IF WE DO NOT KNOW OUR PAST, WE HAVE NO FUTURE

The importance of a museum and a home district for local identity

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Has the concept of home district and a local museum any importance for the community? Do local museums play a role in the construction of local identity? A research project on these issues carried out by the authors has found that in small agricultural places in Finland the most important form of museum activity is to collect local arts and crafts. This helps to maintain affection for the home district and to support local identity. A local museum helps the members of the community to understand the present through the past.

THE STUDY AND ITS BACKGROUND

During the years 1997–2000 a museum development project (within the Finnish Museo-projekti) aimed at developing home district and specialist museums, was carried out in the subregions of Ylivieska and Nivala-Haapajärvi. The main purpose of the project was to finish the basic work with the local museums operating in the area, find specialist areas for each museum and enhance cooperation regarding circulating exhibitions and informing the media.

The original plan was that the project would consist of three phases, but only the first two were carried out. The first phase concentrated

on basic museum work. The project workers tried to find themes for the museums to concentrate on in their collecting, their exhibitions and their recording of oral tradition. In the second phase basic exhibitions were designed for the museums reflecting their special areas. A small exhibition was made in each museum that would describe how the region had first come to be inhabited. Material for educational purposes was designed for the schools. The third phase, which was never carried out, was supposed to link the museums more closely to tourism by planning thematic routes for cultural travellers in the district.

The authors worked for the Museo-projekti during 1998 and 1999. We then realized that

112 everyday museum work in non-professionally maintained local museums is sometimes very far removed from the theoretical principles discussed in museology. With this in mind we decided to write our thesis in museology on this development project.

Our data consisted of 53 personal and 13 written interviews. We have divided our informants into three groups: amateur museum workers, museum visitors and municipal politicians. In the following, we will describe the similarities and differences in the views of these three main groups.

We define amateur museum workers as people, who work enthusiastically for their home district in their own community. They want to save, preserve and cherish the cultural features of the district. The interviews with amateur museum workers also include the interviews with the chairmen of the Home District Union of the Kalajoki valley and the Pyhäjoki region, the regional museum researcher at the museum of NorthBothnia¹ and the project manager for the Museoprojekti. Municipal politicians are represented by the chairmen of municipal councils during the electoral period 1996–2000, the executive managers of the Ylivieska and Nivala-Haapajärvi subregions and the only MP in the area. Occasional museum visitors are included in the visitor group. They filled in a questionnaire we had designed, which was available at local museums throughout the summer of 2000. The interviewees could also participate in further interviews if they stated their willingness to do so in the questionnaire. The purpose of the questionnaire was both to obtain visitor informants and to discover more about the visitor profiles of each museum.

ESSENTIAL CONCEPTS

The concept *home district* is closely connected to people's experience of their environment which means that everyone forms a subjective view of their home district. A person's environment can be divided into physical, cultural, social, economic, political and mental aspects.² All of these different aspects and the social relations and emotional ties connected with them come together when people form a mental image of their home district. In other words, the idea home district is closely connected with mental images. People's stories of their home districts describe their inner reality. Affection for the home district, therefore, is a very personal attachment towards a certain place and defining a certain place as the home district is based on subjective views.

Identity is not a static, ready-made product, but one that changes whether it is the identity of an individual or of a group of people. Closely linked concepts are for example the "I", myself and the image of myself. In the broadest sense, identity is the realization of oneself and one's existence. In a more restricted sense, it is the knowledge of being different from but also, simultaneously, similar to other people.³ Identity is the general understanding that people have about themselves as functioning individuals, as targets of their own and other's perceptions. Everyday issues, such as work and the place where you live, are connected to one's identity. Identity is constructed throughout a person's lifetime.⁴ In cultural anthropology identity is often understood as group identity which people form as members of a certain group and which describes the group as a whole.⁵ Identification means the process through which an individual identifies with a regional or social group, in other words, feels a together-

ness with it.⁶

Collective identity is a cultural phenomenon. Culture consists of meanings, values and views that people adopt and which they also produce through their actions. Culture exists not only in the minds of people as ideas and thoughts but it can also be seen in the ways they act and behave and in the material institutions that they participate in, alone or together with others. Culture is a central concept in the research into collective identity.⁷

Local identity can be considered as a group connection which is assumed under certain conditions. The important thing in the experience of identity is the feeling of continuity. A group would maintain its identity even if all its members were to change. Local identity is based on continuity as well as integration between the members of the group. In our text local identity is individual awareness in relation to one's own local community.

