

**Moving stories: Reflections on archival circulation of otherwise historically absented
Maithil women's tales**

ROUGH DRAFT

Note to Draft Readers: As you will discover, this draft is truly rough and partial. I spent a significant amount of time, prior to drafting, reviewing relevant literature to provide a theoretical framework for the essay. It is no doubt over-represented here and will need to be significantly reduced/tightened and better interwoven into what ought to be the "meat" of the essay, which is a description and analysis of the archiving process from aims to fieldwork procedures to the processing of materials to the design of the archive and its relationship with other products and modalities of my work. I also realize I need to frame the essay more strongly in the idea of "mobility," which in this case entails movement from "intangible cultural heritage" in situ to new modalities (video, audio, text, translation) and "locations" (internet website), which is no where and (almost) everywhere at once. This is a reflexive review, but ultimately, it will be for others to judge the products and their value. In any case, I request your forbearance with the current state of the draft and very much look forward to your responses, as I continue to develop content, argument, organization, etc.

[one or more of these opening quotes]

The processes of globalisation including the development of digital technology have increased access to other cultures and made the permeability between boundaries separating cultures more precarious. This has increased the urgency for thinking about the ethical issues surrounding cultural appropriation and ensuring that cultures are shared responsibly.

- Arya, Rina. 2021. "Cultural appropriation: What it is and why it matters?" *Sociology Compass* 15(10), p.2

Archives are not sites of preservation, as is commonly understood, but sites of loss, governed by a double impossibility: first, the impossibility of complete access to the truth about the past, and second, the impossibility of recovering all the archives available about a given event. This loss is compounded by varying degrees of access, regulated entry, and guarded use, all of which perpetuate silence.

- El Guabli, Brahim. 2023. *Moroccan Other-Archives: History and Citizenship after State Violence*. Fordham University Press, p. 12

[The] exploitation of sources that academic historians would not typically cite has great significance for writing "history from below," as these sources refine the quality of academic history and democratize access to the histories of marginalized classes, all while enabling communities to recover the silent history of subaltern groups' experiences.

- El Guabli, Brahim. 2023. *Moroccan Other-Archives: History and Citizenship after State Violence*. Fordham University Press, p. 19

INTRODUCTION

Brahim El Guabli's provocative statements above together are an apt launch for this essay, which seeks to contextualize my own archival efforts in the history and politics of colonial and anthropological efforts to create and circulate other people's cultural knowledge outside of its original social context. The impossibilities and compoundments noted above must be further situated for the current case in contexts as globally broad and deeply historical as colonialism and as potentially marked as the stratifications within source societies.

My focus is the multi-year collaborative creation of a public digital archive of Maithil women's oral stories that I have spearheaded. People in and from the Mithila region participated in various ways that I will discuss in the sourcing, processing, and circulation of the stories and the resultant digital archive for wider audiences. In this essay I examine the processes and participatory roles, as well as the implications of the movement of such "intangible cultural heritage" (ICH) into new modalities (video, audio, textual, translational), "locations" (internet website – at once nowhere and (almost everywhere), and organizational formats, eventuating in wider access in these culturally extracted forms, shifts in what are otherwise ephemeral and domestic, ritually embedded and/or community-based expressive practices. This is a reflexive review, but ultimately, it will be for others to judge the process and products, their ethics and their value.

I argue that the commonly selective, extractive, and (re)ordered production of archival creations in institutional settings are mitigated by four elements of the archive in question: a) the entailed participatory and collaborative processes; b) the broad accessibility of the archival materials; c) the enabling structure of the archive to interaction, interactional nature of the archive; and finally d) its co-production with a participatory documentary film and basis in a published book that offers important epistemological grounding for the video recorded, transcribed and translated stories despite their isolation from the living culture from which the former emerge.

I argue further that the subaltern nature of the stories within their original cultural context renders this archive as what El Guabli called an "other-archive," despite (and in part due to) my own role as a cultural outsider, not subject to the same "subalterization," in its creation. The archive, therefore, has the potential to impact established histories, as well as sociological understandings of Mithila and the larger South Asian region, even as the stories are circulated beyond their already mobile nature.

