

“Only this Theatre, Faithful and True, Can Preserve the Distinctive Identity...”

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2478/se-2021-0032> © Ústav etnológie a sociálnej antropológie SAV

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This article explores the complex role played by the staff of open-air museums in the Czech Republic, their relationship with the communities they work with, and their impact on the intangible cultural heritage outside the museum gates. It further explores the considerable role played by researchers active in policy making at open-air museums. The position of open-air museums is rather intricate from the perspective of communities and the state administration, with many different roles and tasks that allow and sometimes even encourage open-air museum employees to transform heritage rules or create new ones. Our conclusions are based on several case studies illustrating how the staff of Czech open-air museums build their relationships with communities, groups and individuals and how this collaboration effects the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage. Ethical issues related to museum interpretation and perceptions of interpreted elements by the public are also discussed.

Keywords: open-air museums, intangible cultural heritage, heritage communities, institutionalisation, Czech Republic

How to cite: Kuminková, E., Vojancová, I. (2021). “Only this Theatre, Faithful and True, Can Preserve the Distinctive Identity...?”. *Slovenský národopis*, 69(4), 534–551, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2478/se-2021-0032>

Ethnologists, museologists, curators and other researchers at open-air museums consciously, and sometimes unconsciously, play a crucial role in safeguarding and even saving endangered crafts, customs and other kinds of knowledge. In their work, they must often switch between the roles of researchers, practitioners and even community representatives. Open-air museums put people and their stories to the forefront of their

narratives when creating living exhibitions, with intangible cultural heritage as the principal driving force of interpretation. However, the role of these institutions reaches far beyond the museums' gates. How are the relationships with communities, groups and individuals created and why are they important? Why is the environment of open-air museums so favourable to serving the goals of the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereafter merely "Convention")? To understand the specific nature of open-air museums and their approach to work with intangible cultural heritage (hereafter merely ICH) and ICH-practitioners, we must look at recent developments in museology in general.¹

Janet Blake, a leading expert in ICH who works closely with UNESCO, illustrates the way in which the perception of the cultural heritage preserved at museums has shifted thanks to the Convention: "Within the so-called UNESCO 'ICH paradigm' [...] *material or physical manifestations* of ICH are perceived as more or less secondary, however, there is also a *deep-seated interdependence* between tangible and intangible cultural heritage, given that *the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith* are also part of the definition of [ICH]" (as cited by Neyrinck, Seghers, Tsakiridis, 2020: 63). Blake also explains the way in which the understanding of the museum as an institution has been transformed from the "national treasure" into the social and cultural resources of communities. The elitist conception of the museum centralised around state-controlled identification and safeguarding has been challenged by a community-based conception in which the communities and individuals, whose heritage is presented, are becoming key players in the identification and interpretation of the cultural heritage concerned (Blake, 2018: 20–21).

As is shown by a large number of the sources from which the latest publication *Museums and Intangible Cultural Heritage: Towards a Third Space in the Heritage Sector* follows, museums are playing an increasingly important role in safeguarding the ICH and building a dialogue in society (Nikolić Đerić, Neyrinck, Seghers, Tsakiridis, 2020). Museums are being transformed from authoritative into participative institutions in which the ICH is becoming the main driving force behind narratives and interpretation. Attention is shifting from the tangibility of the presented objects to their intangibility, with the principal emphasis placed on the meaning these objects played/play in the lives of people and the values they represent.

Nikolić Đerić et al., along with other experts, consider the way in which museums can engage in safeguarding measures and promote the viability of ICH. The basis is a conscious interconnection between communities, groups and individuals and museum collections and the fact that the museum perceives ICH-practitioners as the people whose heritage it is administering and that these are aware of their "ownership" of the

¹ cf The International Council of Museums' (ICOM) discussion on a new museum definition at <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>. The ICOM has also published a number of resolutions and recommendations on ICH and museums, most importantly *The Shanghai Charter* (ICOM, 2002), *The Seoul Declaration of the ICOM on Intangible Heritage* (ICOM, 2004) and the Museum Definition (ICOM, 2007). In the years 2000 and 2004, the ICOM held the conferences *Museology and Intangible Heritage I and II* (Vieregg, Ed., 2000; Vieregg, Sgoff, Schiller, Eds., 2004), and the ICOM has published the specialised periodical *The International Journal of Intangible Heritage* since 2006. The agenda of the ICOM also takes in the Intangible Cultural Heritage & Museums Project (<https://www.ichandmuseums.eu/en>).

subject of museum interpretation. In this way, the museum can take advantage of the knowledge of communities, groups and individuals in the study and interpretation of collections, while at the same time conferring on these communities a feeling of pride and an awareness of the value of their ICH. This can motivate them to care for and protect it. This takes place primarily through educational programmes, popularisation and the sharing of information. Museums can, however, also become cultural centres and venues for holding events that make it possible to pass on the ICH to further generations. Communities can learn from museums and then help in the identification and documentation of particular features of their ICH (Nikolić Đerić et al., 2020: 28, 53).