The ideological background behind the founding of local museums

HOME DISTRICT IDEOLOGY IN FINLAND

During national romanticism eager research into home districts began in Finland and its importance was emphasized much more than before. Systematic collection work by the Society of Finnish Literature (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura), founded in 1831, created a network of field workers, laying the foundation for the ideological preservation of local arts and crafts. In the late 19th century ordinary people were persuaded to join in the research into their own environment and cul-

tural heritage. The first regional history society was founded in Lohja in 1894. At first the most important function of these associations was research into local history and countryside.⁸

Today the aim of preserving local arts and crafts is a general development of the home district. The areas of preservation are considered to be cultural and folklore work, environmental protection and care and active home district politics. The importance of the home district is introduced through museums and publications. In addition the associations are preserving the distinctive characteristics of the home district for example by maintaining and organizing home district archives, community houses and parties. The associations are active parts in discussions about the home district, e.g. concerning town planning and environmental issues.⁹

THE BIRTH OF LOCAL MUSEUMS

The regional and local museums were set up following the example of the Swedish Nordiska Museet (founded in 1891), their purpose being to exhibit the peasant culture of their own area. Museums and the home district movement had common objectives as both these ideological movements were in close contact with the nationalism of the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. The first local museum in Finland was founded in Raahe in 1862. In agricultural municipalities preservation activities usually began by collecting objects for exhibitions and the founding of a museum. In practice, the local museum ideology was adopted in the countryside in the early 20th century.¹⁰

The post-war period was a time of great change in Finland. Local, provincial and na-

114 tional identity was emphasized and the national culture was valued and encouraged. In those days national and local regional history societies were established and through their work a local museum was founded in almost every municipality. People collected, i.e. "saved", objects from the disappearing agricultural way of life in the museums, but then time stood still for a while. There was a break in the preservation work and, therefore, the memories of industrialization and urbanization are poorly recorded and documented. The collections in local museums are mainly intelligible only to knowledgeable visitors, but for anyone who is not familiar with the peasant culture, mere objects tell hardly any stories or provide any experiences.¹¹

It is mostly thanks to the regional history societies that almost every region in Finland nowadays has an exhibition or museum. Sometimes the maintenance of a vast open air museum has become such an overwhelming task for the regional history association that the museum has been donated to the municipality which has then assumed the major responsibility for its maintenance. After the donation the regional history society has usually continued to participate actively in developing the museum.¹²

Some people suspect that the time of local museums has passed but they are unaware of the fact that in recent years, worldwide, such museums have been the centre of discussion for having committed themselves to the preservation of the identity and tradition of communities. It is only that nowadays they are called by a different name: ecomuseums. The name comes from Greek and means home district and identity. Finnish local museums are therefore very up-to-date regarding their objectives but there is a great deal of work to be

done regarding the development of their methods.¹³

Museums represent the memory, emotion and consciousness of our society. Their purpose is not to produce culture themselves but to help the people produce it and keep it alive. By collecting and exhibiting specimens of culture, museums maintain identity and make it stronger. They help people understand the world around them and this requires assessment of reality, past and present. This means that museums contribute to people's quality of life. The educational role of museums is also considered important – sometimes it is thought to be their only role.¹⁴

Home district of the informants

HOME DISTRICTS PROVIDE ROOTS FOR AMATEUR MUSEUM WORKERS

The amateur museum workers in our research area do not describe their home district in great detail but usually think that the past and history were emphasized. This can be seen in the emphasis of the roots and the background of an individual and a community. People who have been involved in local museums for a long time seem to have adopted a historical aspect to their understanding of home district through their own work.

Amateur museum workers consider the meaning of the home district to be very important, probably even more than outsiders usually realize. The home district provides roots in people's lives and understanding them allows the world to be perceived in the right way. The foundations of a person's life are laid in the home district. According to amateur

museum workers, a person perceives the world in a circular fashion with the innermost circle being the place of birth and the widening circle the regional, national and even global levels. Some amateur museum workers emphasized the importance of the home district after Finland joined the European Union. Internationalization has also changed the concept together with a change in our way of life. It can be understood both as the place of birth and as one's current environment and people can have several home regions during their lives.

According to amateur museum workers people typically form an attachment to a certain place or environment which then forms the range of meanings of an individual's home district. It is hard to define the meaning exactly. The amateur workers find that the concept is very personal as a result, among other things, of the current mobile way of life. Some saw the home district as the foundation of local culture, some thought of it as a link to history and the past but also to social questions and environmental issues. They think that social questions become important to people when they concern their own home district. Thus the home district was seen as the foundation of identity and a guiding factor for its inhabitants.

