

Tradition archives as memory institutions in the past and in the future: Foreword¹

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To start

This volume consists of contributions that in various ways discuss the political, methodological and ethical aspects of how tradition archives have been — and are — involved in production of knowledge. At the Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore (SIEF) and the Nordic conferences for ethnology and folklore in the summer of 2015, as many as four panels dealt directly with central questions facing the tradition archives. This unprecedented level of discussion within broader disciplinary forums may be connected to an awareness of the need for tradition archives to engage with the extensive use of digital information technology in our daily lives, and to consider and assert their own worth as repositories of human creativity. In this volume we mark this celebration and challenging of the archives with contributions from the four panels, and a few later additions. Following the theme of 'visions', we consider the aspirations and understandings that have been and might be inherent in the act of cultural documentation and representation in the past and in the future.

The book is organised in four sections. The first section, **Tilling the Soil**, consists of a discussion of the somewhat contested identity of folklore archives vis-à-vis historical archives, in addition to this foreword. The second section, **Bringing the Harvest Home**, takes us into various archives and collections. A selection of case studies focuses on collector/archive relationships, specific genres, or collection projects, and examines how myriad interactions shaped knowledge production in the field and in the archives. These studies explore the work practices, correspondence and self-conception of collectors,

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archivists and scholars, and consider the pressures brought to bear on the articulation of what constituted ‘tradition/folklore worthy of collection’ from within and outside of the scholarly world. The related section, **Fields of Cultural Identity**, treats of similar themes with an eye to national and international policies regarding the production of cultural identities. The final section, **Seeds for Future Practice**, addresses tradition archives in the contemporary world, asking what their place might be in related academic disciplines and in the public sphere. What is their relevance to the field of ‘post-paradigm-shift’ folkloristics and to contemporary cultural documentation? Is there still a role for the gatekeeper-archivist? How might tradition archives respond to possibilities and expectations associated with the digital realm? What might our role in the public sphere be, how can we operate with integrity in changing circumstances? Where to from here?

The volume is not designed to be read in any particular order, nor do we wish to shoehorn the chapters rigidly into ‘themed’ pigeonholes. Indeed, a noteworthy aspect of the volume as a whole is the way in which themes and resonances crosscut the contributions. We recognise that the groupings could be organised in a number of ways, and invite readers to browse and dip into the material according to interests or whimsy. The provenance of the contributions, from Canada, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland, has a Nordic-Baltic inflection in keeping with the loci of impetus of the earliest institutionalisation of folk cultural archiving, yet we hope to contribute to a global consideration of the role of tradition archives, past and future. In what follows, the distinctive nature of tradition archives are discussed and some of the themes touched upon in the volume are outlined in more depth.

Tradition archives: generalizability and particularity

In terms of knowledge institutions, the tradition archives constitute a particularly singular category of entity. Individual tradition archives have been safeguarding, preserving, collecting, organising and providing access to *informal* human knowledge, expression and creativity since the early twentieth century. As such, they are the institutions worldwide with the deepest experience of qualitative data preservation: of finding ways to bear witness to everyday life in particular places and times, and of documenting the multi-dimensionality and messiness of lived experience in a manner that gives contextualised access to some of its myriad expressions. Yet they are rarely apprehended or recognised, let alone celebrated, as such in broader societal or academic realms. This

volume seeks to bring some of the insights and conversations arising from this experience to an audience outside of, as well as within, the tradition archives, and to share some of the detail of debates, reflections and rich archival traditions specific to different disciplinary and geographical areas.

What do we (the editors of this volume) mean when we say 'tradition archives'? The term for us includes folklore archives, ethnological archives, oral history archives, sound archives, archives of cultural and literary history, and cultural heritage archives. These institutions differ from historical or 'mainstream' archives (and, indeed, may not be characterized as archives at all by archival science) due to the fact that their holdings are often the result of collection activities carried out with the explicit aim of cultural documentation and preservation, many of which activities may be carried out on the instigation of the institution itself. They differ also in their emphasis on the documentation of informal expression and everyday life, often of non-elite groups, and in the strategies and sensibilities developed in order to meaningfully preserve and provide access to such intensely qualitative material. However, they share with other archives the status of national, regional or academic knowledge institutions: entities that through their activities, work practices and relationships construct, shape, legitimize and lend authority to specific bodies of knowledge pertaining to people and places.