Neyrinck et al. (2020: 67) claim that, particularly in Europe, there is still a preponderance of museums which take objects and collections, rather than the initiatives, needs and visions of ICH-communities, as their starting point. This is true even of open-air museums, though they find themselves in a rather different situation. Their principal goal is to reconstruct the historical environment as a whole and “fill it with life” (Drápala, 2006; Brandstettrová, Langer, 2017; Kuminková, *Ed.*, 2019). Collections may play the primary role in the creation of a museum, though caring for them often continues to be subordinate to other priorities. The balance between caring for the collections and other tasks in the interpretation of folklore, craft technologies, the reconstruction of the traditional way of life, farming, etc. is markedly different in favour of the ICH than it is at traditional museums. Neyrinck et al. further develop the theory that “museums [in general] possess great skills in organizing exhibitions on topics related to ICH which might deepen understanding of ICH and how it functions in society, and assist in [...] promoting and raising awareness. They are also good at identifying, documenting and researching aspects of ICH, but find the participatory aspects of ICH-safeguarding substantially more difficult to implement” (Neyrinck et al., 2020: 69; cf. Blake, 2018: 25).² Strengthening the role of communities, groups and individuals and the perception of the museum as a sociocultural environment freed of the authoritative interpretation of history by museum experts and curators was the fundamental idea behind *new museology*, a movement that developed in the 1980s in connection with the emergence of ecomuseums, community museums, neighbourhood museums and other kinds of museum, as is shown by the *Declaration of Quebec: Basic Principles for a New Museology* (Mayrand, 2015: 116–117). “The museology seen as an instrument of citizenship and of communities’ empowerment [...], communities’ democratization and responsibility regarding heritage protection and safeguarding” is the starting point of this article (Nikolić Đerić et al., 2020: 33). At the same time, Patrick J. Boylan emphasises the goal of new museums not to serve merely their visitors, but the entire population of the given area, including its residents, i.e. local communities (Boylan, 2006: 57).

The idea of living museums came about in Scandinavia at the end of the nineteenth century (Rentzhog, 2007), more than a hundred years before the 2003 Convention. This was at a time when museums collected objects primarily for their value as artefacts, their artistic value, their craftwork, age or historical importance (Vergo, 1989). Precious

² According to van Eijnatten and de Nood, museums do not in essence have any reason to strive to secure the viability of individual features of intangible heritage. Their primary need is “to stimulate the hermeneutics of objects, not to actively keep meanings alive” (van Eijnatten, de Nood, 2018: 95).

exhibits could largely be found displayed out of their original context on the shelves and in the display cases. Living museums – or open-air museums – were to take the idea of preserving objects for future generations much further. They focused, first and foremost, on much larger artefacts – vernacular buildings. Such buildings could be filled with all kinds of original fixtures and fittings, and the founders of these museums saw them as an opportunity to mediate to visitors not just tangible culture, but also the intangible context associated with it. Evidence for this can be found in the words of Anders Sandvig, founder of one of the first open-air museums in Lillehammer in Norway in 1907: “As I see Maihaugen, it is to be a collection of homes where one can almost meet the people who lived there, understand their ways of life, their tastes, their work. But it is not merely a chance collection of individual homes that I intend to preserve from destruction and oblivion at Maihaugen. On the contrary, I shall provide a full-scale illustration of a village as a whole.” (Mathisen, Sognli, Hauglid, Hosar, Krekling, 2005: 8). Today’s open-air museums no longer specialise merely in vernacular culture. Many of them also focus on the urban and industrial environment. Open-air museums have, from the beginning, been more closely connected with the principles of the Convention than any other museums.³ The data presented here is based on the many years of experience acquired by the authors, who both work at open-air museums, in communicating with local communities, groups and individuals and documenting and interpreting aspects of intangible heritage in the Czech regions of Horácko, Wallachia and Moravian Slovakia.

