. It commemorates a famous battle of 1715, the siege of Sinj, in which the few locals, from August 7 to 15, heroically resisted the much larger and better equipped Ottoman army, and in honor of Our Lady of Sinj who, according to belief, saved the city from falling into the hands of the enemy on the Feast of the Assumption.

Alka derives its name from the Ottoman word *halka* (from the Arabic *halqa*), which means ring or hoop. In this way, it is related to other similar games that have a ring in their name, such as the one in Barban, which is still held today, and which were widespread in Italian (*anello*) and Croatian regions (cf. Gunjača 1933: 2-3; Klen 1974: 183-196; Soldo 1997; Božić-Bužančić 1999: 96-106; Belamarić 2015: 6, 28). Variants of Alka were held throughout Dalmatia, from Zadarski kotari, through Skradin, Drniš, Makarska (until 1832) to Imotski (until 1840), and it seems that

its beginnings in Sinj are linked to the year 1695 (cf. Kozlica 2014: 11). All these competitions served the purpose of military exercises and warrior spirit, since the border with the Ottoman Empire was only a few dozen kilometers away from these places (cf. Belamarić 2015: 6; Vukušić 2007: 226). Among them, only the Sinjska Alka has maintained its continuity and, due to its uniqueness, has been recognized and inscribed on UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage since 2010.

The Sinjska Alka is not just a knightly tournament; it is a symbol of resistance, faith, local culture and the identity of the Cetina region. From its very beginnings in 1715 to the present day, Alka has been shaped and (re)defined through various socio-political contexts. Interpreting its history within a museum framework carries with it a number of challenges: from the selection of narratives to confronting ideological connotations and emotional expectations of the community.

Museums are not neutral institutions that merely collect and store objects. Museums – often as institutions of national importance – actively participate in creating collective memory and defining social values. This is particularly sensitive when discussing phenomena such as the Sinjska Alka – a manifestation with layered symbolism and numerous political and ideological interpretations throughout history. Recent events, such as the Croatian War of Independence and the post-war reality, present additional complexity, as the perception of tradition and history is further shaped by contemporary political narratives.

HISTORICAL LAYERS AND SOURCES

The historical context in which the Alka was held undoubtedly indicates the continuity of political influences and ideological instrumentalizations. As an event deeply rooted in the social and cultural life of the Cetina region, Alka has continuously adapted to the political and social circumstances of different periods. This adaptation was sometimes manifested through changes in the actual organization of the event, and sometimes through its direct inclusion in state or ideological projects. For example, during the French rule in Dalmatia (1806 – 1813), Alka was briefly interrupted because the disgruntled inhabitants of the Cetina region planned an uprising against the French (Jurić 1988: 14). However, in 1919, two Alkas were held: one in honor of King Petar Karađorđević, the other as a regular event. The contestants (Alkars) participated in state events, such as the wedding and funeral of King Alexander, and in 1922 Alka took place in Belgrade (Boko 1922). The tragic event of 1935, when the political speech of Duke Grabovac led to a bloody conflict with one tragically deceased victim, further illustrates how deeply Alka was immersed in political currents (cf. Kozlica 2014: 75).

From being financially dependent on the ruling structures to the direct involvement of Alka in promoting ideologies – these aspects cannot be ignored in scientific analysis. Unfortunately, a significant part of the sources in the Alka Knights Society (AKS) archive has still not been processed, which represents a challenge, but also an opportunity for researchers. Systematic research of these materials could open new questions about the relationship between tradition and politics, as well as the ways in which the local community negotiates with external pressures.

In the context of socialist Yugoslavia, Alka experienced a new interpretation. During that period, it was presented primarily as a “folk tradition” and a folklore expression, while certain aspects of its religious and national dimensions were suppressed or reinterpreted. The official discourse

emphasized brotherhood and unity, while local customs, especially those related to Marian devotion and regional identity, often remained in the shadow of ideologically desirable narratives (cf. Kozlica 2014: 113). Such examples confirm the importance of a multi-perspective approach in reconstructing the historical continuity of Alka, as unambiguous interpretations necessarily ignore the complexity of its meaning in different political contexts.

As Kozlica states, the Cetina region has been under as many as eleven different rules over the past three hundred years (cf. Kozlica 2014: 12). This historical instability emphasizes the need to contextualize any interpretation of Alka within the broader framework of changes in state borders, demographic shifts, and socio-economic transformations. Analysis of historical geography, social structures and local identities therefore becomes an indispensable part of understanding the role of Alka – not only as a cultural and ceremonial event, but also as a mirror of political and social dynamics.

