

## Knowledge Management in the Post- Soviet Museums: Challenges of Digital Data Base Implementation in the Georgian National Museum

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**ABSTRACT.** Contemporary western museums became not only bearers of certain discourses of different elites, but place for education, communication and sharing of scientific knowledge accessible to every citizen. This is the new challenge for the post-soviet museums: Static expositions and narratives influenced by soviet propaganda are changing with introduction of new research methods and modern social theories. Georgian National Museum was established in 2004. As stated on its website one of its goals is “to expand and sustain access [to the collections] for current and future generations”. To achieve it, GNM has to organize two century old collections and their registration documents. Therefore, together with the Georgian Ministry of Culture and Monuments Protection, digital museum data base with public access is being developed. The paper presents the challenges of the introduction and integration of the digital data base in the Georgian National Museum. Applying Faucauldian concept of the “authority of delimitation” we explore museum professionals as creators of knowledge, and transmitters of that knowledge. Based mainly on ethnographic methodology – in-depth interviews and participant observation, our research shows that knowledge is the main pillar of the identity of museum professionals. Any change in this knowledge system, order or structure is perceived as an attack on their identity and causes their defensive behavior which can be considered as the main challenge on the way of the implementation of open access museum data base. © 2018 *Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.*

Key words: museum, knowledge, authority, Post-Soviet

From the “Temple of Muses” to the modern times museums have been changed drastically. “The modern museum is a product of Renaissance humanism, eighteenth century enlightenment and nineteenth century democracy” [1:8]. Museums are not only archives, storing memory of a given group or

representations of certain discourses of different elites but the place of creating and spreading of knowledge, a place for communication with and within different societies. For contemporary museums having collection is a means but not an end. Creating genuine experience through objects and collections using modern

technologies is the goal of modern museum. Learning through experience is the end of modern museums [2].

Moreover, museums today aim to become a platform for developing and spreading scientific knowledge. Based on different collections: art, anthropology, archaeology, natural history etc. – they become unique catalysers for interdisciplinary studies. Object-based scientific collections can open new areas of research across different disciplines. In this regard management of museum collections, information about them and access to it for scholars of different research fields and countries is a main task for a modern museum.

Introduction of novel approaches and learning tools and methods can be a real challenge for a museum. Especially for the post-soviet museums, where the static expositions made mainly mid-20<sup>th</sup> century present narratives and interpretations according to soviet ideology. Implementation of new technologies and research methods influenced by modern social theories is not an easy task for the newly established postcolonial nation-state where museums acquire special importance as having own culture and history is considered to be a sign of being a “genuine, authentic people”, which deserves independence and self-governance [3]. Georgia is no exception.

This paper examines museum professionals – registrars, exhibition managers and curators as “authority of delimitation” [4:41] Applying the Foucauldian concept of “archive” - a system of formation and transformation of statements of certain epoch, museum is a place, where the knowledge is stored, whereas knowledge is discursive. It is “the law of what can be said” [4:129]. Collecting is selective process determined by discourse and always in relation to power structures. Objects and texts construct knowledge systems and “become part of strategic mechanisms of discursive power” [5:24]. Professionals working in a museum are charged with the task of creating and transmitting knowledge. They are given

authority to determine what is been said in the museum, which knowledge shall be stored and spread and which – not. Moreover, managing the collections, they have control over the access to the objects and information about them.

Based on one year participant observation, in-depth interviews with museum curators and collection managers and analysis of museum documentation we will explore what happens if the knowledge is not a privilege of certain authorities any more. We will analyse people working in the museum as possessors of knowledge and their attitudes towards the changes and present what effect do these changes have on implementation of the digital data base.

After the two wars in Georgia in early nineties (South Ossetia 1991-92 and Abkhazia 1992-93) and a civil war in 1989-90, national institutions hardly functioned. At every level of the state authorities corruption was common practice. The big shift in Georgia’s recent history is so called “Rose” revolution: the non-violent change of political power, followed by reforms. Election fraud in the capital city caused mass protests in November 2003 and Georgia’s President Eduard Shevardnadze was forced to resign. The new governmental program included neoliberal reforms which affected the Georgian Constitution, police, tax and customs, privatization and education systems.

Privatization of national/state property, so called “Strategic Objects” - hospitals, railway and some monuments of cultural heritage and changes in the national curriculum, particularly of Georgian History and Literature, caused public dissatisfaction. Privatized heritage monuments often were destroyed or reconstructed. New owners massively fired old staff from privatized institutions and enterprises. There were fervent discussions of the reforms in public transport, gatherings and even private parties. The key-note of the protest was the fear that “everything will be sold”. At the same time, the introduction of the new

history textbook and changes in the school curriculum were perceived as a threat to “essential components of Georgianness” – language and history [6:195]. Those were the circumstances before the start of museum reforms.

Georgian National Museum was established with a special presidential decree (№626) on December 30, 2004) as a legal entity of public law. It was considered to be the “beginning of structural, institutional and legislative reforms in country’s cultural heritage management. Reforms include introducing of modern management practices; elaboration and establishment of museum politics and integrated administrative system; improvement of museum collections safety standards; increase of educational activities; collaboration between museums and academia” (quotation from the museum web page).