THE OPEN-AIR MUSEUM AS AN INSTITUTION

There is no doubt that open-air museums have institutionalised intangible culture from the beginning.⁴ On the one hand, they have the means to provide real help in safeguarding it inside local communities. On the other hand, however, their work also contributes to its decontextualisation and idealisation, particularly in connection with its presentation on museum soil (cf. Wilks, Kelly, 2008). The employees of such museums bear a great responsibility for this reason, since their decisions and conduct may have a real impact on the development of aspects of intangible heritage and influence the way in which ICH is perceived and understood by the public.

The first consideration that often goes entirely undetected, and which not all museum staff are able to deal with in a systematic manner, is the difference between “contemporary” and “historical”, “authentic” and “artificial”. Václav Michalička refers to historical situations modelled at open-air museums as *cultural heritage constructs*, and refers to the reality transferred to the open-air museum environment as a *meta-reality* “that represents a *historical memory* that is materialised and constructed, and therefore easily grasped with the senses” (Michalička, 2019: 53–54). Although Michalička relates this theory primarily to material objects and buildings, it can equally be related

3 The role of museums and other research institutions is directly specified in Article 109 of the *Operational Directives for the Implementation of the Convention (Basic texts, 2020: 51–52)*.

4 The issue of institutionalisation was considered by the round table *Cultural Heritage Between Bearers and Institutional Patronage* held in 2019 by the Department of European Ethnology at Masaryk University.

to intangible heritage. A certain degree of distortion always emerges from the creation of a model based on scientific research, sources and co-operation with bearers of traditions. Ceremonies, customs and crafts are presented at the museum outside their original context, and often in an adapted form that corresponds to the museum's interpretational needs and operational limitations.

The founders of the first Czechoslovak open-air museum in Rožnov pod Radhoštěm were aware of this and even planned for it in 1930: "Villages will send a colourful array of their folk costumes here, though people will also come in modern dress – visitors. They will intrude on the scenes of Wallachia in olden times, but this living museum is not just a museum, it is also an ethnographic theatre, a natural stage for a bygone life. Only this theatre, faithful and true, can preserve the distinctive identity of Wallachia." (Jaroněk, 1930: 36). Dean McCannel calls this aspect of heritage interpretation *staged authenticity* (McCannel, 1973).

Live interpretation at the Wallachian Open-air Museum in Rožnov pod Radhoštěm in the 1920s was indeed created on the basis of a search for the last vestiges of "authentic traditions". Inhabitants of surrounding villages helped the founders of the museum reconstruct and rehearse them, so that they could then present traditional dances, music, crafts, annual customs and family rituals as an integral part of the new museum project to twenty-five thousand visitors to the opening ethnographic festivity *The Wallachian Year* (Hasalík, Ed., 2000). At that time, a number of these traditions were still alive in the local area, or there were at least people available who were able to provide some information about them or perform them in person. Part of this collective memory disappears with every coming generation and it becomes ever more difficult to find people who still know these traditions from their own lives. Unless it is made clear and properly stated, it can be difficult for visitors to distinguish between the traditions that are still alive and part of the culture of local communities and those that belong to history, are no longer being perpetuated, and can now be seen only in a museum.⁵

For museum staff to be able both to distinguish these two levels correctly from the museological viewpoint and to interpret them for their public, it is necessary to base the presentation of intangible heritage on proper research and documentation, ideally in close co-operation with the local communities, groups and individuals that are their custodians.

As is stated by V. Michalička and M. Novotný, one of the possibilities is experimental research, during which the museum staff attempts to revive extinct technologies with the help of surviving witnesses and a body of knowledge assembled in the museum. Open-air museums are then sometimes the only place where this knowledge is preserved (Michalička, 2019; Novotný, 2019).⁶

5 The staff of the open-air museum ASTRA in Sibiu, Romania found that if they present contemporary intangible aspects through contemporary tradition bearers in a participatory manner with the engagement of visitors, the public shows greater interest in visiting the museum and spends more time there than in the case of the traditional interpretation of history (Iancu, 2016: 126–127).

6 The Wallachian Open-air Museum has engaged in this way in the past in, for example, the reconstruction of production of wood charcoal in charcoal stacks, the production of polypore hats and the production of felted cloth stockings. It is currently investigating traditional surface finishes for wood, including oxblood paints, for example. The staff of the open-air museum in Strážnice in southeast Moravia have been engaged in experimental research into earthen architecture for many years. Open-air museums help each other in these areas and welcome and train everyone interested in the kinds of technology necessary in historical preservation.