MUSEOLOGICAL CHALLENGES: CHOOSING AND SELECTING NARRATIVES

One of the key questions in museological practice is: which narratives to include and which to leave out? This is not just a technical or aesthetic question, but a deeply ethical and even political one. Interpretation of history in the museum necessarily involves choosing a perspective, and that choice is never neutral.

In the context of Sinjska Alka, interpretation must be multi-layered: celebrating tradition must not exclude critical analysis. It is important to maintain a balance – to present historical facts, but also to contextualize them, avoiding sensationalism and ideological bias. Museum exhibitions must allow visitors to draw their own conclusions based on the available information.

For example, the case of the volunteer and general of the Croatian Army Mirko Norac, who held the position of Vojvoda (Duke of Alka) from 1994 to 2005, at the time he was detained in 2001 and then finally convicted of war crimes in 2004, requires special sensitivity on multiple levels (cf. Vukušić 2007: 225). To ignore this fact would mean to trivialize the history of Alka, as well as legal and political concepts. However, its presentation must also be carefully considered, informed and contextualized. The museum narrative must recognize controversies, but not use them as a means to polarize the audience.

In such cases, where the historically argued context, legal frameworks, political will and collective emotions are not entirely in line – or are even in conflict – it is advisable to use multiple sources, including oral history, participant testimonies, and archival materials. Methodological pluralism can contribute to the creation of an inclusive and scientifically valid narrative that does not exclude different interpretive frameworks.

DIGITAL TOOLS AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

Modern museological tools allow for multidimensional interpretation. Interactive applications, video content, digital archives, multilingual descriptions and audio guides allow visitors not only to consume content, but also to actively engage with it. These tools can include personalized digital tours, 3D reconstructions of historical events and augmented reality that simulates the atmosphere of past times.

At the Museum of Sinjska Alka, we apply such approaches to encompass different levels of knowledge and interests of our visitors. We also use digital platforms to collect local stories and testimonies to further enrich the interpretative framework. This participatory aspect will enable the local community to co-create the content of the Museum at a certain point, further strengthening the sense of belonging and legitimacy of the interpretation. The particular value of the museum exhibition is reflected in its focus on a multi-sensory experience, allowing visitors to directly immerse themselves in the world of Alka and the Cetina region.

At the heart of the modern museological concept is the integration of digital tools that have multifaceted roles: from interpretive and educational to documentary and conservation. Most visitors first watch a short feature-documentary film depicting the Siege of Sinj. A short introductory film gradually introduces visitors to the exhibition, creating an emotional framework and preparing them for a specific rhythm of movement through the exhibition. It is also worth noting that after watching the introductory film, visitors are greeted by a life-size Alkar procession made of wood. Tablets and interactive displays provide the opportunity for detailed exploration of objects – for example, enlarged displays of weapons with accompanying text. Touch screens function as digital libraries, offering access to books and magazines about Alka and the Alka Knights Society, while special segments allow for the viewing of photographs and documents from the archives of the Society.

A particularly attractive didactic element is the interactive video game *Siege of Sinj 1715*, which in an innovative way combines historical narrative with elements of popular culture, attracting both younger and older audiences. Finally, the final segment of the permanent exhibition is dedicated to the Alka winners. There, via a large video wall and a control interface, it is possible to view short video clips about all Alka winners, with the option of selecting the year and learn more about individual winners and their horses.

Digital technologies in the Museum of Sinjska Alka do not represent a mere technical upgrade, but a key instrument of museological interpretation. These tools enable innovative shaping of narrative, while offering visitors an active and personalized experience. In this way, the Museum stands as an example of good practice in the reinterpretation of traditional heritage using modern means, while ensuring its permanent visibility and the transmission of cultural meanings in a global and local context.

Digitization also facilitates the accessibility of content to the wider public, including the diaspora. Through virtual exhibitions, online archives and social media, the story of Sinjska Alka can reach audiences far beyond the borders of Croatia. This opens up space for international dialogue about a phenomenon that is both local and universal.

RELATIONSHIP WITH VISITORS

Engaging the community (i.e. the audience) brings about change in the museum's philosophy, values, goals and practices (cf. Sandell 2017; Antoš 2010: 142). The priorities of the modern museum are focused on working with the audience and attracting visitors, which is contrary to the previous traditional orientation of museums towards collections, i.e. towards collecting, registering and restoring objects (cf. Antoš 2010: 146).