For purposes of this essay, I use the term "Intangible Cultural Heritage" (ICH) to describe the source content of the Maithil Women's Oral Tales Digital Archive. This term derives from the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The convention defines ICH as "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as

well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage” (Article 2: Definitions 1). It notes further that ICH is transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity” (Article 2: Definitions 1), inclusive of “oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage” (Article 2: Definitions 2). The Convention seeks the safeguarding of ICH by “measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage” (Article 2: Definitions 3). Having not initially known of this Convention, it has later become clear to me that my own archival efforts align with the purposes of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

While the creation of digital archives of other people’s *living* (if potentially waning and/or transforming) intangible cultural heritage is distinct in several ways I will delineate below from the appropriation and museumization of other’s tangible cultural heritage from the past, the former cannot be fully understood politically or ethically outside of the latter’s historical unfolding and functioning, a topic to which I turn next.

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION, THE COLONIAL ARCHIVE AND THE POWER OF THE MUSEUM

According to Rena Arya, cultural appropriation “refers to the taking of items (whether tangible or intangible) including ideas from one culture by another (see Young, 2010, p. 5). To this standard definition, reference to the inequality in power between the two cultures should be included, which problematises the taking.” (1) She notes that “whilst sharing or experiencing cultures other than one’s own is a rich part of human experience, it remains problematic because of the damage it may cause, especially when the culture that has been taken from is marginalised, that is, is either a minority or indigenous culture.” (1)

Cultural appropriation is important, argues Arya, “because it concerns the phenomenon of exploitation that has existed historically and continues to do so between cultures of unequal power. Naming this and acting upon it means recognising the histories of colonialism and imperialism and their legitimisation of taking” (2). “The specific dimensions of cultural assets vulnerable to such capture extend from stylistic aesthetics and iconographic representations to sovereign territory, material objects, proprietary data, shared folklore, and religious symbolism. Focusing on the asymmetrical power vectors, Susan Scafidi (2005, p. 9) accentuates the inherently unpermitted character of this extraction, defining the process as the un-entitled capture of an external community’s proprietary heritage, creative expressions, historical legacies, or epistemological structures” (3).

“At its worst,” notes XXX, “appropriation can spur objectification and dehumanization, stereotyping and misleading beliefs, **decontextualizing** and obscuring aspects of the culture in question. Misleading beliefs **can fuel discrimination and justify oppressive policies**. Negative emotional and other impacts on the people of the culture being appropriated, particularly negative impact on self-perception Tsosie (2002) and Fryberg et al. (2008)” (XXX, p. XX).

Ziff and Rao (1997) describe four objections to cultural appropriation: (a) harm to the community whose culture is appropriated, (b) harm to the cultural object itself, (c) material loss to the community whose culture is appropriated, and (d) failures in the laws to reflect alternative conceptions of property and ownership of culture (p. XXX).

Two disciplines that have been fundamental to rethinking the impact that imperialism and colonialism has had in legitimating cultural appropriation are postcolonial anthropology (since the 1980s) and museum studies (since the 1990s), both engaged in self-critique, sometimes called “the reflective turn,” or “the crisis in representation” since the 1980s (including the seminar works of Said 1978, Clifford and Marcus 1986, and Pierce 1990).

Since the late 20th century, numerous tracts have sought to delineate decolonial methods for archiving tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The present essay is situated as a “next gen” case of developments.

Archives, writes Brahim El Guabli, have been wielded by such power-holding institutions as governing and securities apparatuses and churches (2023, p. XXX). In the colonialist context archives operated as a form of knowledge production (Müller 2023, p. XX), what Trouillot (2015) called “fact creation” (p. XXX). For the case of India in particular, knowledge production enabled by surveillance by the British Raj was a crucial mechanism of colonial capability (Dirks 2001, Cohn 1996). Citing Cohn, Müller explains that “whenever the British acquired new territory on the subcontinent, they launched a new survey, which not only geographically mapped the area but described and classified the respective flora and fauna, economy, history and society” (p. xx). The resultant archives”

fixed and ascribed traditions and customs, rank and hierarchies, castes and classes, languages and characteristics. They delineate and constitute, and created categories between the colonizers and the colonized, as well as among them. The vast amounts of information gathered were compiled in surveys and encyclopaedias, in museum collections and paper archives. They ordered, fixed, bound and settled India. (p. xx)