Shrovetide door-to-door procession: interaction between the masks and the researcher. Photo: Hynek Vojanec

OPEN-AIR MUSEUMS AS PARTNERS

In our experience, communities generally consider an expert interested in the heritage of which they are practitioners as a figure of authority. In our case, this means the staff of the open-air museum. Some community members may be pleased by the interest taken by these staff members, others may find it unpleasant or be indifferent to it. In any case, the expert (researcher) is a stranger to them who comes from a different environment and does not know the details of all the various connections, functions and rules within the community. A situation in which ICH-practitioners “act a part” in front of the researcher occurs extremely frequently, and their manner and testimony need not necessarily be natural or truthful – consciously or unconsciously. The aim of the work of a researcher who is striving to contribute towards the preservation of ICH is to become a partner for the practitioner, to be accepted by the community, and to cease being perceived as a stranger. True knowledge can be attained only after trust is established between the practitioner and the researcher (cf. Nikolić Đerić et al., 2020: 41).

Partnership with a researcher may be rewarding for tradition bearers in that it allows them to make use of the knowledge gathered by the scholar or the heritage institution represented by him or her. This partnership must not be unilateral, but should be based on mutual co-operation. One of the principal values the museum is able to offer (and should offer) is information. Data and collection objects assembled over many years of research are a rich source from which communities, groups and individuals may draw

in an attempt to safeguard or revive their ICH. An artisan engaged in a certain traditional technology, for example, can draw on documents stored in the institution's archive and study elaborations of the items he or she makes as recorded in the museum collection. Documentation on items in the museum collection provides additional information of the kind he or she would not otherwise have access to. The curator or researcher also knows how to mediate contact with surviving witnesses who can help ICH-practitioners in the search for paths leading to the reconstruction of traditional craft methods.

The artisan obtains information, contacts and, as a result, a market for his or her goods, no matter whether this means these products being bought by the museum and used for the purpose of presentation or collection or the chance of presenting the given technology at the museum and selling the products on site. In return, the member of museum staff obtains information on the contemporary use of the craft method, on technological innovations and the use of final products, and on the role played by the craft in the life of the artisan and his or her community. The staff member may also obtain a reliable interpreter who is a bearer of a tradition that he or she develops and shapes in connection with the needs of contemporary society. The process also works in a similar way with other intangible traditions.

We illustrate this partnership principle with two examples from the Vysočina Open-air Museum – the weaver Josef Fidler and the practitioners of the Shrovetide door-to-door processions in the Hlinsko area – and the example of the Wallachian dance the “Odzemek”, with which the Wallachian Open-air Museum in Rožnov pod Radhoštěm is associated.⁷

Josef Fidler: the chenille phenomenon

Since 2012, the weaver Josef Fidler has devoted part of his life to reviving a unique technology for the production of chenille fabrics that originated in France and spread to the Czech Lands in the middle of the nineteenth century. Their production ceased here, however, at the beginning of the 1980s. The last place where chenille was produced in the Czech Republic in the 1980s was the production co-operative VZOR in Hlinsko. Josef Fidler shared his attempts to revive the traditional method of producing chenille with experts at the Vysočina Open-air Museum, who introduced him to Otakar Volejník (born 1927), one of the last surviving witnesses, with whom they had been in contact since the 1980s. Volejník had held a managerial position at the VZOR production co-operative and donated some simple machinery and some products to the Vysočina Open-air Museum when the company closed. He then continued to work with the museum, where he assembled and repaired historical weaving looms and gave advice during the installation of exhibits and temporary exhibitions. Josef Fidler meeting Otakar Volejník was a fundamental turning point in attempts to revive the traditional technology for the production of chenille. In time, Otakar Volejník gave Fidler records of production processes and production standards that he had rescued and kept for long years after the company VZOR had been wound up. He also gave him advice on

⁷ Both museums are part of the National Open-air Museum, though they are located in different regions and have only been connected institutionally since 2018.

a number of specific matters and was delighted that chenille production had returned to Hlinsko. Josef Fidler is currently the only producer of chenille fabrics not merely in the Czech Republic, but in the whole of central Europe.⁸ He says himself that he would never have been able to make chenille in his weaving shop without the help of Vysočina Open-air Museum. The museum, moreover, provided him with premises for his workshop in one of its exhibition buildings at the Betlém conservation area in Hlinsko, where visitors to the museum can watch Josef Fidler at work.

