

Lecture 22: Audio-Visual Documentation of Performing Arts at Minpaku by Dr. Shota FUKUOKA, National Museum of Ethnology, Japan

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In this lecture, Dr. Fukuoka discussed the aim of the National Museum of Ethnology or MINPAKU, which is to promote a general understanding and awareness of peoples, societies and cultures around the world through the collection and conservation of ethnographic materials and public exhibitions. In this regard, Dr. Fukuoka shared his visual documentation experiences in Indonesia and Cambodia. He also mentioned challenges he faced when he produced videos for educational purposes, and emphasized that practitioners working with visual media must respect the codes of secrecy that may surround certain practices and always obtain consent from culture bearers before commencing documentation.

1. Minpaku: A research center for cultural resources and cultural documentation¹

Minpaku houses a broad range of ethnographic collections and data which can contribute to and enhance ICH studies. Visual documentation projects, which are a part of the Research Center for Cultural Resources, play a crucial role in recording intangible knowledge. Since opening in April 2004, the institution has conducted in-depth developmental research to facilitate the systematic management and digitization of cultural resources. Materials are shared with other research institutes and every attempt is made to make them accessible to the general public. The Center is also involved in planning and coordinating the implementation and promotion of research projects in order to make cultural resources more widely available to researchers and society.

Dr. Fukuoka shared his fieldwork experience in Southeast Asia in the late 1990s and early 2000s. He conducted ethnographic research on "wayang kulit"² performances in Indonesia, and documented live performances of "sbek thom"³ in Cambodia. He cited both projects in order to reflect challenges and to explore appropriate uses of visual materials taking into account both public interests and desires of culture bearers.

2. Case 1: documenting traditional performing arts in Java

Dr. Fukuoka's film documentation project was conducted in December 1995 and was used for a Minpaku exhibit on Southeast Asia. The film was intended to introduce traditional performing arts in the region. Wayang kulit is a kind of shadow puppet theater in which one puppeteer operates all puppets while telling a story, singing, and directing the accompanying gamelan music. Most of stories are based on the epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana. Generally, the performances last for 7-8 hours, and cover a wide range of emotions and states, including philosophical, humorous, fierce, and "nonsense behaviors." Initially, Dr. Fukuoka and his team planned to document a whole performance to show during the opening hours of Minpaku. The entire performance could potentially be screened to illustrate various facets of wayang kulit. However, the plan had to be abandoned when the team realized that this method would be too expensive

¹ Read in more detail at: <http://www.minpaku.ac.jp/english/research/activity/organization/rccr>

² The term 'wayang' is the Javanese word for shadow, or bayang in standard Indonesian and Malay. In modern vernacular Javanese and Indonesian language, wayang is most often associated with the puppet itself or the whole puppet theatre performance. Read in more detail at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wayang>

due to the amount of film needed. The second option was to document one random scene from an episode, in order to convey the atmosphere and experience of a live performance. However, the performers refused the proposal because they believed that showing a disconnected section would disrupt the flow of the performance and result in an incomplete story. The episode would be removed from its proper context. The third plan was to condense the performance into a one-hour presentation. The performers were dissatisfied with this kind of shortened performance, as it seemed like something designed specifically for tourists. Dr. Fukuoka insisted that researchers must reconcile their research plans with the desires of performing troupes, and the documentation must be a collaborative endeavor.

3. Case 2: documenting traditional performing arts in Cambodia

In November and December 1999, Dr. Fukuoka and his team documented several forms of Cambodian performing arts in Phnom Penh. One of the performances was an episode of "sbek thom,"³ or large shadow puppet theater in Siem Reap. The following year, they returned to document the entire sbek thom repertoire. In fact, sbek thom used to be quite popular before the Cambodian Genocide, but during this period of turmoil, many performers died.

In the 1990s, performers were given a new set of sbek. At that time, Master Ty Chien, the only puppet master who survived the genocide, was over 80 years old. Young people from the community were not yet capable of inheriting the role of narrator, and anxiety existed about the transmission of the art form. In 2000, seven consecutive nights of performances were recorded for two hours each night. The film also included the process of making puppets and interviews with Master Chien. Unfortunately, he passed away later in the same year.

During the documentation project, Master Chien refused to write down the narrative text for fear of it being stolen. He wished to preserve the secrecy of the repertoire, and his decision was based on the values of sbek thom and the social order of Siem Reap. Later, in 2009, Dr. Fukuoka went back to Siem Reap to meet younger members of the puppeteer group and to show them the film. Master Chien's grandson now leads the troupe.

This meeting provided an opportunity for troupe members to reflect on past and future performances. They requested that the program be presented in Khmer language in order to show to children in Cambodia. Currently, the Minpaku team is still discussing how to show the video to the public.

4. Issues in AV documentation

Dr. Fukuoka concluded that AV documentation must be viewed within the process and context of transmission, encompassing practices, promotion, and education for the wider public. The power of the video to standardize an art form or a performance must also be considered. On the one hand, younger generations can learn from videos; however, the videos only document one particular performance, when in fact performances vary greatly from one to another.

We also must consider the ownership and stewardship of the resources. For example, is the internet an appropriate platform for promotion and transmission? Can performers access the internet? Discussions of the appropriateness of the internet as a forum must take into account the digital divide.

³ It depicts stories from the Ramayana. The puppets are made of cow leather (sbek) on which a scene from the tale is carved (screen). The performers act both in front of and behind the screen. Dance-like movements are the major characteristics. The narration is the most vital element to describe the scene and tell old tales.

With regard to the public domain, even documentary films can be copyrighted, but copyright does not exist for traditional performing arts. Therefore, we must think about the right to control the use of the documentaries and related materials.

