



Moving Knowledge? Cultural understanding and dialogue – Reflections on the IX Ethnology Days 17.-18.3.2016

The IX Ethnology Days were organised this year in cooperation with the Association of Finnish Ethnologists Ethnos, the University of Turku and Åbo Akademi University. The theme of the seminar was *'Moving Knowledge? Cultural Understanding and Dialogue'*. The occasion drew more than one hundred attendees to Turku from all over the country. In addition to ethnologists, the audience also included representatives from related disciplines.

The opening words were presented by Chairman, University Lecturer and Docent Katriina Siivonen (Ethnos ry.), Professor of Nordic Ethnology Fredrik Nilsson (Åbo Akademi University) and professor of European Ethnology Helena Ruotsala (University of Turku).

In her opening words, Siivonen brought up the question of how ethnological information works in society and influences it. She also considered the ways in which cultural knowledge and the role of different institutions are conceptualised when creating and maintaining a dialogue between ethnological research and society. Nilsson talked about the meaning of co-operation and co-creation in increasing the power of ethnological information, whereas Ruotsala spoke on behalf of basic research. She highlighted the fact that academic freedom is about having the opportunity to conduct research within a particular scientific field, not based on an order derived via a top-down process.

A new impetus for the museum profession

The first keynote lecturer was Kristiina Ahmas, the director of the K.H. Renlund Museum, the

provincial museum of Central Ostrobothnia in the city of Kokkola. Ahmas gave her speech the title *'Dare to share – collective expertise and the museum institution'*.

The core of the presentation focused on the adolescence of museum professionalism. In her speech, Ahmas referred to the much-used metaphor of an ivory tower. She said that the traditional way of considering professionalism has been to place oneself on a different level than the rest of the people. Even today, many professionals do not want to share their results with 'regular people'. Ahmas had an apt description of this kind of thinking – she called this type of a museum 'the frozen museum prototype'. By that, she meant that a museum without accessible and understandable information is an isolated and stagnating institution with low societal influence.

From my point of view, the ivory tower metaphor is related to the island metaphor that was used to criticise isolated museum institutions about ten years ago. Somehow, though, the ivory tower metaphor is even sadder, because I recognise a hint of low professional self-esteem in it. As Ahmas argued, the ivory tower is connected with power. Ahmas used Michel Foucault's *power over / power to* dichotomy as an example of the dual nature of expert power. In order to be operative and influential, an institution or a professional should not confuse expertise with *authority*. It would be more constructive to consider museums and museum professionals as *experts* who have a lot of knowledge, but at the same time, are aware of the limitations in their expertise. Ahmas stressed that the key role resides in professional attitudes. She suggested that we, as museum professionals, should have an open and complementary perspective on the viewpoints of others, and outlined the fact that mutual success is actually a way of increasing one's own merit.

It is essential to realise that museum professionalism is not just changing now; it already has been changed. If we want to keep museums active and alive in today's society, we, as museum professionals, have to change ourselves as well. In order to be effective and have an impact on things, one must learn to work in a compelling way and speak an understandable language. We do not perform the museum services for ourselves only, but for the people. Today, people do not come to museums to admire the experts – they want to experience, to expand their awareness and to be entertained. So with this perspective, the ivory tower metaphor forces us to think about our clients and stakeholders instead of ourselves – how to do museum work in an audience-oriented way? How do we create an interactional platform instead of merely supporting the outdated, erratic structures of the ivory tower?

The commentary for Kristiina Ahmas's keynote was held by PhD Hanneleena Hieta, who continued by focusing on the problematics related to the essence of a modern museum. In the general conversation, participants noted that the restructuring of professionalism is not just taking place in the museum sector, but at the same time in other disciplines as well. For example, universities are facing a new and yet unknown time. The main reason for this is the re-organisation of the financial base, which is shaking up our concepts of professionalism and the way of doing things. This raw reality was also brought up by the director of the Finnish Museum of Horology, Mikko Kero, in a workshop on the future of museums.

Consuming culture – a matter of human rights and privacy

The second keynote lecture was given by a consumer researcher, PhD Minna Ruckenstein from the University of Helsinki. The title of her presentation was *'Retailed Space: Materializing a Cultural Shift'*.

Ruckenstein focused mainly on children and their role and rights in the modern consumer society. She outlined the fact that whereas in earlier decades parents were supposed to control their children's consumer behaviour, today we are concentrating on children's rights to be consumers

on their own terms. So, today parents' role is to act reactively and be a gatekeeper and a cultivator of consumer culture rather than an authoritative power. This is a human rights issue, and therefore an advanced way of thinking, but at the same time it brings to light many new problematic questions.

For the consumer culture of today, it is characteristic that companies and stores brand their products for different customer groups. For example, children are not just children in today's toy markets – they are categorised as babies, toddlers, children, tweens and teens. All of these groups have their own material world, and consuming is a part of building one's image, determining one's status or seeking cohesion. On the other hand, consuming naturally has everything to do with trends as well. In its own way, I believe this phenomenon has always existed, but I guess the point is that in today's consuming world it has escalated.