Some amateurs think that the home district should be the starting point in everything but people have been alienated from it because, among other things, of the flood of information and mobile way of life. It is not as important for everyone or the importance is not always understood. A specific place cannot become imprinted if people are forced to move many times during their childhood. According to some the importance of home district increases with age and people start to miss it or move back there. They also think that many

people still involved in earning a living would like to return and work there but small places often cannot provide jobs suited to their educational qualifications.

In the interviews with amateur museum workers preservation of local arts and crafts and the activity of regional history societies were integrated in the concept of home district. These activities have a great impact on finding a local identity or making it stronger. Preservation of local arts and crafts has changed considerably in recent years and does not only include museum work in that there is both a material and an immaterial side to the preservation. Nowadays interests related to preservation have become broader including for example genealogy because individuals are striving to obtain more in-depth and more personal information about their own roots and their past. The preservation includes all kinds of development activities in the place of residence and is not only carried out by regional history associations anymore. For some of the amateurs the home district, developing it and keeping it alive are challenges by means of which people living in the region or municipality should be able to keep it vital. Preservation offers roots and continuity for the local people and also a way to root people who have moved into the region and help them understand the present through the past.

HOME DISTRICTS PROVIDE PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND MENTAL IMAGES FOR VISITORS

The natural environment was a very important part of the home district for the visitors. It was sometimes described in great detail but in other cases the beautiful landscapes of the place or region were only mentioned briefly.

116 It should be noted that in almost every case the landscapes of the home municipality were more special, more beautiful and very distinct compared to the scenery in neighbouring places. In addition to the descriptions of beautiful countryside the answers included stories about the agricultural scenery which was usually considered typical of the area. The cultural scenery was also mentioned in the descriptions of the home region and home municipality. Corn fields with barns that are typical of the area were a source of pride for the visitors.

All visitors would have liked to show the buildings in their home municipality to an outsider. Many people mentioned municipal centres with their services, such as libraries, town halls and certain residential areas, as places worth showing to people from outside. Industrial plants and areas were often mentioned and their importance to the economy and migration was emphasized. In some cases some historically important buildings, such as railway stations, which had brought innovations to the countryside, were mentioned. The church was mentioned in the descriptions of the home municipality as often as the scenery. The importance of church and religion could be seen in the answers in almost every interview.

According to the visitors the changes in society have had an effect on how highly people value their home district and how the concept has changed. Nowadays people move much more often to study and work than they used to do in the early 20th century. The home district used to be where people were born and where they stayed for the rest of their active lives. Today this is not always true, and people may, so to speak, have several home districts.

The visitors who had lived in the same place all their lives justified the importance of the

home district with the fact that they had become attached to it during the years. Some interviewees had been forced to leave their home district because of work or study, but they had nevertheless returned, sometimes after many years. They justified their return with a longing for the home district and a need to go back to their roots. They had not been able to feel at home in a strange place and life there had not felt good. Personal relationships in the home district had also had an influence on many people's decision to return.

It was quite clearly stated in the answers of those who had moved away from their birth place that they missed their home district and felt their birth place was their home district even though they had not lived there for years. For them it meant roots and they emphasized the importance of the district on the emotional level. It and their childhood home had been safe places to grow up. The informants who had moved away from their home district felt they carried their home district with them and that it laid the foundation for their whole life. When they described their district the important things were the values and ways of doing things they had learned as children and through which they had built their own identities. Honesty, appreciation of work and past generations were the central values that the informants had learned in their childhood. The changes in society, migration towards growth areas and unemployment have influenced people in such a way that they are increasingly interested in finding their own roots. Some visitors thought it was important to be able to define one's home district on the emotional level to be able to lead a well-balanced life.

Some visitors were unable to define a home district for themselves. Although they had lived in the research area for decades but it still

did not feel like a home district to them. It is possible that since they had no strong emotional ties to the area they were more easily able to analyze the features of their home municipality in a different way, as outsiders, compared to other informants. According to them, while they felt at home in the municipality they lived in, this feeling was not the same as feeling a certain municipality or region was one's home district. We feel that because of this inability to tie their roots to a certain place they emphasize this difference between feeling at home somewhere and calling it their home district. These informants told us they were jealous of people who were able to name their home district as they thought it important for modern people to know their roots.

According to some informants describing their home district, telling someone about it and differentiating between its good and bad points was very difficult because they felt all this was very close to them. Their home district was more or less their home and its surroundings, their childhood home and home district laid the foundation for their whole life. Work was defined as a very important part of the home district and the two could not be clearly separated. In other words, home district was a place where they had been able to make a living and where they had interacted during the active time of their lives.

