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A Taste of Intangible Heritage: Food Traditions Inside and Outside of the Museum[1]

As nourishment, food consists of tangible, material substances which humans consume. But the knowledge and practice of food preparation, etiquette of eating and symbolic meanings tied to various foods are all intangible. How does this affect the work of museums?

Key words: intangible heritage, food, musealisation of food processes

The Unesco *Living Human Treasures* program states that:"*...although the techniques for producing artefacts and even preparing food can be put in writing, the actual act of creation has no physical form. The performance and the act of creation are intangible; embodied in the skills or techniques of those who do them.*"

A focus on intangible cultural heritage must: "give precedence to ways of presenting traditional and popular cultures that emphasize the living or past aspects of those cultures (showing their surroundings, ways of life and the works, skills and techniques they have produced)"

http://www.unesco.org/culture/heritage/intangible/html_eng/index_en.shtml

In other words, a focus on intangible heritage is *context oriented*. It promotes processes more than products, thereby contending a pure object-orientation.

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In the following examples, I wish to discuss 3 ways that food can be integrated with the goals of museums:

• Food processes *IN* the museum

• Museum *presentations* of food processes

• Museum collaboration to present food in *traditional settings*

Food processes *IN* the museum

Anyone who has worked with museum pedagogy knows that special arrangements can activate groups, giving positive results for both the museum and the community. One particularly successful example of museum/community collaboration is the annual New-years *mochi* pounding ceremony at the San Francisco Asian Art museum. *Mochi* is a Japanese desert made from sweet, glutinous rice which is pounded and pulled until it can be formed into ball. It may be eaten at any time, but has a special ritual significance in symbolizing prosperity for the new year. Since the early 1990s the Japanese American group Kagami Kai has performed the ritual within the museum, pounding the warm rice in wooden mortars accompanied by singing and the rhythm of *taiko* drumming, and sharing the finished *mochi* with museum visitors.

When they bring this ritual into the museum, Kagami Kai shows that it is not only a product – *mochi* – which has been created, but also sets of relationships between participants in the ritual. And as this is an annual event, lasting social relationships are also maintained between the minority community and the museum.

Museum *presentations* of food processes

A visitor to Korea learns very quickly about the symbolic importance of certain types of food. For example, during a previous trip to Seoul, I could see large food storage containers seemingly everywhere, even in downtown parking lots. And of course, in each container, one would find variants of pickled vegetables know as *kimchee*. Kimchee storage is obviously a living tradition, but how can we learn about its production?

The National Folk Museum of Korea, has made a diorama showing traditional processes in kimchee-making. Ingredients, tools, and methods of preparation are all presented in a simple, but effective manner. Although this presentation may be based on historical, rather than contemporary techniques, the tradition itself still seems to be very much alive. Even though living practitioners are not present, the exhibit shows a process which can provide an understanding of intangibile aspects.

A similar example of Museum presentations of food processes comes from my own work. The travelling exhibition “Farewell - Death and bereavement in multi-cultural Norway” aimed at presenting cross-cultural perspectives on the death rituals of various groups of people in Norway, both in former times, and in contemporary multi-cultural society. In collaboration with the respective communities, the rituals of several different religious groups were brought into focus, as well as common factors which everyone must deal with - no matter what their religious beliefs.

During fieldwork with various communities in preparation for the exhibition, I noticed that presenting how food is used in religious rituals might provide a useful basis for cross-cultural comparison, as well as giving visitors and these communities new insights into their own traditions. Three cases may illustrate this:

Buddhism

One example of food used in religious rituals is from the Khuong Viet Buddhist temple. The temple lies outside of Oslo (in Norway). There, I was allowed to document the ritual held for a recently deceased man. The assembled monks told me that the aim of the ritual was to help the soul of the deceased to gain clarity and peace in the spirit world, so that it could find its way to rebirth in this world.

A large photograph of the dead person was displayed at a memorial altar near the entrance to the temples ritual area. Flowers, candles and incense were all placed at the altar, together with offerings of fruit, cookies, soup and rice. These offerings would provide spiritual sustenance to the dead soul on its journey, and later be eaten by relatives of the dead person as a blessing from the spirit world.