Those who use, work in, support, or contribute to tradition archives often share a set of understandings and indeed affectual linkages that grow out of interaction with the rich and textured material in the archives, and out of the multi-layered relationships with individuals and communities that are part of tradition archives work. These shared understandings (or, more correctly put, understandings that are *felt* to be shared) manifest themselves in the use of terms such as 'duty of care', in the drive to contextualize 'items of tradition' as well as possible, and in the care taken to avoid misrepresentation of the material or the source communities. One thing that stands out at such gatherings of 'archive people' as those mentioned above is the energy, enthusiasm and dedication of attendees, which speaks to their understanding of the value of the material, of the work and its attendant relationships, and of the importance of continuous reflection on our work practices.

These shared understandings notwithstanding, the label 'tradition archives' refers to a very broad range of heterogeneous entities. Even within disciplinary groupings, a label such as 'folklore archives' can be used to describe entities with vastly differing ranges of work practices and approaches, and often the use of discipline-specific vocabulary masks considerable difference. What do we mean when we say 'fieldwork', 'archival content', 'collection', 'interview', 'organization', 'respondent', 'questionnaire'? The actual work methods

that shape the production of knowledge are themselves shaped by national, regional, institutional, language-group or discipline-specific habits and dispositions. Detailed descriptions of individual archives' collection and work practices do exist, but very rarely do the details make it into compendium works with an international audience. The studies in this collection, by anchoring their discussions of knowledge production in detail-rich case studies and chronicles of process, provide the reader with a very real appreciation of the variety and specificity of approaches and practices that can be associated with the title 'tradition archive'. The content of the volume is outlined below, section by section.

Tilling the soil

Two themes that emerge strongly from the chapters of this book are those of tension on the one hand, and potential on the other. The opening chapter by folklore archivist **Maryna Chernyavska** outlines the parallel development of historical and folklore archives and explores the relationship between archival science and repositories of tradition. Considering a number of characteristics that make folklore archives a problematic concept from an archival theory perspective, she highlights how many of these characteristics may be regarded as relevant and acceptable in the context of postmodern thinking. A more nuanced understanding of archives as contingent cultural artefacts opens up a space for folklore archives to assert their strengths as 'living' collections with blurry boundaries, and with complex relationships both between internal elements and between the institution and its community. At a point where archivists and other information professionals are re-evaluating their values, approaches, and goals, Chernyavska calls for an assertion of the worth and potential of folklore archives by those who care about them.

Bringing the harvest home: Insights from past collection practices

The examination in this volume of collection and archival work practices, rather than of archival content alone, resonates with shifting centres of interest within and outside of the disciplines of folklore and ethnology. Investigation of the construction of knowledge through the collection, selection, organization, labelling, safeguarding, publication and dissemination of cultural 'items' plays a central part in a reflexive epistemology of folkloristics, in looking at how our disciplinary knowledge and field of study were brought into being and constructed by the work practices of individuals and institutions. At the

same time, a reflective or critical reading of archives as contributing to the construction of knowledge from particular viewpoints resonates with the broader problematization and destabilization of archives within the humanities and social sciences. For archival practitioners, users and contributors, this reflection and documentation is an important part of knowing our antecedents in order to mindfully inhabit our present and future.

What determines and shapes the material that ends up in tradition archives? The chapters in this section highlight the role of individuals, institutions, researchers, collectors and correspondents in producing ethnographic materials. They discuss what has been collected, what makes it into the archives, and how the material is shaped by selection — and rejection — and by the crafting of documentation and finding aids. They highlight several layers of complex relationships embedded in the process, with collection strategies and the production of archival documentation influenced by changing contexts of intellectual history and political history, and by individual and institutional idiosyncrasy.

Marleen Metslaid and **Susanne Nylund Skog** both examine one series of steps in the co-construction of knowledge in archives: communication processes between scholars and their contributor/collector correspondents. Metslaid describes the role of the Estonian National Museum's network of correspondence in the co-construction of ethnographic knowledge in the 1930s, examining individual and institutional textualization strategies, collector motivation, and constantly-evolving relationships of exchange and recognition. Nylund Skog concentrates on two individuals: the Swedish folklore scholar and collector Karl Gösta Gilstring and one of hundreds of correspondents, Elsa Pihl, who worked with him from 1957 to 1974. A close reading of correspondence and archival content lays bare the nuanced process of the conversion of personal letters to excerpted folklore texts organized by content and geographical distribution. Each case study illustrates what can be learned by the comparison of primary and secondary documentation and by immersion in working documents, and brings a vivid appreciation of the attitudes and individuals involved, through access to their words in correspondence. The negotiation over time in this correspondence as to what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' folklore (for example, generalized retrospective description or reflection, or discussion of contemporary life), the preoccupations with the exigencies of salvage projects and with issues of authenticity (which, it becomes clear, varied in character and extent from institution to institution and from person to person), the interplay of status, gender, and personal affiliations and friendships, and the evidence of reciprocity, whether mediated through pay, status, personal satisfaction or validation of local knowledge: all of these details hint

towards rich contexts of knowledge production that are of their time, shaped by scholarly and societal patternings, yet deeply influenced by individual character.