Michel Foucault’s now classic work on the nexus among power, knowledge, and discourse (as “truth”) has provided the foundation for much postcolonial work on museums and archives as sites of knowledge production undergirding colonial projects and their 21st century legacies. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (XXX), Foucault demonstrates that rather than being a place for the retrieval of facts, it is rather a process of ordering and creating “facts” and their worth. Writes Susan Pearce,

For museums, the basis of authority is that power to arbitrate upon material culture, to decide what is “valuable” or “interesting” and what is not, to endeavour to add the former to the museum’s holdings, and to construct it into meaningful patterns, which, of course, reinforce the estimable quality of the original decisions. We should not forget that “decide” carries the sense of “to cut out, or to cut away”: the good is top-sliced and the dross finds it [sic] own level. (1999, p. 26)

In this manner, museums demonstrate “an immense capacity for the absorption of aliens; after all to turn the problematic alien into the ‘Other’ which supports ‘Us’ is, *par excellence* ‘the museum’s art’” (1999, p. 33).

Colonial museums and the institutions that followed them conducted decision-making processes about what to include and exclude, how to organize and categorize it, how it should be interpreted, what it was worth, and who should and should not gain access to it. As Müller points out, “people accessing, reading and interpreting the photographs are confronted with this pre-set structure and are subject to the ordering power of what and how things are included in an institutionalized archival corpus” (2023, p. 34), producing history via the production of history (Trouillot 1995). Such knowledge production also produces absences and silences (Hilden 2022).

As with conventional archival processes in museums, digital archives too entail decisions about collection, preservation, ordering, exhibition, and processes related to access archival material. Yet Katja Müller (2023) has argued that digital archives and collections have the capacity to challenge, as well as (or rather than) reinforce archival power conventions (p. 37). As Irene Hilden notes, “With the increased opening of archives and their inventories through digitisation, many institutions have undergone enormous changes in recent years and are facing ever new challenges. While these processes enable a democratisation of access to knowledge, the shift to digital archiving practices continues to affect questions of hegemonic knowledge production in and of the archive” (p. 28). Thus, one of the key potentials in digital archiving is broader and freer access to the archive, which in turn can mean less exclusive power to interpret archival material.

A distinction must be made between the digitization of formerly non-digitized materials (objects whether textual or otherwise) through the use of photography and the creation of an archive of *intangible* cultural heritage via audio and/or video recording and/or photography. The first is often an attempt to “democratize” access and sometimes even “return” misappropriated materials while hanging on to the originals (and their constructed value and ownership). It may also result in recontextualization (or further decontextualization). The latter is an attempt to preserve ICH for any variety of uses and purposes, ideally centering access and organizational strategy, and therefore interpretive salience and other forms of control of the source community itself.

Of course one must remember that communities themselves are politically and socially differentiated, such that “community access and control” is not undifferentiated. Moreover, while mobile phones connected to the internet are now fairly ubiquitous across the world, still not all individuals have one, and not all that do have strong connectivity or unlimited data. As Muller notes, “New technologies make new forms of search and access possible, which are less restricted by conventional power mechanisms” (48).

It is crucial, however, to be cognizant of the fact that digital archives of ICH are not unmediated. For instance, oral tales emerge from embodied individuals in multisensory settings; when audio recorded they are detached from that source (Hilden 2022, p. XX), whereas at least video recording enables a mediated encounter with the embodied individuals in question and, to a degree, their audiovisual environments.

ARCHIVAL AIMS

The Internet revolution of the 1980s forward has enabled the publishing of audiovisual data that had previously been un- or under-represented in institutional contexts. The interactive nature and potentially global reach renders the internet a critical venue for the circulation of ICHs. “The advantage of new technologies,” wrote Peter Stockinger (2012), “is undeniable and, undoubtedly, they provide the necessary conditions for processing intangible materials. ...One of the many challenges of disseminating ICH is valorizing and conveying its ‘living’ quality” (XX). My scholarly career, which has grown in parallel to the expansion of internet technology and reach, has eventuated in my own attempt to make the ICH of Maithil women’s tales more widely known and available, at first through providing depth of context and subjectification in writing (Davis 2014, etc.); then in the creation of a community-engaged documentary film focused on Maithil women’s perspectives and tales (Davis 2023); and from 2018 (?) to the present, in the creation of a public digital archive of such tales called *Maithil Women’s Oral Tales* (n/d) whose primary content are video and audio recordings of Maithil women – in both Nepal and India, each at a different historical moment, telling tales that had been passed to them across generations.

