

Archiving Cultures: Bridging the Gap between Material and Immaterial Heritage

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Abstract:

In *Archiving Cultures*, Jeannette Bastian guides the reader through a compelling exploration of what ‘cultural archives’ are. She explores how diverse communities express and document their heritage and collective memories. She also considers the reasons behind intangible forms of expression, as well as their function as archival records. Analyzing several forms of externalizing memories and knowledge beyond written text, she shows their relevance as records for their communities. The next challenge for archivists, cultural policymakers, and everyone concerned with preserving cultural expressions is to determine how they can contribute to this endeavour.

Archivierung von Kulturen. Die Lücke zwischen materiellem und immateriellem Kulturerbe schließen

German Abstract:

In *Archiving Cultures* führt Jeannette Bastian den Begriff der „kulturellen Archive“ aufschlussreich ein. Sie untersucht, wie Gemeinschaften ihr kulturelles Erbe und ihr kollektives Gedächtnis zum Ausdruck bringen und dokumentieren und reflektiert die Gründe für immaterielle Ausdrucksformen sowie deren Funktion als Archivdokumente. Die nächste Herausforderung für Archivar_innen, kulturpolitische Entscheidungsträger_innen und alle, die sich mit der Bewahrung kultureller Ausdrucksformen befassen, besteht darin, zu bestimmen, wie sie zu diesem Vorhaben beitragen können.

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“Information society is a transparency society. The imperative of transparency is that information must circulate freely. It is not people but information that is truly free.” (Byung-Chul Han, *Infocracy: Digitization and the Crisis of Democracy*, Berlin 2021, p. 8)

In *Infocracy: Digitization and the Crisis of Democracy*, B. Han warns us of the dangers of the abundance and ubiquity of information, a warning that is more relevant today than ever before. Today, we are witnessing an escalation of conflicts around the world. However, the loss of cultural heritage and its importance for the recovery and well-being of survivors and victims alike has not been widely discussed. UNESCO comments on this topic: “UNESCO in 2020 has explored the role of living heritage in emergencies, including conflict and disaster situations.[...] the Convention adopted operational principles and modalities for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in emergencies” (Susanne Schnüttgen, “Living Heritage—A Contribution from UNESCO,” in: Christoph Wulf, ed., *Handbook on Intangible Cultural Practices as Global Strategies for the Future*, Cham 2025, p. 39–54, here: p. 50.).

Taking into account what Han argues and the statement by UNESCO, I ask myself: Could digitalizing and preserving material heritage be a response to the endangerment of the collective memories of peoples facing life-threatening situations? How can we take care of the immaterial heritage of subalternized peoples? Is it necessary to ‘preserve’ both types of heritage? What does it mean to safeguard *living heritage* in the era of the information society? Some answers to these questions can be found in the book *Archiving Cultures: Heritage, Community and the Making of Records and Memory* by Jeannette. A. Bastian.

The introduction to the book provides a critical and necessary examination of how society (i.e., Western society) has created records and data based on a colonial, exploitative, and manipulative approach to memories, bodies, and knowledge of dehumanized subjects for the benefit of empires and states. Questioning the administrative, 'legal,' and judicial capacities of the conception and treatment of records in colonial and national archives, Bastian invites us to look beyond explicit functions of archives to enter into a debate about what culture, forms of representation, and communication of knowledge mean for the past and present of non-Western societies. To carry out this discussion, Bastian proposes the laudable idea of cultural archives as a process "that considers intangible cultural expressions and tangible documentation equally as records and asks how they can be legitimately and seamlessly accommodated and subsumed within archival practice" (p. 2). To test her theory, she re-examines the term 'document,' as well as its forms of recording, duration, and communication.

In the first chapter, she draws parallels between heritage studies and its divisions, and archival studies. She then explores central themes such as cultural heritage, archival heritage, and how they interact to form cultural archives. While sharing analogous characteristics with cultural heritage, Bastian argues that archival heritage manifests in more prescriptive and formalized ways, perpetuating a multifaceted human legacy that is continually evolving and being selected over time. Bastian points out that the evolution of archival heritage, spanning centuries of record-making and record-keeping, is not solely defined by the physical manifestations of records and collections. Indeed, the theoretical underpinnings and practical methodologies employed for the management and preservation of these collections have played a pivotal role in shaping the archival heritage. In the mid-20th century, an academic 'archival turn' emerged, "asserting the 'archive' as a foundational element of humanistic studies and conceptualizing it as a metaphor for the accumulated and distributed knowledge of communities and subject disciplines" (Adrian Cunningham, "Archives as a Place," in: Heather McNeil & Terry Eastwood, eds., *Currents of Archival Thinking*, Santa Barbara 2017, p. 53–80, here: 55.). Without this paradigm shift, it would perhaps be much more difficult to echo the work presented here by Bastian.

