Contextualizing the Archives

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Notions of context have become profession-defining elements of theory and practice for both folklorists and archivists. For archivists, the idea that the records in their care do not exist in a cultural vacuum but rather emerge from a variety of individual, social, cultural and institutional contexts, has been fundamental to professional practice since the middle of the 19th Century. For folklorists, a theoretical focus on the context of folklore, and folklore as a context-situated event, came to the fore during the 1960s and 1970s, eclipsing earlier text- and item-based approaches. The ideas of context described above emerge from two different intellectual traditions and have been applied to distinct sorts of materials. However, within the conceptual and physical confines of folklore archives over the last 150 years, they have gradually come together. This paper explores a variety of topics related to context and archives, and through it I take my first baby steps in a larger dissertation project aimed at "contextualizing" folklore archives.

By "contextualizing" folklore archives, I refer to my efforts to do a number of things. In one sense, I place folklore archives within the context of the broader history of the archival profession. I explore the development of ideas of context in historical records archives and how these ideas gradually became applied to materials in folklore collections. In another sense, I place folklore archives within the context of the broader history of folkloristics. I examine the impact of contextual and performance-based theoretical shifts in the field of folklore and discuss how these theoretical changes affected the relevance of and practices in folklore archives. Finally, I hope to gain a greater understanding of what I can best describe as the archival context itself. I am interested in how the meanings of research materials change when they enter an archival frame—how a body of materials shifts from being a hodgepodge of writings, recordings and images that

examine contemporary experience to both a record of that experience and of the work done to document it.

Here I focus my efforts at contextualization on three topics: The place of folklore archives within the broader history of the archival profession, the influence of performance-based approaches on folklore archives, and the gradual acceptance of folklore materials under the broader umbrella of archival holdings.

Within the archival profession the notion of context is best understood as the effort to maintain information about the environment in which a body of records were created and used before they entered an archival repository. Approaches for maintaining this contextual information are rooted in two fundamentals of archival practice: arrangement and description. There are three primary concepts that guide archival arrangement. Two, *respect des fonds* and *provenance*, frame the basics of the archival unit through the preservation of records in groupings that relate to their sites of creation and use. The corollary concept of original order stresses the maintenance of the organizational and filing systems of the records' creators.

In addition to the use of arrangement schemes to maintain the intellectual context of archival materials, archivists also rely on descriptive conventions to stress the same ends. In this way, the archival finding aid is more than just a document that provides access to archival materials by identifying their locations within a repository. As a narrative description of the contents and history of a collection, the finding aid frames a body of material. It places an archival collection within an intellectual context, and by explicating the logic of arrangement in narrative form, gives meaning to the whole as a sum of its parts, and each part as a portion of a larger whole.

American archival theorist T.R. Shellenburg notes in his discussion of archival arrangement that early archival formulations were based on subject, "much as books are classified in libraries" (Schellenburg 1956:169). The early similarities between library and archival arrangement are important to note since they suggest a former perception of an intellectual kinship between materials that are now, from the perspective of professional archivists at least, viewed as fundamentally different. The first shifts in this approach appeared, by most accounts, in 1841 when one of two Frenchmen—either the

Minister of the Interior, Count Duchatel (Schellenburg 1965:170), or French historian Natalis de Wailly (Duchein 1983:66) first articulated the concept of *respect des fonds*. A concept that would gradually achieve acceptance and begin to fundamentally inform the work of professional archivists.

The emergence and acceptance of the concept of fonds marked the beginnings of a movement away from the organization of archival materials according to subject distinctions and toward one that attempted to preserve archival materials in units that related back to the original environments of record creation. These early articulations of the importance of context led over time to the establishment of the systems of arrangement and description that have served as markers of identity for the development of an entire profession over the last century and a half.

At the same time archival record repositories flourished under the care of archivists guided by a profession-defining theoretical apparatus, folklore archives emerged into a conceptual framework of their own. The earliest folklore archives directed their energies toward the preservation of a highly specialized body of knowledge—lore, if you will. Researchers viewed the items of folklore they "collected" as inherently threatened cultural resources that informed national identity (Thompson 1953:89-90). The preservation of these materials in repositories dedicated to the purpose formed a part of a larger effort to salvage the intangible artifacts of the past before they vanished forever. Folklore collecting became a means of stoking the growing fires of romantic nationalism across the European continent. Folklore archives became resting places for the long-term preservation of the embers that ignited this cultural conflagration.