Shrovetide door-to-door processions and masks

Another example of the perception of the researcher by the local community comes from the village of Vortová (Pardubice Region, Chrudim District, population 232). The idea of including the local Shrovetide door-to-door processions in a proposal for nomination for inscription on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity was initially supported by just some of the practitioners and inhabitants. The mayor at the time was in favour of the idea from the beginning and tried to convince the people of the village that it was a worthwhile cause that could help keep the tradition alive. He took representatives of Vysočina Open-air Museum to see local inhabitants and helped overcome their scepticism.

The fundamental turning point was their meeting with the man who made the special costume for the *strawman's* mask. He invited the researchers to prepare material used in the production of the costume. While they were doing this, he related his personal memories of the time when he wore the mask himself and shared his personal feelings spontaneously about the tradition and what it meant to him. His account was later documented in a short film. The mayor also initiated a project that involved local people bringing their own photographs and other memorabilia from Shrovetide door-to-door processions held in former years to the Village Council. This project met with a great response and a great deal of material was assembled, which the mayor then had scanned to create a commemorative CD.



Josef Fidler and Otakar Volejník sharing experience concerning chenille production. Photo: Oto Volejník

⁸ His production can be seen at <https://www.zinylka.cz>.

Co-operation with the mayor, as the official representative of the village, and other important figures in the village, former and active practitioners of the tradition, was a crucial moment in the perception of the researchers by the community. Moreover, during several meetings organised by the village council the agreement of the majority of the inhabitants and practitioners of the tradition was obtained for inscription on the UNESCO Representative List. The trust of the local people continues to this day, and the inhabitants of Vortová share their personal feelings and concerns regarding the preservation of Shrovetide door-to-door processions, seek advice concerning innovations and invite the researchers to private meetings and events.

We can state on the basis of our experience that gaining the trust of the local community is a long process. At first, the museum staff were tolerated guests, but did not become part of the community. A fundamental breakthrough occurred after a considerable period of time had passed, and first and foremost after the Shrovetide door-to-door processions and masks in the villages of the Hlinsko area were inscribed onto the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010.⁹ This act gave the researchers a place and a role in the community.

The “Odzemek” dance

The popularity of the Wallachian Open-air Museum and its success with visitors are based in part on an extensive range of programmes and the interpretation of ICH at more than fifty events every year. Of all these aspects of intangible heritage, one holds a special place – the male solo dance the “Odzemek”¹⁰ which almost fell into oblivion at the threshold of the twentieth century. It was saved and revitalised thanks to a few individuals and the folklore movement, and is today an inseparable part of stage folklore and, to some extent, living folklore (Románková, 2014). The Wallachian Open-air Museum first became involved in the development of the “Odzemek” in 1925, when it was presented at the *Wallachian Year* festival. The dance was presented at the museum by newly formed folk dance groups at folk performances from the 1950s onwards. A regular “Odzemek” competition has been held by the Wallachian Open-air Museum since 1987 under the supervision of a jury comprised of former dancers and experienced active dancers. *The School of Young “Odzemek” Dancers* – a week-long course held at the museum (and under the patronage of the museum) every year since 2009 – has had a fundamental influence on the preservation of the tradition. Young men who want to learn the dance can master their dance skills and gain an awareness of the history of the “Odzemek” and the folk culture of the Wallachian region here. This takes place in the traditional manner, with the dance being passed on to the young by older and experienced dancers.

Almost all the dancers among the instructors, participants and competition juries are members of folklore groups and have, therefore, been connected to the museum

9 The nomination documentation is available at the UNESCO website <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/shrovetide-door-to-door-processions-and-masks-in-the-villages-of-the-hlinecko-area-00397> and has also been published (Blahůšek, Vojancová, 2011).

10 The modern history of the “Odzemek” and the role of the museum in its safeguarding is considered in detail in the dissertation by Eva Kuminková-Románková (Románková, 2016).



Intergenerational transmission of the odzemek dance during the The School of Young “Odzemek” Dancers. Photo: Jan Kolář

through these groups for many years as regular performers.¹¹ This is a considerable advantage that the museum gains from this partnership. The museum also gets the opportunity of following and documenting the “Odzemek” and all its important practitioners since it has open and direct access to them. The staff of the museum who are involved with the “Odzemek” have established strong connections with the dancers. And since they are themselves active in the folklore movement, the dancers welcome their participation, assistance and moral support at events associated with the “Odzemek” more than they do in the case of employees who do not have a relationship to folklore, and see them naturally as insiders.