Moreover, it is stated as its mission: “To research, preserve, interpret and make accessible to all, the past and present of Georgia, of other nations and cultures...” In order to achieve this and ‘make accessible to all’ introduction and implementation of collection/object data management is crucial.

After the years of wars and financial crisis museums were hardly functioning. Employees were not familiar to modern technologies; there was not enough funding to buy new equipment. Poor salaries, out-dated equipment and amortized buildings, almost no visitors and no new exhibitions were the obvious problems to be solved.

But in the working process the group of the young new managers identified more complex problems regarding documentation of museum objects and collections and the implementation of the new collection data base and management policy. The main problem while working with museum professionals was their different understanding of museum and its function being a catalyser of interdisciplinary research based on its scientific collections. Moreover, their approach to knowledge and its possession and management was and at some points are still different from the new

policy the Georgian National Museum management

The Georgian National Museum unifies ten leading museums, two research centers, the National Gallery, four house-museums, fourteen archaeological sites and storages.

Nearly two million objects of Georgian and Caucasian natural and cultural heritage are kept in the museum. Its highlights include hominid remains from Dmanisi dated back to 1.8 million years; endemic, relict and rare specimens listed in international conventions and the Georgian Red book; masterpieces of goldsmithery and chasing from the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennia to the late Middle Ages, unique cloisonne enamel collection including world’s largest “Khakhuli Triptych of the Holy Virgin” (1125 – 1155), epigraphic monuments of Georgian, Aramaic, Greek, Jewish, Arabic scripts and Urartian cuneiform, collection of Qajar portraits as well as masterpieces of Georgian, Russian and European artists including Paolo Veneziano, Lucas Kranach the Elder, Niko Pirosmiani, Lado Gudiashvili, Vasil Kandinsky. Ethnographic collection, one of the first of the museum, houses significant material on people living in Caucasia. But the history of the collections of the Georgian National Museum began in the 19<sup>th</sup> c when the Russian Royal Geographic Society's Museum of the Caucasian Department was founded in Tbilisi. Later on a group of Georgian intellectuals known as “Tergdaleulebi” established the Museum of the Society of Spreading Literacy among Georgians which was followed by the Georgian Museum founded with the decree of the government of Georgian Independent Republic in 1919. Georgian National Museum collections are inheritance of the above mentioned museums which were modified several times during their history. Methods of registration and description of objects were also “inherited” from the Russian imperial and soviet periods. The object registration policy adopted and approved by the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union was

still in use when Georgian National Museum was established. According to the policy, every object in the museum shall be registered when acquired. A unique access number is given to it and the basic information about its provenance, material, measures etc. are entered in the special primary catalogue. After that the object is given to an appropriate curator, which enters professional description in a so called “discipline-specific catalogue”. Objects and their discipline-specific catalogues are kept in closed room/rooms under the supervision of the curator. In soviet museums existed also a card files system where the cards containing short information about the object were organized in alphabetic order to facilitate search process within the collection. In addition, each object shall have had a “passport” which could be used as a backup in case of loss or damage of the catalogues. In case of any loss, discard, change or moving the object according remarks was made in the catalogue. During inventory catalogues were used to identify objects and check collection condition, identify any loss or damage. The above mentioned documents have had, and according to Georgian legislation, still have legal force for the museum and its controlling authorities to maintain control over the collections.

In spite of the fact that museums in Georgia have had policies on collection management and registration, they were ignored or violated during dozens of years. Different museums were subordinated to different bodies which often did not control collection registration and maintenance process. Moreover, different museums used to have different approaches and systems of registration and cataloguing objects, which would change upon decision of its controlling body: 1968 with a decree of the Academy of Science the discipline-specific catalogues were abolished in ethnographic collections of the Simon Janashia Museum of Georgia. Primary catalogues were left as only registration document and information source. In the Ioseb Grishashvili Museum of Tbilisi History

objects in discipline-specific catalogues are registered on the basis of its medium, therefore objects made of mixed media would be registered in two or even more discipline-specific catalogues which is very confusing and leads to mistakes in the object inventory. So called “treasury depot” in the Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts did not maintain its own collection catalogue but is still using century old catalogues of the countries’ first art museum.

Old catalogues are damaged; sometimes it is not possible to read all the information. There is a concern of their destruction with the time which can lead to the loss of historical information on museums and its collections.

To solve this problems museum management initiated new inventory in all Georgian National Museum collections in order to develop digital museum data base which will be a full registry of all museum objects with public access.

First attempts to make new inventory were met with anxiety by the curators and collection managers. In order to explain tensions between the new administration and old staff, one needs to get a glimpse of museum as a community and its history.