During one year, the Museum of Sinjska Alka has more than 30,000 visitors. Approximately 85% are local residents, while the remaining 15% are foreign visitors. This structure of the audience

indicates the Museum's strong local and national roots, but also its increasing recognizability among international visitors. Visitors to the Museum come with different expectations, prior knowledge and interpretive frameworks. While some seek confirmation of their own identity and continuity of tradition, others are oriented towards critical review of historical narratives. In such a plural context, curatorial practice requires sensitivity, analytical distance and openness to different perspectives.

As a curator, I strive to establish a dialogic model of communication with the audience, avoiding one-sided interpretations or normative conclusions. Instead of closed narratives, I strive to present multi-layered historical contexts using primary sources, interpretive frameworks and comparative approaches. Sensitive and ideologically charged topics – such as the role of Alka during the period of the Independent State of Croatia or socialist Yugoslavia – require special attention, where it is necessary to avoid the position of arbitrator or interpreter and allow visitors to develop informed opinions on their own. As a strong national and heroic symbol, Alka has always been of interest to all regimes, so its role within the political framework also needs to be understood.

Audience reactions to this approach range from expressions of gratitude to criticism that sometimes reflect broader social tensions and polarization. Nevertheless, the curator's professional responsibility lies precisely in encouraging critical thinking, not in meeting dominant expectations.

In line with contemporary demands for a participatory museum, I have tried to add to my work an even greater dimension of contact and collaboration with students, local artists and the wider community, which became an innovation in museums at the beginning of this century (Antoš 2010: 145). Thus, I have organized, for example, art workshops, handicraft workshops and thematic activities – the Children's Alka workshop, providing the youngest visitors with an opportunity to actively participate in learning about tradition and cultural identity, running with small spears and trying to hit the alka ring in the same way that children play on the streets of Sinj. Such activities, curatorial guidance and interactive exhibitions create a space for joint learning, reflection and negotiation of meanings.

This approach not only increases the relevance of museums in contemporary society, but also indirectly contributes to a broader understanding of cultural phenomena in their historical and social complexity.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

The Sinjska Alka is deeply rooted in the local community of the Cetina region. Therefore, dialogue and cooperation with the local population, the Alka Knights Society, schools and other relevant stakeholders is crucial. The community not only preserves tradition, but also lives and shapes it.

The curator must understand that tradition has emotional value for them and is often a symbol of collective identity and pride. This requires an empathetic and open approach, as well as a willingness to listen and include local voices in the creation of the museum's narrative. Workshops, local forums and collections of oral traditions help strengthen the sense of community and owning the tradition. It also reduces the risk of rejecting the museum interpretation as imposed or "foreign".

The relationship with the local community of Sinj and the Cetina region in the context of the Sinjska Alka is shaped specifically by the fact that I do not approach this tradition as a local participant, but as an outside historian and ethnologist. It is this position that defines my work as a curator: on the one hand, I provide an analytical and comparative view of Alka in a broader historical and cultural framework, and on the other hand, I must be aware that for the people of Sinj, it is above all a symbol of collective identity, pride and emotional belonging. I am aware that my interpretations may be experienced as “foreign” or imposed, therefore I emphasize the importance of building trust through dialogue. In this sense, I rely on the principles of participatory museology and the understanding that the knowledge of a community is inextricably linked to its cultural, historical and geographical context. I do this by collecting oral traditions and by actively listening to and appreciating those who not only preserve Alka, but also live it through the traditions of their region.

A particular challenge is the interpretation of those historical layers that are perceived in the community as controversial heritage – for example, representations and documents related to the periods of Yugoslavia or the Independent State of Croatia. Such content sometimes causes dissatisfaction or resistance since they are perceived as a threat to a homogenous narrative of identity. In these situations, I try to act as a mediator between the expectations of visitors, the views of the Alka Knights Society, and the museum’s commitment to scientifically based interpretation. My role is not to avoid these topics, but to carefully contextualize and explain them, thereby creating space for critical, but also empathetic interpretation. In this way, the museum becomes a place of dialogue, not imposed authority, while the community remains an active heritage subject and co-shaper of interpretation. In my opinion, that this is the way to build a “partnership” relationship in which scientific analysis and local emotional perception complement each other, and to affirm the museum as a place of understanding, negotiation and preservation of lived tradition.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ALKA KNIGHTS SOCIETY

Collaboration with the management of the Alka Knights Society (AKS) is often delicate due to their desire to interpret and present the Sinjska Alka in the best possible light – as a symbol of honor, heroism and the permanence of local tradition. However, the concept of the “best”, or idealized representation of tradition, is not universal or unambiguous. While the local community recognizes in Alka the confirmation of its own identity, pride and continuity of cultural heritage, museological and ethnological approaches require a critical examination of even those layers of history that deviate from the idealized understanding. These layers, which encompass social tensions, changes in symbolic meanings, or historical circumstances that are not always in line with today’s interpretations of “honor and tradition”, are inseparable from a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. It is precisely in this tension between the affirmative and analytical approach, between the protection of tradition and its scientific reinterpretation, that the fundamental challenge of curatorial work within the interpretation of Alka is manifested.