Liina Saarlo and **Åmund Norum Resløyken** approach the construction of research objects through the examination of particular genres or themes. Saarlo discusses the documentation of the *regilaul* song tradition of Kodavere parish, Estonia, from the late nineteenth century through the twentieth century. Different collection periods show marked variations in approach to genre content, fieldwork strategies and focus of enquiry. Saarlo charts these variations against changing scholarly principles and political ideology, while tracking the not insignificant effect of collector dispositions and human relationships on the creation and shaping of the corpus. Resløyken approaches the issue of Norwegian efforts during the 1930s and '40s to use folklore questionnaires to 'capture' the Christmas Goat. An examination of three questionnaires details the theory-led 'hunting' work done to consolidate a diffuse set of practices, images and names into a folklore research object. Scholarly debates and practices construct the folklore object, but these debates and practices are not divorced from broader political contexts. **Ave Goršič's** chronicle of folk belief's fluctuating status as a research topic in Estonia during the Soviet era illustrates the interaction of political entities and shifting, locally-inflected iterations of broader ideological contexts with the activities of memory institutions, the relevance of which is not confined to past eras only.

Agnetta Lilja's contribution examines the way in which the work of the Institute of Dialect Research in Uppsala interacted with changing conceptions of the nature and value of folklore work from the late 1950s into the 1970s. She outlines elements at play in struggles for authority in the definition of folk culture, tracing a shift from the drive to salvage the fragile remains of Swedish peasant culture through the collection, categorization, naming and filing of corrected and authenticated questionnaire submissions, to the collection of respondents' own reflections — in recorded audio or writing — on contemporary lived experience. Although the phrase 'paradigm shift' is often used as a blanket term to denote changing constellations of understandings, preoccupations and work practices in folkloristics in general during this period, Lilja's case study shows how this shift is anything but unitary, even, exclusively uni-directional, or divorced from technological or societal change (or, indeed, happenstance). **Alf Arvidsson's** discussion of the application of folklore methodology to Swedish jazz history brings us into the late twentieth century. It provides a window onto the processes involved in contemporary field research into human artistry and

its social contexts with regard to a genre not immediately associated with tradition archives, and discusses the role that tradition archives may play as society's reflective tool, with an eye to archivalization practices, processes of canonization, and changing relationships between tradition archives and their stakeholders.

Fields of cultural identity: Archival and national policies

The joint contribution by **Kelly Fitzgerald and Niina Hämäläinen** underlines the centrality of dedicated individuals as well as of social expectations and political ideas to the development of the early tradition archives. In two case studies, dealing with Finland and Ireland respectively, the authors explore how folklore collection in the nineteenth century was initially carried out with a view to publication — which was itself often strongly linked in these cases to the promotion of the Finnish and Irish languages — rather than a view to the creation of archival collections. Both case studies demonstrate the impact of individual and institutional choices on how archival collections have been catalogued, perceived and promoted.

Lauri Harvilahti brings us back to 'where it all started', evoking the visions that brought about and shaped folklore collection in Finland, Scandinavia and the Baltic area from the seventeenth century, discussing the development of the Finnish and other early folklore archives, and arguing that their worth persists. Although the vision of those who motivated the collection and archiving of everyday culture in the past may not fully resonate today, the archived collections can enable new and inspired visions — ways of seeing and apprehending the past — and maintain their value in the present and future.

Konrad J. Kuhn's consideration of Swiss folklore collection in the 1930s to the 1960s acknowledges tradition archive materials as resources mobilized by political actors down through time, and as complex cultural documents with a haptical and sensual presence produced by the embodied, social and cultural practice of scholarship. His reminder of the need for vigilance on the part of practitioners because of the 'still very real immanent power of this collected knowledge' (page 235) has a relevance that is particularly apposite at a point when tradition archives are re-articulating their role in civil society, and when traditional cultural resources are being mobilized in essentialist representations of culture and identity.

