

Digital archiving of records of anthropology

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The Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (SAC) ran this conference (August 6/7 2009) on digital archiving of records of anthropological research in Thailand (http://www3.sac.or.th/archiving_culture/?page_id=61). The centre director, Dr. Paritta Koanantakool, talked of various initiatives to provide access to research outputs in Thailand, including the database on ethnic groups in Southeast Asia (<http://www.cesd-thai.info>). SAC is a resource centre with a library and museum in Bangkok that is now seeking to build a digital repository (www4.sac.or.th/anthropological_archive/) for research material, as discussed in the presentation by Thanwadee Sookprasert and Sittisak Rungcharoensuksri. DART - the Digital Archive of Research on Thailand is a collaboration between the University of Washington, SAC, and the Thai Institute for Population and Social Research. The project aims to archive multimodal research collections using a standard metadata system and to make existing collections discoverable by entering metadata even if the collection is not housed in the archive. It also aims to provide a portal for searching across various institutions with significant Thai collections. The basic question is what is an archive? To dispel confusion it was made clear that an archive may have a web presence but is nothing to do with Flickr or YouTube, it is a primary repository of historical records, fundamentally created for research.

Charles Keyes (University of Washington) gave a reflection on how he went about preparing his data for his own analysis, years after his initial fieldwork in the early 1960s. He set about transforming filecards, photos, fieldnotes and more and, in the process creating an archival form of the primary data. He noted that when ethnographic records are reconstrued as historical records, as can happen when they are preserved rather than being their epistemological status is transformed. It was refreshing to hear an established academic engaging with these issues as, in my experience it is rare to find a researcher so committed to preserving their own field materials, paying attention to standards for file formats and the metadata. (In fact, Robert Leopold later noted that of some hundreds of US anthropologists who retire each year, only about 20 deposit in a repository.)

Keyes noted that recording 'saves the said from the saying' (quoting Paul Ricoeur), fixing the spoken word that would otherwise be ephemeral and that the resulting archival objects are potentially problems for the host community, just as they are also likely to be welcomed by them as a wonderful resource.

Dr. Rasmi Shoocongdej (Archaeology, Silpakorn University) talked about the necessity to safeguard archaeological data so that claims made by one researcher can be checked by others. She gave the example of a skeleton she excavated which disintegrated after it was exposed to air, so the drawings and photographs taken of it become the only source that then have to be preserved. She also appealed for methodological notes to be stored with data to give more contextual information about how the collection was made in the first place.

In a panel discussion Charles Keyes and I talked about changing methods of data collection and

assessing the value of fieldwork materials for a new generation of scholars. Good primary data requires planning before fieldwork and guidance about what standards to conform to (e.g., media formats, metadata standards: Open Archives Initiative, Dublin Core, etc). Publicly funded research must be made publicly available requiring open access repositories. Issues of intellectual property mean that permissions need to be sought during fieldwork. We need to encourage methods for creation of good, well-structured data in the course of normal fieldwork, without adding too much to the researcher's labour, but recognising that the work created will provide a firm foundation for future analysis. There was some discussion about the detail of metadata required for discovery of material in collections. Some advocate thin metadata which may be as thin as nothing, allowing the data to be discoverable based on its contents. I find this an impossible solution, imagine trying to find books in a library without a catalog, just searching on the books' contents. No standard terms would mean that you would only find part of what you were looking for, or else you would find way too much because all results in all sources would be returned. There was general agreement that 'good enough' metadata could provide a suitable finding aid while not making it too hard for the depositor to fill in a catalog. An example that we use at [PARADISEC](#) is the [Open Language Archives Community](#)

Robert Leopold (Smithsonian Institution) discussed issues in the online presentation of fieldnotes. What kinds of sensitivities can prevent access to research data? Should there be differential access for native peoples? He suggested that placing fieldnotes online complicates (rather than resolves) the ethical and methodological issues surrounding their use and reuse by subsequent researchers. Further, the selection of particular fieldnotes for digitization and online display naturalizes and valorizes their ethnographic authority in source communities.