Study and work force young people to leave the countryside where they would have stayed, had there been a source of livelihood available. The young informants included in our data had stayed in or returned to their home district. These informants felt people have a need to look for and find their own background in their home district. Some were ambivalent about living in a small municipality where all the inhabitants know each other

which was both positive and negative. Many of these young people had had the opportunity to travel, among other things, because of their studies and had had new experiences and views and were trying to see and understand their own home district and the world of today in the light of these experiences.

HOME DISTRICTS ARE A RESOURCE IN INTERNATIONALIZATION FOR POLITICIANS

According to politicians the importance of the home district has grown since Finland joined the European Union. They feel that as national boundaries are becoming less visible and the world is becoming more open, regions and home districts become much more important than before. Finnish independence is built on the countryside and the home district. The importance of the concept in the light of individualism is also becoming stronger than before. Knowing your roots is important for individuals and regions as well as the whole nation.

According to some politicians the home district is the region where people have lived their active lives. It was often discussed in the light of the employment rate. The politicians thought there were threats and problems to keeping the home district alive. If the changes in society are to be advantageous for small places, agricultural areas need to be developed in many ways. The home district was seen as a chance to develop local industry, business life and tourism and to have an effect on the general impressions about the area.

The politicians thought that different age groups had different relationships to the concept. Some politicians felt that young people move around much more and, therefore, have

118 a different view of their home district than older people who have literally lived off the land. Other politicians thought that the importance grows at retirement when, after the years spent working, it is possible to return to one's birth place or home district.

The importance, according to the politicians, has changed because of changes in the way of life, for example with the current migration to growth areas. Earlier the home district was a safe agricultural place to live. An individual was born as a part of a social community where (s)he lived and interacted throughout her/his life. Through a stable and sometimes closed social network people acquired the way of life, the values and new influences. Today people are much more mobile and changing place of residence for example is easy because of work or study; a new home can be found as easily in a neighbouring municipality or another province, country or continent. In addition to this people live in the middle of a great quantity of information which influences them. For these reasons perhaps people's relationships with their physical surroundings are not as strong as they used to be in agricultural societies.

Local museums in the research area

The local museums in our research area preserve the local peasant way of life in a very object-centered way. Modern traditions are hardly preserved at all in the museums. In our opinion the reasons for this are, among other things, limited operation and storage spaces and some limitations arising from the original function of the buildings. Another influencing factor is the lack of regular and professional employees in most of the local museums. The

primary reason, however, is financial.

The museums in the area particularly help amateur museum workers to look for their past and their roots and to keep their culture alive. The museums are not, however, an active part of their community. Some of the exhibitions had remained unchanged for decades before the development project took place. In addition to basic exhibitions there is not much activity in the museums apart from once each summer when they used to arrange a home district day. The museums did not advertise themselves and gave little information to the public about their exhibitions.

These museums had not changed as the society changed but they were projections of the time in which they had been established. We feel this is due to the fact that the active work in the museums had been done during the time of establishment. The objective then was to preserve disappearing peasant objects. It seems that the museum and its exhibition was considered finished after something from every area of life had been collected.

Museum concepts of the informants

MUSEUMS PROVIDE ROOTS FOR AMATEUR MUSEUM WORKERS

According to amateur museum workers a local museum preserves and exhibits objects which represent the collective local cultural tradition. It is a tool for finding one's roots and studying the backgrounds of various phenomena and many people emphasize its importance in educating people about their home region.

Some amateur museum workers think that

preserving objects is not necessarily the main purpose as a museum should also preserve information about the features of local culture. Almost everyone thinks that a museum is oriented towards the past but it should also be able to record the immediate past. A museum can either be a sight or a place of activity. Some amateur museum workers do not think of museums as static, instead, they reflect different ages and the views connected with them.

Many amateur museum workers note that it is not the only purpose of a museum to collect objects but information and ideas connected with them should also be preserved. The collections should include research as it is easier for visitors to understand the exhibits if some research material and stories are included in them. Collecting and preservation should take place continuously so there would not be year or even decade-long pauses in the preservation process. People should understand, however, that not all museums can preserve all kinds of objects. Local museums should utilize their collections by constructing, for example, theme exhibitions, otherwise the exhibits have little importance. Maintaining local archives could also be included in the tasks of a museum.