Seeds for future practice: Recent and future challenges for the tradition archives

Where do tradition archives stand now, in terms of vision? What manifestations of the future are imagined for such institutions? What is their value and relevance, as seen by ‘insiders’ (archivists, scholars, contributors, supporters) and by the ‘outside world’ (the public, the media, host and funding institutions, artists, scholars from cognate and other disciplines, other heritage institutions)? In terms of their potential to reflect ‘the folk’, however conceived, what visions of the past and present do they present? The final section of this book approaches these questions from a number of perspectives.

Looking at the Scandinavian scholarly context, **Eldar Heide** identifies tensions within folklore, cultural studies and ethnology regarding tradition archives and how they represent pre-modern folk culture. He outlines how some post-paradigm-shift objections to the content and organisation of tradition archives — regarding lacunae in collection and organisation or finding aids, and prescriptive categorization — may be invalidated to a degree by the way in which digitization opens the collections up to alternative readings and to recombination of the material therein. He asks whether the will to digitize and engage with tradition collections, or a lack thereof, is bound up with unexamined attitudes within folkloristics towards ‘out-dated’ material, and calls for a re-examination of the discipline’s attitude towards resources that are indeed very much relevant to the disciplinary research interests of today. **Laura Jiga Iliescu** explores ways of thinking about how a researcher might engage with material in tradition archives, mindful of their own role in shaping meaning. She draws upon the particular relationship between narrator and audience in the case of supernatural experience narratives, and the attendant tensions around issues of belief, to shed light on tradition archives as one part of the long chain of actors involved in the transmission and creation of narratives. Illustrating the myriad layers of construction and interpretation involved, she argues for collectors’ and scholars’ explicit engagement with the way in which their voices are added to ‘a multi-voiced construction of the fluid and unfixed meaning of the story’ (page 275).

Enough of scholars. What of the broader role of tradition archives as memory institutions and as actors in the public sphere? They possess agency in a very concrete sense, as institutions that actively document and make available selected iterations of cultural life. As such, they could be seen as knowledge brokers, facilitating exchanges of knowledge for both the academic community and the broader public. Earlier chapters in the volume discuss selection, organisation and dissemination choices that have shaped the representation of

folk culture and the role of tradition archives prior to the availability of digital technology: the final chapters consider similar issues in a digitally enabled realm.

If collaboration is, as it has always been, central to the work of tradition archives, who is collaborating on what parts of the process, and what is changing or may change? In considering participatory practices in tradition archives, **Sanita Reinsone** points out that folklore has always engaged in 'crowdsourcing' avant la lettre, and that digital access means that participatory approaches can be applied not just to content generation and dissemination, but also to archival or digitization work such as transcription, and to contextualization and interpretation/classification of archival material. **Catherine Ryan and Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh** examine the digitization and access-provision strategies of the Irish Folklore Collection, particularly the development of a pilot thesaurus in collaboration with the Digital Repository of Ireland and the National Library of Ireland. This case study highlights the challenges inherent in attempts to respond to the potential of digital information retrieval, and gestures toward the long road ahead in the discussion and development of flexible classification capabilities both within folkloristics and with regard to qualitative or cultural data more generally.

Fredrik Skott, Cliona O'Carroll and Audun Kjus look to the future, discussing the broader implications of the use of digital platforms for content generation, access to existing cultural content and, perhaps most significantly, access to contextual and process documentation. In a context where public institutions are increasingly expected to provide access to knowledge generated through the use of public funds, all three authors call for a 'look before you leap' approach that is cognisant of the tradition archives' role as producers of knowledge and as participants in the construction of cultural identities and, ultimately, large-scale power relationships.

In a consideration of tradition archives' broader societal role, Skott addresses how the selection and composition of tradition archive collections have a direct bearing on issues of memory, forgetting, identity, and power over the past. He considers a range of potential reasons for excluding material from mass online publication, and critically discusses anonymization and selection strategies, using examples from the four major archives of folk tradition in Sweden. Should archives just discount problematic materials from online publication, publishing materials of a 'more innocent character' (page 332) exclusively? Skott argues that such an approach would merely add more layers of selective representation in a context where 'selections often become wholes' (page 325). Instead, he also champions collection-based dissemination of a broader range of material, where folk tradition documents are archived and

presented along with the contextual information and process documentation relating to their generation (such as correspondence, field diaries and research reports), so that they can be better presented and interpreted as products of their time and place. In this way, tradition archives would explicitly embrace their unavoidable role as active creators of cultural heritage and actors in the public sphere.