Walsh (researcher) 'headnotes' are the notes in one's mind - more than could possibly be recorded, and are typically not included in any published version in order to ensure that the notes are 'objective', an illusion based on the absence of any information other than the written notes. An interesting observation that follows is that fieldwork never completely ends, as the interaction of the researcher, their 'headnotes' and the original records continues as the researcher's perspective on the original notes changes over time. The perspective of a researcher at the end of their career may be quite different, and potentially far richer in its understanding of the field material, than it was at the time of its recording.

Brigitte Vizina of WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organisation) an agency of the UN, presented some examples of how IP issues are managed by archives and other collecting institutions around the world. WIPO's mission is to build a balanced and accessible international IP system. She also guided us through a plethora of acronyms associated with the field, including TCE, or traditional cultural expression (= what was known as 'folklore') , characteristic elements of the traditional artistic heritage of a community that are developed and maintained by a community. She also discussed misuse of TCE when music was misappropriated from a UNESCO archive. Some copyright does protect TCEs, but generally it protects derivative products based on TCE. Thorny questions arise, such as how do you manage TCEs in an archive when the interests of the tradition bearers conflict with the aims of the archive?

Mark Turin (Cambridge University) in a talk titled 'Collection, protection, connection' gave an overview of the Digital Himalaya Project (<http://www.digitalhimalaya.com/>). The lack of a single

institutional centre for Himalaya study meant that a digital centre with a web portal was a logical choice, overcoming the problem of dismemberment of collections with papers going to a library, tapes to an audio archive, music to a music archive and so on. There were a number of films that needed preservation ('Nitrate won't wait') so the project made a homemade digitisation device for 16 mm film. They processed a subset of the collection to low level for delivery as an 'appetiser' and can then redo the same material at a higher resolution later. This is salvage anthropology of the products of salvage anthropology. If they didn't migrate these legacy formats while there was a chance to do so they would be lost. Turin noted that anthropologists may have worried about reintroducing old footage to current communities, but now with Youtube much of this is being done by others in less principled ways so anthropologists can take the opportunity to provide properly produced and contextualised material.

The project includes full online sets of rare journals and runs a digitisation office in Kathmandu where most of the work of converting material is carried out.

Turin also noted the work of Susan Whitfield in the Dunhuang project (<http://idp.bl.uk/>) in particular her article 'Navigating Through Uncharted Territory:IDP, An International Internet Digitisation Project', including the perils of technology (<http://idp.bl.uk/downloads/UnchartedTerritory.pdf>)

See: Creative heritage project - [http://www.wipo.int/tk/en/folklore/culturalheritage/Intellectual Property and Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage: A Survey of Current Practices and Protocols in the South Pacifi](http://www.wipo.int/tk/en/folklore/culturalheritage/IntellectualPropertyandSafeguardingIntangibleCulturalHeritage:ASurveyofCurrentPracticesandProtocolsintheSouthPacifi)

Anthropologists Rolf Husmann, Carina zur Strassen and Lahu filmmaker Jakhadte presented an exciting project in which they digitised 16mm film, made in the early 1960s by the Austrian Hans Manndorff, in northern Thailand. A team of four had made 53 short ethnographic films (the shortest of 4 minutes) which were never returned to the villages. The Institut fur den Wissenschaftlichen Film (IWF) (http://www.iwf.de/iwf/default_en.htm), now named IWF Knowledge and Media, Gottingen produced digital copies of the films for housing in Bangkok and return to the villages in the form of nine DVDs. Prof Manndorff is now 83 and an interview with him was played to the conference. Jakhadte is now involved in making a film about the whole process from his perspective as a representative of the northern hill-tribes.

There were a number of other presentations, some in parallel so I could not get to all of them, but see the online program for a listing.