However, Ruckenstein pointed out that consumer culture is facing a total turning point because of the new media culture. Retail spaces have not just become part of our everyday lives; they are constantly affecting our behaviour everywhere around us. Advertisers have found so many new and discreet forms within which to work that we might not even recognise what an ad is anymore – and children play an essential role in this confusion. For example, many large, multinational companies are using ordinary children to gain more visibility for their products. Another form of this new consumer culture is targeted advertising: ads are personalised just for you based on your internet behaviour – they are ads that seem to read your mind. It is both frightening and difficult to think about what all this means. If your friend posts an Instagram picture of a commercial product, do you even think that it might be a sponsored advertisement? And perhaps a better question – even if the ad itself might not be harmful, do you want to be a part of a world where everything, including consumers' souls, are for sale?

Ruckenstein ended her speech by questioning the morality of contextual advertising. She outlined the fact that the question is not about

the harm that, e.g. a personalised advertisement, might cause individuals. The essential question is in the transparency of the consumer culture. Do we want to give the decision-making power regarding our consumer behaviour to major companies? Do we, as a community, want to live in a world where it is possible for corporations to dictate our needs?

From moral order to cultural diversity

Friday started with the third keynote lecture by Professor Beata Binder from Humboldt University. The title of her speech was *'Between Politics and Law: Anthropological Approaches to Moral Order'*.

Binder provided a thorough review on the history and essence of moral anthropology. The concept 'moral anthropology' has its roots in Kantian philosophy. In short, it studies moral order by using anthropology as a tool in the process. Binder also discussed German Antidiscrimination Law as a field of social anthropology and law, politics and critique in general. The main focus, however, was on moral anthropology and questions such as how to reflect on morality, how to describe it and how to analyse it. Binder addressed these questions by focusing on studies by, e.g. Albert Hirschman and Didier Fassin.

It is essential to note that the dichotomy between good and bad has always been a part of political discussions – and policies tend to construct and reflect social worlds. At best, moral anthropology can offer a human-oriented approach to the numerous policy-related moral questions. As Fassin put it: 'Moral discourse simplifies for the purpose of its cause whereas critical analysis renders the complexity of issues and positions'. According to Fassin, moral anthropology has an important task in exploring and investigating the politics of, e.g. immigration, asylum and poverty.

Binder concentrated on the paradigm shift that has happened in anthropology during the last few decades. In moral anthropology, it is important that the researcher is aware of his/her own position in the study. It is therefore essential to be reflective during the research process. This increases the transparency and, thus also, the reliability of science. On the other hand, as Fredrik Nilsson noted in his commentary, a similar kind

of turn has been occurring in other fields of cultural studies as well since the 1990s, not just in moral anthropology or anthropology in general.

Nilsson also discussed xenophobia. He noted that in a national context, it is too easy to forget that every society is actually rich in ethnic diversity. Moral anthropology might be a way to understand this kind of cultural atmosphere better. However, there are many problematic questions related to this prospect as well. Today, our society is dealing with a great deal of racism, but is it ethical to go and ask xenophobic people about their reflections and feelings, e.g. about immigration, if we know that their point of view is actually ethically misguided and even wrong? Or should this kind of xenophobic thinking just be cut off at once, without any questions asked? Moral anthropology, as Binder outlined it, could be seen as a tool for politics and used to reflect on matters that we as researchers see as important.

The conversation on cultural diversity continued in the panel discussion. The participants in the debate were Director Tuomas Martikainen (Institute of Migration), Special Adviser Henri Terho (Arts Promotion Centre Finland), University Teacher, PhD Sanna Lillbroända-Annala (Åbo Akademi University) and Chair University Lecturer, Phil. Lic. Timo J. Virtanen (University of Turku). The panel discussion dealt with multi-voiced Turku, especially from the point of view of town planning. The discussion brought out the essence of ethnological research. The core of ethnological research is to understand different kinds of cultural phenomena and give voice to those who otherwise would not get heard in the cacophony of opinions. In other words, ethnological research supports a diverse and thriving cultural complex, and therefore, it is an essential part of democratic societal conversation.

The Ethnology Days conference was filled with numerous immersive presentations that were held in 11 different workshops, but still there was time for networking and informal conversations. The social evening was held in Aboa Vetus & Ars Nova Museum, which is always a cosy and convenient place to visit. As the members of the board of the Association of Finnish Eth-

nologists Ethnos also changed during the annual general meeting, the long-standing chairman of the association, PhD Katriina Siivonen, resigned from her position. From my own behalf, I thank Katriina for her determined and hard work for the association over the years. Ethnos continues its effective work in promoting the discipline of

ethnology with a new skilled and enthusiastic board – and it will arrange the X Ethnology Days in Pori in March 2018! The days will be organised in cooperation with the Cultural Heritage Studies Department of the University of Turku.

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