The support of the museum is also important and irreplaceable to the dancers, giving them a partner with whom they can discuss the development and direction of the tradition as well as material facilities for holding the *School* and competitions. The museum documents all activities connected to the “Odzemek” that are held here and has no problem with making this documentation, along with its collection of publications and archive sources, available at any time to dancers and other people interested. The Wallachian Open-air Museum prepared a nomination of the Wallachian “Odzemek”

11 The majority of instructors and juries are non-professionals. They have not been trained beyond the regular activities of their folk dance groups. All of them learned the dance from other experienced dancers in a non-formal manner. There are very few exceptions who have been members of professional folk dance ensembles.

for the national inventory – *List of Intangible Elements of Traditional Folk Culture of the Czech Republic* – in 2012 at the instigation of dancers and with their guidance.¹²

The Council for the Wallachian “Odzemek” – an advisory body of the Director of the Wallachian Open-air Museum – was established in 2011 on the basis of this relationship. Its status as an advisory body is rather formal. The council actually serves to establish dialogue between the staff of the museum, the Wallachian Folklore Association (which represents regional folklore groups) and “Odzemek” dancers. Researchers meet up here regularly with dancers and organisers of folklore life in the region, plan joint activities, review the results of past activities, and discuss the development of the dance, innovations, new generations of performers, identification and documentation and, last but not least, the Convention and the possible inscription of the “Odzemek” on one of the UNESCO’s lists of ICH.

We have used three examples to show how open-air museums work with local communities, how they establish a relationship with them, and what benefits this relationship has for both parties. The moment at which the researcher ceases to be a stranger in the community raises many questions related to the ethics and responsibility of his or her work.¹³ It is a great advantage for researchers to be insiders, though they must, nevertheless, continue to maintain a professional distance from the studied tradition and its bearers in as much as they do not permit their behaviour or comments to influence the development of the tradition itself or the attitude of its practitioners in any way.

Despite accepting the researcher among them, the bearers of traditions and their communities continue to see the researcher’s opinion as being of the utmost erudition and, therefore, universally valid – all the more so if the researcher has been instrumental in safeguarding and promoting their heritage with the support of the museum. They will, for this reason, sometimes ask the researcher fundamental questions and demand decisions about how to handle their heritage and about what is “right” and what is “wrong”. It is not the task of the researcher to contribute towards determining the direction of the development the heritage is to take or its preservation in a certain form. Researchers should, from the ethical viewpoint, remain observers or providers of the support requested by the ICH-practitioners themselves.

OPEN-AIR MUSEUMS AND THE PUBLIC

Experience shows that heritage institutions, including open-air museums, have an influence not merely on the communities they study, but also on a large section of the public, as the public also sees these institutions as authorities in their field and considers the aspects of ICH presented by museums as “primordial” and credible. Uninformed members of the public often cannot easily distinguish when a presented tradition is a reconstruction, a stylisation or “original”. The museum staff are also often not aware

12 For more information see <https://www.nul.k.cz/2017/01/30/1380> or <https://www.nmvp.cz/roznov/odborna-cinnost/valassky-odzemek>.

13 Questions of museum ethics were considered by the seminar *The Museum and Ethics* held by the Masaryk Museum in Hodonín in 2019.

of their responsibility in this respect and contribute unwittingly to the distortion of the image of the presented tradition by failing to draw sufficient attention to these things.

Open-air museums work with several kinds of interpreters. Bearers of ICH elements usually do not give stylised performances; they present the ICH that is part of their everyday lives. This is how Josef Fidler works, for example. His workshop is located in an exhibition building at a museum. Nevertheless, he demonstrates his technology in the exact way in which he uses it to make products for his customers that are traditional as well as modern and adapted to contemporary demand. He demonstrates his craft in modern dress and is surrounded by contemporary aids that are part of everyday life (e.g. he dries his chenille scarves on a modern clothes drier).

The villagers from Vortová are invited by Vysočina Open-air Museum every year to present their door-to-door procession as part of a programme for the public a week before the actual event held in their village. They find themselves in a different environment in which they may be taken aback by the fact that visitors to the museum do not respond or interact with the masks in the same way as the inhabitants of the village, as they do not know the contexts of the custom and do not have any connections with the participants (Vojancová, 2019: 150). On one hand, the museum takes the procession out of its natural environment and context, while on the other hand this is the best way of acquainting the public with the real tradition and its practitioners and reinforcing awareness of the ICH of the region.¹⁴ At the same time the museum provides the local community with a certain protection by redirecting the interest of tourists in a tradition inscribed on the UNESCO list by promoting and offering a chance to see it in a place sought out by tourists. This means that strangers do not inconvenience the villagers during the actual procession in the village, which prevents undesirable changes and the possible stylisation of the tradition. Co-operation between the open-air museum and the local community reflects the needs of safeguarding and establishes a balance.