The second chapter examines the Western archival legacy and proposes a nuanced perspective that embraces diverse community expressions. Seeking to bridge the gap between established archival practices and dynamic cultural expressions, Bastian reimagines archival theory, using the concept of the cultural record as described by Ghanaian scholar E. Ashie-Nikoi: “created by both individuals and the community” (p. 32). Records are considered not only as evidence of actions and/or transactions, but also as forms of memory. This positions them as a process-oriented endeavor, in which records, their creation, and their preservation are fluid and specific to time, place and culture.

Chapter three comprises oral archives, which P. DeSalle describes as written-down oral documents or testimonies (cf. p. 54). Theorizing oral traditions as active living records and memory texts, like written records with a different set of rules and ‘grammar,’ and acknowledging oral or non-written text as a product of community memory and tradition, leads Bastian to explain that memory texts are multifaceted terms that present connections between people and events, as well as how these connections are remembered and transmitted. They also describe how oral societies consider and locate their past and present. Memory texts can be objects, narratives, or places that evoke memories in individuals or communities. They combine reality, myth, and recollection (cf. p. 62).

In chapter four, “Carnival in the Archives,” Bastian describes embodied archives. These are present in performances such as dance and parades, presenting dynamic expressions as archival records that capture the essence of community celebrations and commemorations. This perspective redefines oral and embodied traditions as integral components of the archival matrix, emphasizing their role in preserving and transmitting collective memory across generations within territorial contexts. These traditions act as a form of internal records alongside external formats, such as video and sound recordings, photographs, and/or text, which are used to record events. Her plea is not to divide the archive and the repertoire, but to see them as complementary (cf. p. 77).

In the fifth chapter, “Memory, Community, and Records,” Bastian clarifies her view that memory is the unifying concept of the different forms of record-keeping in community archives. Drawing on Aleida Assmann’s concept of “cultural memory” in *Canon and Archive* (Berlin/New

York: 2010), she guides the reader through digital initiatives to illustrate how communities appropriate their narratives of memories of specific events that they wish to preserve and transmit. One example of this is *The Black Cultural Archives*, a national heritage center dedicated to collecting, preserving, and celebrating the stories of African and Caribbean people in Britain. “Through its online presence, the center shares stories that represent their unique and diverse experiences” (p. 93).

In the final chapter, she delves into several challenges facing cultural archives, the most relevant of which is the need to overcome dichotomies. This involves using digital technologies to unite seemingly irreconcilable opposites and adjusting archival thinking to accommodate unification (cf. p. 102). The merging of contrasting elements indicates that digital technologies are transforming archival spaces from formidable bureaucratic environments into global congregational domains. This transformation encompasses the re-evaluation of archival practices and the extension of principles to establish archival equity. It could be hypothesized that a re-evaluation of the archival mindset is a natural outcome of these digital re-evaluations, driven by both public and institutional demand.

The author uses the concept of ‘living archives’ to share a mindset in which archival collections are utilized to supplement historical records with real-time elements. This approach facilitates the creation of new archival material through a range of participatory activities. The living archives exemplify the interaction between the past and the present within Aleida Assmann’s theoretical framework of cultural archives (cf. p. 107).

Returning to the opening questions: The collective memories of different communities mean nothing without context. There are several ways to take care of immaterial heritage, especially for those seeking equity in the value of their memories, as well as in the production and transmission of knowledge. However, these methods must be appreciated by the Western archival canon in order to make a dialogical engagement between the heritage-memory-archive nexus. Finally, different types of heritage do not exist; they are all interconnected, and their creators should always be at the center, not the objects.

In conclusion, *Archiving Cultures* makes a vital contribution to archival and heritage studies. It offers innovative perspectives on the preservation of cultural heritage. Bastian's persuasive argument for the archival validity of intangible cultural expressions successfully challenges our existing notion of what constitutes a record. The book has the potential to become essential reading for anyone interested in the intersection of culture, memory, heritage, and archival studies.