My interest in Maithil women’s tales stems from my conviction that 1) they constitute a unique and rich source of culture heritage imbued with (diverse) women’s insights and perspectives on their own social and cosmological worlds; that these insights and perspectives are marginalized in their own (patriarchal and casteist) culture and society; that because of this they have been written out of history; and that therefore, we create a fuller understanding of Maithil society and culture, and the contours of human worlds more generally by valuing and circulating them. These tales and the telling (sometimes ritual) contexts in which they “intangibly” circulate can be understood as “present absences” (Stoler 2002) or “absent presences” (Hilden 2022) in the archives (including but not exclusively colonial) of Mithila and South Asia more generally. Irene Hilden has argued that such marginalized presences are “a characteristic feature of the colonial archive and the production of history and cultural memory, determined by mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion” and constitutive of the “active production of ignorance” (2022, p. XX). Like Hilden, whose focus is the Berlin Sound Archive, my aim is to create overt archival

presence – “a remembering and voicing and legitimating epistemologically speaking” (Hilden 2022, XX) for the previously absented components of Maithil culture. Such sources, argues El Guabli, “refine the quality of academic history and democratize access to the histories of marginalized classes, all while enabling communities to recover the silent history of subaltern groups’ experiences” (El Guabli 2023, 19), potentially at the same time promoting cultural identity and pride, and preserving ICH and their embedded epistemologies for future generations (Stockinger 2012, 4.3.2.1).

In what follows, I delineate the many steps toward the creation of the digital archive, from sourcing to processing to designing to populating to circulating.... For each step, I examine the manner in which members of the Maithil community....

MAKING OF THE SOURCES

For purposes of creating the archive, I first attempted a participatory process that failed. In 2016, I brought with me to Madhubani five high quality audio recorders with microphones. My idea was to show a set of students from the Mithila Art Institute (and/or other youth in the community, if interested) how to use the equipment and to record their women elders telling stories in their repertoires. My notion was that in addition to making their own contributions to the archive, the students would in the process pay more attention to and thereby appreciate these stories and the wisdom their elders shared thereby.

When I introduced this idea to the students at the institute a few of them expressed interest in the project, except they essentially said they wouldn’t need the equipment (which admittedly had taken me quite a bit of effort to acquire from my university for that period of time), holding up their mobile phones and saying, “uh, we can just use our mobiles.” Clearly, in the several years since I had been to rural South Asia, there’d been an explosion of access to smart phones. Not every individual had one, but I got the impression that there was at least one in many if not most families that had at least one mobile phone.

In the end, only two students at the Mithila Art Institute decided to follow through on recording their elders’ stories. Of the two, I could only get the recordings of two stories off one of the phones, which had incompatible types of recording files. The students quickly lost their enthusiasm. And I came to realize how little they were, as a group, interested in such stories, as opposed to those they found on Facebook, Instagram and other social media sites. Furthermore, most of the students were quite busy, not only with the 4-5 hours/day at the art institute, but with their commutes, their household chores, and their other studies. Their minds and their clocks did not have the bandwidth for this project. I myself remained committed, however, and began, using a snowball method, to seek out elder women (and a few men) with significant story repertoires in Madhubani and its surrounding villages.

Having conducted similar research in Nepal a 12-13 years prior, I had a sense of how this might unfold. I engaged the support of several teachers and the administrator of the Mithila Art Institute in helping to identify and introduce us to storytellers, as well. Much of the time, my

filmmaker collaborator, Carlos Gomez, videorecorded the storytelling sessions. When he was not available, I videorecorded them myself. M.S. Suman, being fluent in Maithili versus my own limited conversational capacity.

I had made the judgment that the reading and signing of written consent forms would be personally and culturally alienating in this context where not everyone is literate and bureaucratic processes can be intimidating and a matter of suspicion. Thus I established consent (per my approved IRB proposal) by describing the project verbally and seeking verbal recorded consent.