The local museums in the area have also arranged other types of activity in addition to exhibitions. This has mostly been at the request of the public. Many amateur museum workers find that museum visitors would like some action but this requires a lot of resources from the personnel maintaining the museums and some feel it destroys the atmosphere of a museum. In some cases the physical surroundings of the museums place limitations on their activities. Sometimes it is also difficult to draw the line between the museum and a community house. People were also afraid that the

local museum would not be able to withstand so much wear and tear. Sometimes the museum milieu was considered unsuitable for arranging activities.

The idea of there being no local museum in the region appeared impossible to many amateur museum workers as forming a complete image of the home district without a museum could not be achieved. There would be a great gap in the preservation and handling of tradition. The lack of museums would also make it harder to arrange education about the home district in the schools. If the municipality or regional history society had no museum, it would be replaced by private collections, home museums or functional community houses. The idea of museum work would, in their opinion, live on in some form because people's need to record their past is very strong. The absolute lack of a museum was considered as a sign of thinking superficially and it would cause a break in the passing on of information to future generations.

The role of a provincial museum is considered as that of an authority guiding and supporting the activity of local museums. The support provided by a provincial museum for the local museums in our research area, which were situated along the southern border of their province, does not necessarily consist of anything but consultation and written communication. Many amateur museum workers had, however, received help from the provincial museum if they had needed it. The museum work in the area was considered rather independent which also left the provincial museum to serve more as a background influence. The conflict between local and provincial museums lies in the fact that professionally led and financially secure provincial museums could not always understand that local muse-

120 ums operated with a voluntary work force and that they were financially very unstable. This results in the advice from the provincial museums not always being suitable in view of the limited resources of local museums.

The Museum Policy Programme (Museo 2000), published in 1999, instructs the owners of local museums to establish local professional museum worker positions to guide the work being carried out there.¹⁵ Many amateur museum workers reacted very positively to this because, through the Museoprojekti, they had come to understand how important it was to have a local professional working in the museum. Because the scope of the provincial museum was so wide, it would be much easier for a professional museum worker to concentrate on a smaller area. There are many specialist museums in our research area and, as regards their development, it would also be very important to have a professional position in museum work in the area. The help and advice of a professional would also encourage local workers to participate. Some amateur museum workers thought that, in addition to a professional museum worker, a person should also be employed to be in charge of the home district archive. The idea of a regional museum professional was not received favourably by all local museum workers however. Some thought that Finnish museum work is good enough as it is today because the necessary professional system is available. The regional position should not replace the current system, only add to it.

The future of the museums in the area looked good in the eyes of amateur workers. The Museoprojekti had awakened them to various development needs. Most development projects deal with museum buildings or objects and how they are stored. They were also

planning to establish functional centres of tradition, regional history houses and handicraft areas. In many municipalities they were looking for new storage space for the collections. Informing the media and advertising were also being developed, virtual exhibitions were planned and there were plans to make the collection work more systematic and seek professional help, for example in the maintenance and conservation of the collections. Cooperation between schools and museums was being developed and contacts were also sought in other organisations.

Visitors feel that a local museum connects the past to the present

When we asked the visitors about places to go in their own municipality or ways to spend leisure time there, they hardly ever mentioned the museum or it was the last item on their list. Those visitors who did not mention the museum in their answers did not consider themselves active museum visitors either. They thought, nevertheless, that a museum is a very important place especially for older people, people who had moved away and people who visited the municipality. Some visitors considered it their professional duty to visit the museum. Others, however, said that the museum was among the interesting places to go in their municipality. These were people, who hardly ever went to museums either in the municipality of residence or elsewhere. People who considered the museum to be the pride and joy of the place, were rare. They were active museum visitors and enjoyed going to the theatre and concerts both when travelling and at home.

Nearly all visitors considered the museum to be an important record of regional history and a representation of the local immaterial culture. Even though they thought that the local museums in our research area were very similar, their own local museum was most important in maintaining the original features of the region. Many visitors found that the museum tells about the changes in everyday life over the past few decades and also describes local history rather well. They thought the museum was a great treasure for the region and that it connects the past to the present and maintains the feeling of continuity. Through recording the past and telling people about it, the most important task of a museum seems to be education, especially for younger generations. Further tasks include providing experiences and widening people's view of the world. For some visitors the museum was a place where they could return to the time of their childhood.

Most visitors had not visited the provincial museum and as a result did not see its role as very significant as far as recording local tradition was concerned and they were unable to assess its importance in more detail. To many visitors the provincial museum remained rather distant and they did not, for example, see it as a place to go with a group of students. The visitors who had been to the provincial museum considered its provincial work important because, among other things, the safety of the objects there was guaranteed. In their opinion the provincial museum was trying to describe the area for which it was responsible, as distinctively as possible. They felt it demonstrated the general features of the area and did not concentrate so much on the history of a specific place.