Dialogue and compromise are necessary to achieve a balance between preserving the integrity of tradition and scientific objectivity. My goal is for the Museum of Sinjska Alka to become a place where the past is viewed in its entirety, without excessive romanticizing, but also without unnecessarily compromising. The AKS management has an important role as a guardian of tradition, but the museum’s interpretation should offer space for different voices and interpretations that together build a more extensive and realistic picture of Alka.

The Alka Knights Society acts as the founder and fundamental institution of the Museum of Sinjska Alka, with its role going beyond mere patronage (cf. Viteško alkarsko društvo 2018). Since its founding in 1715, the AKS has nurtured and transmitted the values of chivalry, honor and collective identity manifested through the ceremonial and competitive practice of Alka (c.f. *ibid.*). As the “guardian” of this specific heritage, the AKS strives to affirm Alka in the public and cultural space as a symbol of local and national pride. For this reason, Alka is included in the broader framework of the protection of intangible cultural heritage, which is confirmed by its inscription on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010.

The Museum of Sinjska Alka, although created within the framework of the AKS, has a different and complementary function. As a museum institution, it is not only a space for the representation of knightly values and traditional ceremonies, but also a place for scientifically based interpretation. While the AKS strives to preserve the idealized image of Alka, museum practice is directed towards a multi-layered interpretation of its history, showing also the aspects that are less known, complex, or potentially controversial. For example, historical changes in the social background of competitors or the political instrumentalization of Alka in certain periods, especially during the 19th and 20th centuries. In this sense, the Museum positions itself as a mediator between the ceremonial narrative and the critical examination of the historical circumstances that shaped Alka and its social role.

The relationship between the AKS and the Museum can therefore be seen as a dialectical union of two different, but inextricably linked perspectives. On the one hand, the AKS acts as the guardian of the symbolic and ceremonial dimension of the Alka, and on the other hand, the Museum assumes the obligation of scientific analysis and plural interpretation in the construction of a historical narrative. Such an approach allows the Museum of Sinjska Alka to be not only a place of affirmation of heritage, but also a space for dialogue, critical reflection and broader social understanding.

This achieves a balance between two complementary missions: the preservation of the integrity of tradition and the commitment to scientific objectivity. It is this interplay that makes the Museum of Sinjska Alka a paradigmatic example of how intangible cultural heritage can be interpreted within a museum framework – not only by celebrating, but also by researching and critically examining its historical and contemporary meanings.

CONCLUSION

The ideals of chivalry (Keen 2005) defined in medieval Christian Europe are timeless – loyalty, courage, faith, justice, protection of the weak, generosity – and should certainly be nurtured. However, museums are also recognizable by another function: adopting and using new scientific and ethical knowledge and responding to the development of society and the changing environment (c.f. Ocello 2011: 190).

Interpreting sensitive topics in the context of the Sinjska Alka requires courage, thorough knowledge and high ethical responsibility. As a curator in a community where tradition is both sacred and everyday, I feel the weight of responsibility for the way I present history every day. I have to balance established historical facts and scientific objectivity on the one hand, and social sensitivity on the other, aware that every choice I make affects the perception of the community and visitors.

My approach is based on transparency, dialogue and continuous learning – not only about the history of Alka, but also about the space and people whose identities are intertwined with it. I strive to ensure that the Museum is not a space where history is embellished or simplified, but a place where history is considered in all its complexity and multilayeredness.

Digital tools, participatory methods and the involvement of the local community help me to make the interpretation dynamic and multidimensional. Visitors are not just observers, but participants in the process of learning and understanding. In this dialogue, I feel that the Museum of Sinjska Alka becomes a space where the past and the present communicate, where controversies and complex narratives do not cause polarization, but encourage critical thinking and empathy.

Finally, my work as a curator also involves continuous personal learning – about history, about people and about what it means to preserve a tradition that is alive and sensitive. Through this balance between professional responsibility and personal reflection, I strive to “build” the Museum of Sinjska Alka as a place that respects the past, strengthens the community, and opens up space for dialogue, understanding, and the joint shaping of cultural identity.

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