In most storytelling and recording situations, a number of people in the household and sometimes intimate others from the community were present, giving the session an air of domesticity and enjoyment. Of course, the presence of one or two outsiders and the small video recorder (or, in the case of Nepal years earlier the small audio recorder) were not the usual fare. Often, as is the custom when guests arrive, tea and sometimes a snack were served first over small talk. My own ability to communicate in Maithili was usually of significant interest and also made for a more positive and relaxing environment, I believe, than would have otherwise been the case, given my obvious foreignness (despite my attempts to comport myself in dress and behavior in a culturally appropriate manner). Perhaps more significant was the “vouching for” made evident by my local chaperone, who was known to the community and family in question.

El Guabli (2023) notes that “...archive and source creation are the key moments for the infiltration of silence into the process, because they are the pivot points for decisions regarding which stories or events are deemed worthy of being saved for the future” (13). Rather than directing storytellers about which stories to tell, we encouraged storytellers to tell whichever stories would come to mind. In some cases, other women present suggested additional stories, and if their family member/neighbor didn’t know that story, they might tell it themselves. Occasionally, a storyteller would lose their place in the story or forget how to proceed, and other women present would remind them or correct them. This then became part of the story rather than excised from the story, since I deemed it a relevant and natural part of the storytelling process. When a story emerged that would normally have been told in connection with a festival or other event, we took note of that (as such contextual information is often available elsewhere, including in my own publications). I was determined not to pick and choose through the stories but to include them all in the archive (unless the recording was so awful or partial as to render the story inscrutable).

PROCESSING OF THE SOURCES

The initial labeling for the tale sessions was by date, location, and numerical order, with the names of storytellers noted in the recording and in writing elsewhere. Where video recording was used, stills of the storyteller were created to help identify the storyteller, after we determined that they would like to be credited/identified for their storytelling. Everyone wanted to be credited, an indication that they were happy to participate in the creation of the archive (as explained to them) and perhaps for some that they wished to “go down in history” or at least be

recognized for their storytelling abilities. Per my explanation, they also knew that access to the recordings (and those of others in their society) would be available to themselves and their families/communities/progeny, as the archive was to be public. My hope is that Maithil heritage peoples' will be able to reuse the material as they see fit in the future. We engaged in storytelling sessions over a five month period in the Janakpur area (2003-2004) and over a four month period in the Madhubani area over a four month period (2016–2017). Incidentally, in Maithil culture, unlike some others, there are no stories for which initiation or another status is necessary for telling or listening. Three of the women who facilitated in the identification and introduction of other storytellers themselves also shared stories. The three were also celebrated Mithila artists (painters) whom I met at the Mithila Art Institute.

In order to avoid making preclusive assumptions about the value and appropriateness of the stories that were recorded, I decided to include all of them in the archive. Brahmin and Kayastha women were disproportionately represented, which can be explained by a set of intertwining factors – most prominently greater access of people of these varnas to me through institutional and social networking; and greater domestic time generally available to (and required of) these women, which means they are more likely to listen to, remember, and tell such stories. Still we worked hard to establish connections among women of other communities and had some success in that regard in both Janakpur and Madhubani.

While my efforts at participatory, intergenerational sourcing of stories failed (as described above), the processing of the stories for inclusion in the archive was very much collaborative and interdependent with people of Maithil heritage residing in Janakpur, Madhubani, Patna, Delhi, and even Sweden, England, Canada and the US. These collaborators, acknowledged in the archive, have had roles as transcribers, translators, subtitle creators, and cultural and linguistic consultants. A total of seven people at least one line of whose families derive from Mithila took on these paid roles. Collectively, their linguistic and cultural knowledge was invaluable to creating written transcriptions and translations for each story. While the translators created drafts of translations, I edited these for readability and understandability of prose for English speakers, often going back in forth with the original translator (and referencing the transcription in Maithili) until we were both satisfied to the best of our ability that the original meaning was brought across into the English translation. *MORE*

ARCHIVE DESIGN FEATURES

- Local knowledge regimes
- Accessibility of the archive
- Interactive features of the archive
- Contextualizing in the literature
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CONNECTIVITY TO CULTURAL CONTENT AND THEORY/ANALYSIS

- My writings

- Nupur's forthcoming thesis and subsequent
- Sama in the Forest
- Teaching tools

CONCLUSION