The display case made for this part of the exhibition attempted to recreate this scene, to show how everyday foodstuffs could become imbued with power far beyond their nourishment value. The display also shows the importance of memory in Buddhist death rituals.

Sikhism and Christianity

Starting in the early 1970s, Norway experienced a wave of immigration, many of whom came from India and Pakistan. Some of these immigrants belong to the Sikh religious minority. When a Sikh dies in Norway, he or she is cremated, and the ashes are normally sent to India for spreading over running water. Mourners assemble after the cremation for recitation of religious poetry, as well as for the distribution of *parsad*, a kind of bread/pudding which is a symbol of Gods blessing. One man at the sikh *gurduara* temple told me that “Parsad bread is warm, soft and sweet, just as God is warm, soft and sweet”. And since parsad represents Gods blessing, it should be accepted enthusiastically, with both hands.

It can be useful to compare the blessing of eating parsad bread with the Christian ritual of communion.

The Christian New Testament tells that by dying on the cross, Jesus Christ atoned for the sins of humanity throughout all time. Three days after burial, Jesus supposedly arose from the dead and traveled to heaven. Christian belief teaches that one-day in the future, Jesus shall return to earth in order to judge the living and the dead – which will complete creation by opening the kingdom of heaven.

The ritual of communion is seen as a preparation for this day of judgement. Communion refers to the last supper that Jesus had with his disciples, when he gave them bread and wine as symbols of his body and blood, and said that "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:54)

Each of the above museum examples *show* and *describe* food processes. However, in the museum, it is difficult to create "total sensory experiences". Exhibitions are normally not made for eating, health restrictions can hinder the serving of food in many unlicensed localities and some kinds of ritual foods may be reserved for certain groups of believers. Perhaps museums could help provide these "total sensory experiences" to their public through community involvement?

Museum collaboration to present food in *traditional settings*

Istria is the westernmost county in Croatia. In the mid 1990s, county tourism authorities looked for a tool on how to reinvigorate the county's rural hinterland. The answer they found was to encourage agrotourism. Agrotourism is another name for farm holidays, or rural agricultural tourism. This form of tourism may entail guests staying and eating at living, working farms, but can also pertain to rural bed and breakfast facilities, as well as rural restaurants.

Ideally, agrotourism is presented as a mark of natural quality:

"To stay at an agrotouristic farm in Istria means to stay in a natural environment, in contact with nature and its beauties, in contact with the cultural heritage of Istria, with traditional life in a village; it also means to enjoy the specialties of traditional Istrian cuisine, dishes prepared in the traditional, home made way, with ingredients produced on the farms and with the hands of your hosts." (Sinčić 2003:215)

County authorities profile agrotourism as a sharing experience between host and guests:

"You have a unique chance to be among the first to pave the way for agrotourism in this region, to discover the atmosphere of the home of your hosts [...] to taste with

them the autochthonous food, to drink home-made wine to give way to the senses." (Istria County Tourist Association 2003:3)

The Ethnographic Museum of Istria has been involved in the process of re-invigorating rural cuisine through publications, workshops, 'stunt' exhibitions (such as a one-day exhibition about local "easter bread" traditions at a regional wine festival) and consultations. The museum has also had deeper involvement in some projects, however- as the sponsoring institution for private persons who apply for government funding in order to remodel their farms for agrotourism. Here, the museum provides a guarantee that funds will be used in a appropriate manner, and that the heritage value of the premises will be upheld.

Engagement in activities outside of the physical museum premises can be fundamental if museums aim at supporting intangibile heritage as living tradition. Not only for the preservation of food traditions, but for studying and promulgating any social phenomena.

I believe that museums can benefit from inviting community participation in their projects and activities. They can also benefit by trying to show processes in their exhibitions, their publications and their documentation work.

Involvement with these aspects may not only provide a 'taste' of intangibile heritage to participants, but perhaps also create an appetite for understanding how traditions are kept alive.

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