However, just because folklore archives were sites of intellectual and cultural preservation did not mean that the materials stored there rested in timeless stasis. Regardless of how folklorists of the period viewed their materials—such as the dying relics of a vanished historical period, for example—the archival collections themselves were dynamic. Situated as they were either within or connected to academic institutions, folklore archives were an intrinsic part of the research exercise. Items were gathered in the field, classified like samples in a natural history collection and filed along side their taxonomic brothers

and sisters in the archive. The classificatory practices within folklore archives were an extension of the general methodologies of folklorists. These methodologies were framed by an understanding of the world steeped in the very same scientism that infected the educated classes in Europe and America during the period.

While nationalism first inspired the impulse to collect and preserve folklore materials, the rapidly accumulating pools of data soon fueled a whole set of curious new observations. Rather than reinforcing the uniqueness of various national traditions, folklore collecting projects began to establish the pervasiveness of many traditions: stories, songs and beliefs across nations, language, geography and time. These mounting observations eventually inspired the growth of cross-cultural comparative folklore research, which became the focus of folklorists' work through middle of the 20th century (Ben-Amos 1981: xix). Folklore archives became central to these comparative projects. As a result, most folklore archives began to develop organizational and indexing systems that further assisted the comparative study of folklore.

I have come across few records of early archival organizational schemes. However, basing my assumptions on discussions in later publications that refer to archival practices, such as the Symposium on folklore archiving held at Indiana University in 1953 and the run of The Folklore and Folkmusic Archivist (Thompson 1953b; List 1958-1968), it does seem that the two dominant approaches to organization during the mid twentieth century had been in use since at least the end of the nineteenth.

Like the geologists, botanists and other natural historians of the era, a basic approach involved categorizing each item received according to the folkloric equivalents of genus and species. Folklore genre, sub-genres and a host of other typological distinctions shaped the intellectual arrangement of materials, which were then collocated with their kin in files, folders, envelopes or by transcribing them onto index cards (Thompson 1953b:118; Wilgus 1958:3). Form followed intellectual fashion as well. From the literature it seems that the most influential organizational plan was that developed by the Institute for Dialect and Folklore Research in Uppsala, Sweden which formed a basis for genre categorization in many other settings (Thompson 1953b:113). After

the revision of the major European and American folktale index, the Types of the Folktale (Aarne and Thompson 1961[1928]), in 1928, both it and later the Motif Index of Folk Literature (Thompson 1955-1958) became the primary means of organizing folktale materials within folktale-genre files.

A second approach to the organization of materials in folklore archives involved maintaining some degree of provenance according to collector. In such archives it seems that materials coming in from a particular collector were accessioned either as cumulative units of that collector's fonds or as stand alone collections identified by his or her name. In either case, all materials brought in by an individual were organized first by that persons name, frequently kept in original order, and heavily indexed to allow subject–here primarily meaning genre and region–access (Stekert 1967:64). In some cases, materials were stored in folders or envelopes, and at least one institution, the Archives of the Irish Folklore Commission, materials received from individual collectors were bound into leather and cloth volumes and stored on shelves in accession order (O'Danachair 1961:1; Thompson 1953b: 94). Some archives that were originally organized along genre lines reorganized their holdings according to the fonds of individual collectors or researchers at later dates (Stekert 1967;Rikoon 1979:5)

In the literature on folklore archiving there is nothing mentioned that suggests one system predates the other or that one of the two necessarily dominated the field early on. Rather, as William Hugh Jansen wrote in the inaugural issue of The Folklore and Folk Music Archivist in 1958, "No greater chaos can be imagined than that which prevails among the various set-ups which are, or might be termed, folk archives in the United States" (Jansen 1958:1). Although he limits this statement to refer to archives in the US, a reading of the extant literature on the matter shows beyond a doubt that there were very few standardized practices in the discipline. In the words of another scholar, "Every archive is the development of an idea of some one pioneer in the field" (Ake Campbell in Thompson 1953b:89).

Early folklore archives flourished within the context of the intellectual worlds of folklorists themselves. The archives existed for disciplinary use and were shaped according to disciplinary needs. As such, they—and the materials they held—were not viewed in the

same way as the repositories and materials overseen by professional archivists. This perception of folklore archives as fundamentally different from the records of government and industry was as true for professional archivists—on whose radar folklore archives did not even seem to register—as it was for folklorists.

Folklore archives would remain highly relevant to the work of folklorists for over one hundred years. However, by the 1960s several dramatic changes occurred that would ultimately push genre-based folklore archives out of the intellectual mainstream of folklore research.[1] Space and time constraints prevent me from speculating on the broad cultural and disciplinary forces that began to strain the conceptual and methodological frameworks of the field. As a result, I will focus my attention on an intellectual orientation that emerged as a result of this conflict: the contextualist shift in research focus and the increasing emphasis placed on the folkloric performance and folkloric event as the site of folklorists' inquiry. That the results of these methodological shifts have proven dramatic to the field cannot be understated. Thirty years down the road, folklorists generally no longer identify as scholars involved in the comparative study of folkloric texts, but rather as ethnographers engaged with the study of "artistic communication in small groups" and cultural documentation. In response to the growth of these "New Perspectives," many older scholars expressed concerns over what they saw occurring to the field. In his 1973 address, incoming AFS president D.K. Wilgus noted in response to the new emphasis being placed on performance that we "might as well burn the archives" (Wilgus 1973). In fact, the rise of contextual and performance based approaches altered the nature of research activities to such a degree that folklore archives today–of the sort created to support comparative textual research at least–stand largely unused by professional folklorists engaged in ethnography (Gabbert 1999:123).