Not many of the visitors had acquainted

themselves with the National Museum which made it very hard for them to define its task. They considered the National Museum both physically and intellectually distant and strange. Often their views were based on suppositions and, based mostly on emotions, they considered the National Museum magnificent and of national importance. They felt that the aim of the National Museum was also a distinctive representation of its area of responsibility which, in some cases, was considered negative. Finds that came under the relic law are automatically preserved at the National Museum and this was considered unfair to local museums. They did feel, however, that the National Museum was important for all Finns and foreigners interested in history.

Nearly all visitors considered the local museum more important for them than the provincial or the National Museum. In the local museum the exhibits come from their own municipality and they are, therefore, easily accessible.

Almost every visitor felt the lack of a local museum would mean rootlessness, indifference and lack of respect for the past, earlier generations and the culture and the future of the municipality. Even though most visitors do not consider themselves active museum visitors, they feel that the lack of a museum would be a great loss to the municipality and local people. People need to be provided with opportunities to familiarize themselves with the history of their home district and, through that, also their own history. Knowing the past of one's home district is important for a person's definition of him/herself. The existence of a local museum provides a feeling of security and people feel there should be one in every municipality that has some respect for itself and its culture. Some visitors also made a note on the

122 limited resources municipalities have for maintaining museums.

If there had not been a museum in the region, the information collected there would have been preserved in other ways, for example in the form of local histories. Private collectors would possibly preserve objects but they would not be available for everyone. The visitors did not consider it a good solution either, for the objects to be moved to another museum in another place as then they would not be so easily available to the local people. One of the visitors felt the existence of a museum was essential because other municipalities had one. Some thought that if there was no museum, people would not even miss it.

According to the visitors making history live is one of the important tasks of a museum. It was emphasized in many interviews that the buildings of a local museum should be a part of the history and past of the region and they should be kept as much as possible in their original state. The teachers we interviewed felt especially that it was the task of a museum to provide information in an experiential way which is most successfully done in historical surroundings. Many visitors emphasized the importance of context information attached to the exhibits.

THE MUSEUM REPRESENTS THE UNIQUENESS OF A MUNICIPALITY FOR POLITICIANS

The politicians saw the museum as a place for collecting information and reflecting the uniqueness and identity of the municipality. They thought a museum briefly describes local history, tradition, background and specific features. Some politicians saw the museum as a way to root people which would help the

younger generation to strengthen their affection for the home district and make it easier for incomers to get to know their new home. Others tried to find importance for museums more or less in tourism and making them a necessary commodity for visitors.

Almost every politician found the provincial museum a distant institution, intellectually and physically. Many interviewees had never been there, which means that most of what they said, was supposition. The provincial museum was considered an institution providing guidance and control to the local museums. Some politicians felt the provincial museum carried the main responsibility for recording provincial history. Almost all politicians considered the local museum a more important facility in preserving and maintaining local history. Here the opinions of amateur museum workers and politicians coincided.

The greatest differences in the opinions of amateur museum workers and politicians were found in the question of a position for a sub-regional professional museum worker. The politicians either agreed, had some reservations or disagreed completely whereas almost all amateur workers were clearly in favour of establishing the position. Some politicians thought there could be subregional positions but they should not replace municipal museums. Others felt, however, that because of the historical background it would be better to keep to natural regional borders than establish artificial subregional boundaries. Some politicians were in favour of establishing the position but their main concern was the financing. Some politicians had not thought about such a position before but they were very positive about it. Others were either reserved about establishing the position or disagreed completely with the idea. They pointed out, among

other things, the premature state of development in the subregions.

Many politicians felt it would be impossible not to have a museum in the region because private collections would not be able to replace it. They thought that the lack of a museum would mean that the past had no importance and some said the lack of a museum would be an indication of a weak local identity and a sign of the poverty of the region.