Clíona O'Carroll also discusses some of the questions relating to the digital shift — in this case surveying a terrain where the concerns of oral history and folklore overlap — and advocates a slow approach to digital access provision to archives of oral testimony. The chapter argues that relationships between human actors form a core element of this work, and that the characteristics of audio/visual interviews should lead us to carefully consider and rethink their presentation. Technological change presents opportunities but also leads to a range of expectations being brought to bear on tradition archives. Some of these expectations are in tension with our understanding of the materials in our care. O'Carroll argues that archives of everyday experience should be prepared to push back against these expectations, and become active proponents of a slow and open engagement with their holdings that does justice to the richness, intimacy and cultural density of the material.

Kjus notes how tradition archives' transition to a digital habitat is likely to be gradual and carried out over a long time span. He outlines some principles developed to provide guidance during the logistics-focussed day-to-day work of the years and decades to come, characterising the mode of achieving a publicly orientated tradition archive as multi-institutional, project-based, and with ownership and responsibility shared between contributors and collectors. His discussion paints a picture of a long-term digital solution that integrates the generation and dissemination of new documentation as well as the safeguarding and dissemination of existing collections, a solution that can aid the user in accessing related resources across a number of institutions, and that fosters a more considered relationship between the repositories and their contributors. Echoing Skott, he emphasises the necessity for a platform that, through the presentation of folk cultural material within its full institutional and human context of generation, supports and encourages users towards the most nuanced, sensitive, fully-informed and ultimately robust and coherent interaction with it.

To end

Chapters chronicling early folklore collection reveal telling details about the attitudes of the 'experts' towards what should be included in collections: the good

rather than the rubbish, the gold rather than the slag. Gold particularly, with its connotations of value, of beauty, of transformation (of a life of precarious drudgery to a life of secure comfort and ease; of a collector's missive to a valuable cultural text), and of the joyous excitement of those who find it, is a strong image that stays with one on reading this book. But perceptions of value are socially dependent, and open to change, inversion and expansion. Certainly, immersion in any tradition archive is enough to convince many of the value and beauty of the materials therein. The gold to be seen glinting in this book, the presence of which transforms all around it, is perhaps different in character to that of early twentieth century folkloristic understanding. It is the documentation that was kept and archived even after the precious element of the time was extracted: the correspondence, fieldnotes, jottings and observations that can open a window not only on the prevailing political and scholarly contexts of creation of 'tradition', but also on the micro-societal and human context of a song, memory, livelihood strategy, performance or narrative.

As folklore, ethnographic or archival practitioners, this methodological inflection is one aspect of our heritage and our wisdom. Much of it is particularly relevant to concerns of today: from the delegitimization of the archives to the challenge of qualitative data preservation to struggles over ownership, authority and cultural representation. Our reflections may not only inform our own practice in the future, but also give us a hoard of nuanced understandings to share.

We and our predecessors have been carrying out the large-scale generation and preservation of qualitative data longer than anyone else. Through our reflection, which happily can be carried out in interaction with rich, particular material and collections that exist in a context of great time-depth, we are learning lessons about what may be valued and preserved, about casting the net wide, and about the potential for even small scraps of contextual material to enrich collections and their interpretation immeasurably on both a human and a scholarly level. We have no choice but to be aware of the multiple voices constituting any creative representation of reality, and forming an inherent part of any fixed and archived version thereof. We understand that documenting lived experience in all its messiness and complexity is in itself a complex and messy task. We are in a good position to appreciate the opportunities and challenges posed by the digital realm: the ability to consider and present multiple and varied linkages and formats, the transformative increased capacity for access and use, and the seemingly ever-more-complex issues of duty of care.

We have reached a certain point in the articulation of a vision of our particularity and potential. Conversations within the discipline(s) are intensifying their consideration of our role as knowledge brokers and active constructors

of cultural heritage in an age where access to our collections will be quite differently mediated. Other stakeholders, quite rightly including the communities and individuals represented by the collections (and those rendered invisible by them), are becoming more active partners in these conversations. This discussion should continue, and its successive insights must be incorporated iteratively into our actions as we shift into a new phase of existence. It is up to us to listen, to engage with each other and with those outside the discipline, and to make, to communicate and to assert the decisions that will result in our role in the public sphere being one of integrity. As Maryna Chernyavska asks in our opening chapter (page 25): 'If we won't find the answers, who will?'