Vysočina Open-air Museum: Craftsman at a museum event in clothing with historicising features. Photo: Ilona Vojancová

¹⁴ The Wallachian Open-air Museum works in a similar way with Shrovetide, Easter and Saint Nicholas door-to-door processions.

Another group of interpreters at open-air museums is made up of artisans who also make a living from their craft, but wear traditional dress for their presentations at the museum, try to speak in a dialect that they do not normally use, or play the part of a constructed historical figure in some other way to evoke the impression of the illusory “authenticity” of a historical situation. They may do so at their own initiative or at the instigation of the museum. Some artisans or other bearers of traditional knowledge do so in the belief that this is expected of them by the museum and better evokes the atmosphere of a historical age, particularly if they are invited to take part in museum fairs. In many cases, however, this results in an imitation of a traditional folk costume or clothing with historicising features and tends to make a rather anachronistic impression in combination with a sales stand and the museum environment. In such cases, the museum interpretation suffers more than it gains, as these people do not base their performance on profound knowledge of history but on their own feelings and assumptions. The rather low level of knowledge of traditional folk culture among the public that we see and the large number of entities, individuals and media that unwittingly, though systematically, play a part in shaping its stereotypical image also contribute to these situations.

The strongest player in this respect since the middle of the twentieth century have been the folklore groups that are engaged in the presentation of staged folk music and dance with the use of stylised folk costumes. Open-air museums are also dependent to a great extent on folklore groups if they want to present performing arts as an integral part of the ICH.

The museum staff are faced with the considerable task of searching continuously for a balance between the presentation of “true” historical reality corresponding to the time focus of the museum and the productions of contemporary bearers of traditions who either interpret traditions as existing in new and modern conditions or cast themselves in the illusory and non-existent reality that Václav Michalička writes about (Michalička, 2011; Michalička, 2019). Both these sources are available to members of museum staff. They can also draw on their own research and the museum collections, and study elements of the ICH themselves, learn them and present them to visitors to the best of their ethics and knowledge. This is also a widely accepted method of interpretation at open-air museums. Even so, however, the museum always creates an artificial image – Michalička’s *meta-reality*, a materialised historical memory that can be grasped by the senses (Michalička, 2019: 53–54). Since we cannot go back into history, there is only one route open to the museum staff – systematic cultivation of the public and the unceasing endeavour to raise awareness.

OPEN-AIR MUSEUMS AND THE STATE

With the adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, the protection and promotion of traditional folk culture¹⁵ obtained the backing

15 Primarily elements that have roots in the rural environment and that therefore fall into the category “traditional folk culture” still continue to be considered intangible cultural heritage in the Czech Republic. Research conducted among open-air museums, however, indicates that they see the concept of intangible cultural heritage much more broadly.

of a legal standard. Specific measures for the implementation of this protection and promotion were drawn up in the Czech Republic on the basis of this document in the form of a *Strategy of Improved Care for Traditional Folk Culture in the Czech Republic* (Ministerstvo kultury České republiky, 2016) which created a functional system of responsibilities. In each region, one of the museums run by the regional authority was selected as an accredited regional unit for traditional folk culture. These units are devoted to the identification and documentation of traditional folk culture in the regions on the basis of tasks arising from the *Strategy*. They are also responsible for maintaining regional inventories of ICH and a system of awards for artisans safeguarding traditional technologies. The National Institute of Folk Culture – a state organisation of which part is the Museum of Villages of Southeast Moravia – has been entrusted with overarching tasks and jurisdictions. The Institute is officially responsible for methodical leadership and the practical implementation of the Convention in this country.

The exception among the accredited regional units is the Pardubice Region, in which the accredited regional unit is Vysočina Open-air Museum, which is part of the National Open-air Museum and is therefore a state organisation rather than a regional one. This institution was a clear choice for the representatives of the Pardubice Region in view of the fact that Vysočina Open-air Museum was, and is, highly respected in the area of traditional folk culture by the general public and politicians in the region.¹⁶

The public does not see this area as a region with a wealth of surviving elements of folk culture, for which reason the political representatives failed to devote the corresponding attention to this issue at the beginning of their work with the museum. In time, however, the staff of Vysočina Open-air Museum managed to convince the representatives of the regional authority of the need to support and protect its ICH. Alongside the regional *List of Intangible Elements of Traditional Folk Culture* and a system of awards for notable artisans, the Pardubice Region is also the only one in the country to have also introduced a special category of subsidies for the area of folk culture. Thanks to close co-operation with the open-air museum and connections established with its staff, the regional authorities are now aware of the importance of safeguarding, protecting and promoting intangible culture just as forcefully as tangible culture and natural sites. They appreciate their co-operation with Vysočina Open-air Museum and take advantage of its work for the development of the region.