The importance of home district for local identity

Identity is one of the mental instruments that take shape throughout a person's life and help in the building of continuity between people and the outside reality. Maintaining and restoring importance, meaningfulness and human dignity throughout the changes in one's life are some of the forces that control the development of identity. The success of this process depends on both the unifying abilities of the individual and the identity models offered by the culture. Moreover, it depends on the ability of these models to give content and continuity to life.¹⁶

Collective identity is a cultural phenomenon that is intersubjective in nature, meaning that it presumes several people or great masses share the same thoughts about certain issues. Collective identity deals with commonly recognized meanings which we have created in order to be able to recognize them in ourselves and others. The cultural meanings attached to groups, communities and social systems have crystalized in symbolic codes. These are cultural models of meaning which can be used to interpret reality in different situations. Sym-

bolic codes manifest themselves as repetitive expressions, mythical stories and symbols and meanings considered self-evident.¹⁷

Experiences form the invisible side of identity. In research into cultural identity this has often been overshadowed by the more visible signs of identity. A model of identity means external, from the viewpoint of the individual, models of activity and behaviour and the understanding of right and wrong included in them. Models of identity are provided by the individual's way of life and cultural heritage and are chrystalized in manners, oral tradition and material culture.¹⁸

National and ethnic identities are attached to certain places, events, symbols and histories, which means they represent belonging somewhere. The traditions of identity are also in a constant state of change. Changing conditions in society result in no local identity being able to remain unchanged in the modern world. Historical processes are full of chance occurrences and surprises just as well as conscious planning and activities. This is also true about the formation of collective identity.¹⁹

Creating boundaries, being different, belonging somewhere and being similar are central concepts in the formation of identity. To feel continuity and similarity, an individual must be "him/herself" and, at the same time, part of a greater whole. Belonging means accepting and living up to the models of identity provided by culture, community and society. The opposites of positive models of identity are often used when creating boundaries. The negative features are reflected onto the person or people one wants to separate oneself from. Processes of identity are mostly unconscious but changes of life and changes in living conditions and culture can result in ac-

124 tive knowledge of identity, strengthening the senses of boundaries and belonging, realization of feared models of identity or renewal of identity.²⁰ It is clear in many of the interviews that the informants have built similar boundaries of identity. The interviewees often talk about a sense of togetherness and sameness inside municipal boundaries, and the large central town of the area, Oulu, is evaluated in a negative way. According to the informants the locality is being emphasized because of the changes brought about by entry into the European Union and the boundaries of identity are more and more actively being defined in nearby surroundings.

In a way identity has two sides. On the one hand identity is a certain objective state of affairs which can be described from the outside on the basis of observations and research. Based on this it is possible to describe the identity of a community, its roots, general character and continuity. Through the stages of development the community has retained a sense of "sameness", i.e. original individuality. On the other hand identity also means the inner experiences of an individual or a community of themselves, their roots, development, "sameness" and how they are connected with a culturally and chronologically more extensive background, foundation or soil.²¹ All informants felt that a local museum is a very important mediator of local history and continuity and, in doing this, is a definer of the collective identity. Through a local museum individuals are able to define their place in the community. The experiences of a local museum visitor receive a personal dimension along with the general one because, in all probability, they can find objects and information about their own family and history in the museum connected with a larger historical whole.

The need to belong is one of the basic human needs. To be able to belong to a group or a place and express solidarity towards it, one must be able to distinguish its basic elements and identify oneself with its goals. Symbols of identity are material and immaterial behavioural elements representing belonging and communality. Cultural identity is built on these symbols and your home district and the way you describe it is one such symbol. Home district is the key to a person's feeling of continuity and organization of background.²² This is supported in our data by the visitors' experiences of their home district. In their interviews we found that affection for the home district grew stronger if one was absent from the place of childhood. Belonging to the home district was experienced through personal relationships and people who came from the same region interacted a lot with each other in a strange place.

Identity also means experiencing and understanding your own place on different levels: among family and relatives, in the home village, locality and province. Identity and one's own place are most clearly understood in small circles meaning the immediate family, relatives and village community. Individuals feel that they are connected with a larger whole which they accept and want to support, continue and develop. Therefore they adopt certain models of identity, role models and influences that they gain from the way of life and cultural tradition of the community. In our data visitors especially emphasized the importance of personal relationships as a definition of home district.²³ The values and evaluations adopted in the childhood home create the foundation for identity and have an influence throughout a person's whole life.

Affection for the home district reflects per-

sonal identity and it is built out of the past, the present and the future creating the foundation for a person's sense of self. Home district identity is very important for people's general wellbeing and satisfaction. When people have emotional ties to their home district, they appreciate it and are willing to act in support of it. Therefore home district identity has social importance. It strengthens the community from the inside and creates social togetherness. Home district identity is basically a socio-cultural phenomenon.²⁴

Politicians considered the home district important and had an influence on it through their own actions. They had to make professional decisions about wellbeing and satisfaction. Municipalities must be able to offer the basic services to their inhabitants and satisfaction and softer values are left in the background. Amateurs worked for the satisfaction and social togetherness of their community. They felt that all kinds of development work done for the municipality is part of the preservation of local arts and crafts which means that almost everyone living in the municipality participated in this work. Some visitors felt that one of the basic elements of home district was work. For them home district was a place where they had lived the active part of their lives.

