

The Guardians of Past Voices. Oral Archives in Tuscany: the first census



14 field workers covering ten Tuscan provinces has yielded a treasure of 124 archives, containing 115,072 paper records or audio and video recordings. The volume edited by Pietro Clemente and Alessandro Andreini describes the results of this study, including concise tables that clearly demonstrate the extraordinary richness and diversity of the archives. This remarkable array covers large collections, such as the Audio-visual Archives in Nomadelfia (created by Don Zeno Saltini to document the progress of his community of Catholic volunteers), to much smaller archives preserving perhaps only a few dozen records (made up of personal research for

student theses, local scholars, enthusiasts writing about local traditions and so on). These archives are prevalently classified as private and preserve variable quantities of audio spools, audio cassettes, DAT, vinyl discs, CD or video supports. They are stored in boxes, shelves, drawers or even household cupboards but also in private offices, in their association headquarters or in an area of the museum created to preserve, along with audio records, the objects of the same time period.

The breadth and vitality of the oral Tuscan archives is comparable to that of any state, municipal, regional or provincial archives as well as those generated by enterprises, or by academic, religious, economic or charitable organizations. It requires the commitment of scholars and institutions to safeguard intangible cultural heritage once it is stored (in line with the dictates of the “Convention pour la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel immatériel” (Convention for the safeguard of intangible cultural heritage) UNESCO, 2003).

The records, discovered thanks to the census, consist largely of recordings made with devices from the “Geloso” (a recording device named after its inventor) to the digital. They refer to the history of the 20th century in Italy as it was shaped by events and realities: the Resistance, the Second World War, agricultural and farming culture (in particular, the phenomenon of sharecropping), labor and social conflicts, but also music, popular theatre. The archives illustrates, in the words of its author, Clemente, “the marvelous show of a culture seen inside a life and a life seen inside a culture.”

The effect is kaleidoscopic: “I custodi delle voci” is a polyphonic text—a sort of “post-Anthropology”—that is to say, derived from the debates that inflamed the 1980s in a climate of critical rethinking of the discipline. In the text, a myriad of voices are represented with different tones, volumes and modalities: the voices of administrators who committed themselves to the financing of the research project; teachers and researchers who organized and conducted the research; the voices of the people who created the archives, recording voices present in the text. The administrator, the teacher, the researcher, the archivist worked

together to collect the voices of the sharecropping farmer, the shepherd, the worker, the craftsman and the soldier. Here is a long chain linked by a thread —the voice of people who ask to whisper or cry their story as well as those who try to “give voice” to those excluded from history. The work traces back to the glorious and mythical mission of Italian anthropology which, from its beginning, insisted, because of historical-social reasons, on the need to contribute to the “inroads of the masses into History”, according to Ernesto de Martino’s famous sentence.

The notion of voice is central to the solid essay by Pietro Clemente entitled “Their voices and ours”. Clemente constructs his passionate wandering through wide and narrow spaces; or past, present and future time, choosing the voice and the *poetics of listening* as his only moral support.

For Clemente, the voice becomes a sacred asset, sometimes magic, but always a catalyst of stories about professional vocations, ethical missions, disciplinary statuses, and civil responsibilities. “For years I used oral sources while always seeking their scientific validity. I criticized people who used them as ordinary or invisible tools, or mangled them with egocentric arrogance while hiding their dialogic powers. Yet I was ashamed to record my mother’s voice even if I knew I would miss her some day --as if I couldn’t accept a technical ghost and should always use my imagination, to bring back her accents, intonation and verbal irony through my mind and voice.”

Clemente, a lover of the voice who is aware of the fact that he loses the expressive richness that moving images add to the sound of an ethnographic video, but prefers “the listening together with the photography, if possible”. The “political-researcher militant” Gianni Bosio (who inaugurated a tradition of “social usage of the recorder” and wrote in Praise of the tape-recorder – in addition to founding the important archives “Istituto Ernesto de Martino”) Clemente has taken upon himself the cultural and social inheritance of Bosio, and of all the people who contributed to his project and helped him up to the present. Clemente looks towards the future and has been working for many years on a “history of memory”, “a place where people who want to tell their stories will be able to do so” instituted by the “Communes” or city administration, managed by “young anthropologists” and also conceived as a stronghold in defense of the beauty of diversity and against the standardized flattening effect of popular TV programs like “Carramba che sorpresa” (a popular 1990s Italian variety show on television).