Most of the staff work here since their student days. Every newcomer is introduced with a concept of “museumeli” – a person, who is not just working in the museum, but has a deep attachment to it. The suffix “-eli” indicates belonging to a certain group or place, “Kartveli” for instance means Georgian. For most museum professionals there is a strong, not to say intimate connection to the museum as an important part of their identity. The pride of belonging to the museum community (being “museumeli”) is observed in almost all museums within the Georgian National Museum. Starting from the ‘wards’ – staff monitoring the exhibitions, and ending with the directors – all are proud to work in the museum. Some of them even compare the museum with the family – “one big family” “we are family”. In some departments younger colleagues refer to their elder co-workers as “aunt”

and “uncle”. It is an entirely different world with its established rules, informal authorities (people not possessing high position but respected because of their knowledge/experience or personal features) and complex relationships. Internal jokes often told to the newcomers are “Once you breathe the museum air, it poisons you and you’ll never be able to quit!” or “to swallow the dust of the museum” to become a true member of the community. So museumeli is attached not only to the people one works with, but with the building and collection/objects in it: “my objects” “my collections” “my catalogues” – is how they mention in everyday conversation the objects and documents under their curatorship.

It is no wonder that in such community the sensibility towards the “other” is very high and museum staff as a community facing changes and defending museum from “others” demonstrate ignorance and fear. [7:57].

Another important factor was that employees were not familiar to modern technologies; they were never trained to use computer, because there was not enough funding to buy new equipment. Moreover, soviet regulations were restricting access to certain information and documents (for instance, maps), it was prohibited to take the registration catalogue outside of the museum building. Under such conditions curators could not easily accept drastic changes in collection management policy and give access to newcomer “strangers” to the collections and documents. Meanwhile the Ministry of Culture and monuments protection initiated the project of elaboration and implementation of digital museum data base which will be a full registry of all museum objects with partial public access. A small group consisting of curators and managers was created to collaborate with the Ministry of Culture and to develop and implement the data base. Working with different curators, our group had to answer two main questions: “Who will be able to make changes in the data base?” “Who will have access to this

information?” The idea of having all collection data available online was causing suspicions and fear. All the informants later in the interviews and private talks before we even started to work on the data base were expressing their concern about “everybody will have access to their material”. “They will publish it and then? What shall we do?” “If anyone can access it [object information], what are we here for?” Obviously, curators were afraid to lose their authority and function and sometimes even job. In this regard we will go back to an old term: “mtsveli (the guardian)” which was used during and after the soviet period instead of “curator”. Museum professionals working decades long and taking care of collections, sometimes risking their health and even lives (as protective measure some materials were systematically treated with chemicals, during the civil war museums were in epicenter of fights and fire) developed very strong attachment to the collections and their knowledge about it, which they truly believe are “theirs”. Most of them are still use the term “mtsveli” instead of “kuratori” and this sense of “protecting” still prevail all the other functions in performing their jobs. This causes certain obstacles in implementing open access data base. Unconsciously or sometimes even consciously they create hindrances in accessing collections or some information on the object or collection.

Going back to Foucault’s definition, museumeli as an authority of delimitation possesses certain power which is defined by their knowledge. This knowledge and their social environment create their psychological discourse where discourse is “the practical realm of language in action – talk and texts, words, utterances, conversations, stories, speeches, lectures...” [8:10]. Discourse is constructed in a social environment, forms certain patterns which become organized systematic practices for an individual. It is constructed and taught through socialization and turns into a unique “personal order and identity.” [8:10]. So, museum is a place where Museumeli’s discourse is

constructed and maintained. Fundamental pillar of its identity is knowledge. Museumeli is at the same time authority of delimitation, e.g. creator of knowledge, and transmitter of that knowledge. Any change in its knowledge system, order or structure is perceived as an attack on Museumeli identity and causes their defensive behavior which can be considered as the main challenge on the way of

the implementation of open access museum data base.

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*ეთნოლოგია*

## ცოდნის მენეჯმენტი პოსტსაბჭოთა მუზეუმებში: ელექტრონულ მონაცემთა ბაზის დანერგვის სირთულეები საქართველოს ეროვნულ მუზეუმში

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თანამედროვე დასავლური მუზეუმი განათლების, ურთიერთობისა და სამეცნიერო ცოდნის გაზიარების ადგილია. პოსტსაბჭოთა მუზეუმებიც ახალი კვლევის მეთოდებისა და თეორიების შესაბამისად იცვლება.

საერთაშორისო სტანდარტების დანერგვის გზაზე საზოგადოებისათვის ხელმისაწვდომი ციფრული მონაცემთა ბაზა საქართველოს ეროვნული მუზეუმისა და კულტურისა და ძეგლთა დაცვის სამინისტროს ერთ-ერთი მნიშვნელოვანი პროექტია. ნაშრომი განიხილავს მონაცემთა ბაზის დანერგვის პრობლემებს საქართველოს ეროვნულ მუზეუმში. მუზეუმის თანამშრომლები წარმოდგენილია, როგორც ფუკოსეული “ობიექტის განმსაზღვრელი ავტორიტეტები”, რომელთა იდენტობის მთავარი შემადგენელია ცოდნა. ეთნოგრაფიული მეთოდების გამოყენებით ჩატარებული კვლევა ავლენს, რამდენად მგრძობიარენი ხდებიან მუზეუმის თანამშრომლები, როდესაც ხდება ცვლილება მათი ცოდნის სისტემაში.

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