Identification or attachment to the home district is a very subjective issue. It is not acquired like cultural tradition but it develops as time passes. It is difficult to identify oneself with a strange place because, firstly, there are no memories there. Attachment does not necessarily have anything to do with communality because city dwellers can be just as attached to their home block without the support of other residents because of their own memories. In small communities the relationship be-

tween attachment and communality is different.²⁵ Some of the visitors included in our data had not identified themselves with the municipality they currently lived in but still felt their home was in the home district. Some of these people had not lived in their birth place for decades but their childhood surroundings were important to them. Even though there were no relatives left there, their attachment to the region had remained strong. Some visitors did feel at home in their current municipality of residence but they still did not consider it their home district. Other visitors had not felt at home in their new municipality of residence and after longing for their home district had got the better of them, had moved back to the place of their childhood.

Changes in society have always made the question of identity a current issue. Re-evaluation of past events and creating a direction for the future are an essential part of identity. The elements, traditions, and group symbols of the past can be used to erase the insecurity that changes often bring to identity.²⁶ One of the changes in modern society is that information technology has invaded all areas of life, in a way causing a commitment to today and ignoring the past. In addition it has resulted in changes in everyday life and migration to growth centres. According to our informants it was this that especially changed the concept of home district in such a way that a person may have several home districts during his/her lifetime. The concept of home district also changed from concrete to a more abstract. The physical surroundings are not necessarily so important anymore but the home district is more or less an emotional state. All this also changed the way in which people defined identity. Adaptation to the new situation was required both from the people and from the

126 identity and, in some sense, the past was considered not so important.

Symbols of the past can be used to erase the insecurity brought about by change. This could be seen clearly at the turn of the millennium when, in our opinion, the feelings of continuity and safety were strengthened by phenomena brought in from the past. The change in social structure has also made local identity stronger and emphasized its importance. It was evident in our interviews with the politicians that local awareness is being strengthened in the current social situation. Even though new jobs are being created in our research area as we speak, people have noticed that without cultural interests they are unlikely to receive new residents.

Recognizing a place as being the same at different times is achieved mostly through history and geography. Information about the continuity of existence and the marks of history such as families, cultural traditions, manners and styles that have remained, is needed to be able to recognize a place. The residents and the community also understand what continuity and sameness are based on and how they can be distinguished from the people living in other places. One must, therefore, acknowledge the roots and foundation of one's identity and, also, the relationship of one's own identity to others.²⁷ According to our data the local museum is the place through which people are able to define both themselves and their group. Our informants thought there should be a museum in every municipality even if it was not visited regularly. Knowledge of the existence of a museum creates a feeling of security and continuity.

NOTES

- This article is based on a pro gradu thesis written for the Department of Ethnology and a secondary thesis in museology written for the Department of art and cultural studies at the University of Jyväskylä.
- 1. The Museum of North-Bothnia is situated in Oulu.
- 2. Räsänen – Räsänen 1982, 40–41.
- 3. Aro 1999, 177.
- 4. Lönnqvist 1997, 57.
- 5. Jargon 1998, 89.
- 6. Kansatieteen terminologia 1977, 10.
- 7. Kaunismaa 1997, 41. Kts. myös Lönnqvist 1997, 57.
- 8. Aaltonen 1963, 117. Turunen 1996, 5–6.
- 9. Turunen 1996, 7–9.
- 10. Bringéus 1990, 15. Turunen 1996, 5.
- 11. Vilkkuna 2001, 2.
- 12. Turunen 1996, 11, 20.
- 13. Vilkkuna 2001, 2.
- 14. Sola 1997, 30–34, 185–195; Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 1–2.
- 15. Museo 2000, 46–47.
- 16. Manninen 1984, 121.
- 17. Kaunismaa 1997, 41.
- 18. Manninen 1984, 107–109.
- 19. Anttonen 1999, 242. Kaunismaa 1997, 44. Ks. myös Smith 1991.
- 20. Manninen 1984, 134.
- 21. Kirkinen 1984, 162–163. Paasi 1984, 59.
- 22. Suojanen 1996, 108.
- 23. Kirkinen 1984, 161.
- 24. Suojanen 1996, 108. Heikkinen 1996, 32–33.
- 25. Manninen 1984, 143.
- 26. Manninen 1984, 121, 146–147.
- 27. Kirkinen 1984, 160.

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