The staff of open-air museums also play an important role at the national level. Evidence of this can be found in the representation of current and former open-air museum employees in the National Council for Traditional Culture, an advisory body to the Minister of Culture. Five of its eighteen members worked or continue to work at four different open-air museums, while traditional museums are represented by just three members. The staff of open-air museums also contribute to the work of other advisory bodies of the Ministry of Culture. This is due to the fact that both communities and political representatives at the regional and national level consider open-air museums entirely relevant and essential partners in caring for the ICH of the country.

16 Other regions have also delegated this task to institutions running open-air museums, such as the Regional Museum in Kolín (The Central Bohemian Region – The Museum of Folk Architecture in Kouřim) and the Ethnographic Museum of Dr Hostaš in Klatovy (The Plzeň Region – Chanovice Open-air Museum).



*Wallachian Open-air Museum: Presentation of folk dance and folk costumes by a local folk dance group.
Photo: Jan Kolář*

Thanks to this access, the staff of open-air museums can exert a considerable degree of influence on decision-making and legislative processes. They can directly affect the creation of the conditions and the legislative framework within which the protection of the ICH takes place.

CONCLUSION

Heritage institutions play a fundamental role in shaping views and opinions on the nature of cultural heritage. It is clear that the principles of new museology offer a path towards enhancing the role of open-air museums in society. The trend towards open and participative museums forces ethnologists, curators and other staff members at open-air museums to re-evaluate their role as authors of valid interpretations of history and, in the case of ICH, the present day. Partnership with communities, groups and individuals allows them to explore and mine irreplaceable sources of information, although it does, however, sometimes place them in the role of arbiters and presents them with complicated ethical dilemmas. As soon as they become involved in the safeguarding process, they cease to be mere observers and inevitably become co-creators.¹⁷

¹⁷ The most sophisticated system of co-operation with bearers of traditions can evidently be found at the Hungarian Open-air Museum in Szentendre (Csonka-Takács, 2016). Further examples are given by, for example, Janet Blake (Blake, 2018: 25–27).

The state administration has the means to support the safeguarding of the ICH or prioritise it over other public interests. Partnership with politicians allows open-air museums to intervene directly in shaping favourable conditions for the continued existence of intangible elements. This partnership must, however, also be forged in a purposeful manner.

Finally, open-air museums, as heritage institutions, influence the view of traditional folk culture held by broad swaths of society. The public often considers what they present, and how they present it, rather uncritically as reality. According to M. L. Stefano, museums also place great emphasis on past events and customs, which she sees as an obstacle to safeguarding efforts (Stefano, 2009: 121). Every open-air museum has, therefore, a great responsibility to separate consistently the real from the stylised, the historical from the contemporary (cf. Rutherford-Morrison, 2015). Raising awareness is a key task for open-air museums in relation to the public and an area in which museums can be helped by ICH-practitioners, who can generally become the best interpreters and can teach the museum staff things they do not anticipate. Museum presentations become more genuine, more credible and more faithful through experimentation and close co-operation with these people.

Museum employees are public figures – they are continually moving between communities, the public and the state, and perform a variety of roles. One moment, they are negotiators representing communities, the next, they are negotiating with ICH-practitioners in the name of the state. Most often, however, they are representing the interests of their institutions in respect of all parties. Every day they take on their share of the responsibility for safeguarding the ICH of their municipality, their region or even the state. Do they need new skills to do this that they have not needed in their traditional everyday museum work? The experience of our two open-air museums shows that it is absolutely fundamental to establish the kind of relationship with bearers of traditions that allows them to establish a trustful relationship with the researcher, to be themselves and make it possible for them to learn from each other. As masters of their intangible heritage, ICH-practitioners are experts who the museum can rely on. In return, they obtain important historical information from the museum that inspires them to return to the values of their predecessors.

Acknowledgments:

The peer-reviewed scientific article received institutional support for the long-term conceptual development of a research organisation provided by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic.

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