As the folklore archives created by academics fell into disuse, a quiet revolution in the perception of the relationship between folklore materials and historical archives began to occur. The cultural salvage approaches of the past certainly carried with them an implicit understanding of folkloric materials as representative of national heritage. However, no matter how important they were, folkloric

materials were not seen as existing in the same sphere as, say, the foundational documents of government. Over the last 30 or so years this perception has begun to change. It has become possible to view materials that in the past were seen as essentially different from one another—e.g. a recording of a folk song and a letter from George Washington—as conceptually connected in new ways. I argue that perceptual changes linked so-called folk materials to, or perhaps rendered them more concordant with, other materials that for years had been under the care of professional archivists. As a result, long entrenched ideas of archival practice that had previously been seen as unimportant to folklore materials gradually assumed a greater relevance, and new collections were founded whose practices adhered to the standards set forth by professional archivists. A question that lingers here is whether this change in professional practice, one that occurred under the broader conceptual shift outlined above, had more to do with folklorists reaching out to models founded on archival standards, professional archivists reaching out to folklore collections, or some combination of the two.

What caused the change in perspective in regard to the relationship of folklore materials vis-à-vis historical records is something that at this point I can only speculate on. I believe that the application of new technologies, in particular magnetic audiotape, to fieldwork dramatically changed the nature of the research and documentation folklorists were able to conduct. A related factor was the emergence of contextual and performance-oriented approaches to folkloric materials that dramatically altered the locus of fieldwork practice, putting emphasis on the documentation of the folkloric event rather than on the collection of texts. The increased interest in social, cultural and oral approaches to history by historians, especially the adoption of the oral interview as a viable historical methodology, changed perceptions of what kinds of materials had historical value. The argument here is that historians themselves are brokers in what constitutes a viable historical resource. Additionally, all the factors that lead to the growth of public sector folklore come to bear here as well, in particular, the explosion of popular interest in historic preservation and national heritage built around the bicentennial, and the application of "folklife" models that tended to affix a broader significance to elements of human behavior

by placing it under an umbrella of cultural heritage. Finally one cannot overlook the centrality of the American Folklife Center and the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, whose growing influence in the field has done much to shape the practice of academic and public sector folklore in addition to guiding the establishment of folklore repositories along national lines.

Regardless of the reasons, the results of this conceptual shift are clear today. I am only one of a growing number of folklorists who holds a MLS degree and professional training in archives in addition to a higher degree in folklore or ethnomusicology. And while the dawning congruence of folklore archives and historical archives has been underway for years, one publication that I like to cite as the jewel in the crown of this process is Corsaro and Taussig-Lux's Folklore in Archives (Corsaro and Taussig-Lux 1998), which is a guidebook for viewing folklore materials from the perspective of the professional archivist and creating a framework for professional archivists to approach folklore materials. This drawing together of two formerly different worlds has had a profound effect on the practice of folklorists working in archives (or folklore archivists, folklarchivists or whatever). What we have are archives, archives in the same sense that a professional archivist would use the term. Archives structured by contextual relationships maintained through the application of concepts, such as provenance, and explicated through the use of standard archival descriptive approaches. We operate within an archival context, and I hope through additional research to flesh out what that means about our collections and to our profession.

Note

1. This is not to say that the genre-based archive of the early 20th century has vanished. For example, collections organized by genre continue to grow and be used as pedagogical resources in academic environments, such as UC Berkeley and BYU, where genre-based approaches are a part of undergraduate instruction. However, genre archives, and archives in general, no longer hold the central place they once did within the field.

In addition, genre-based materials still exist as distinct bodies within the broader confines of ethnographic repositories whose other collections might well be organized according to approaches standard to the archival profession. As Indiana University Folklore Librarian, Moira Smith pointed out to me once in regard to the Indiana

University folklore archive, its organizational schemata run like geological strata across the entire collection. One approach to organization would be superceded by another, which in turn would be superceded once more. A collection like Indiana's can be read like a rock shelf, with changes in theoretical concerns, research interests and the idiosyncratic systems of curators delineated by each shift in organization and description.

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