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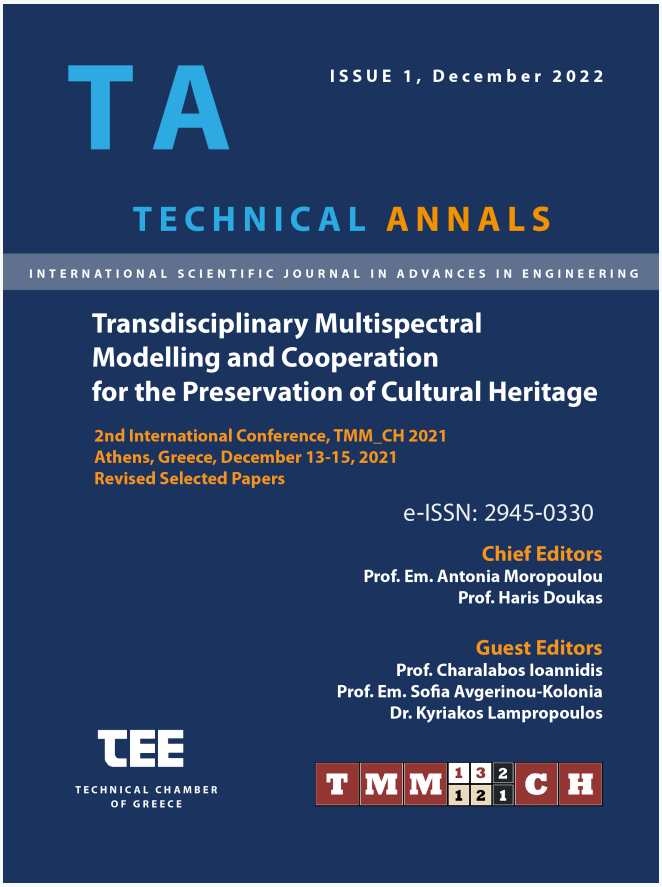

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Community Archive as a Platform for Development and Preservation of Intangible Heritage—the Community Archives Project

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Abstract. BG archives have initiated the Community Archive Project, the objective being to create communal archives that will prepare the material for researching Israeli development towns and Bedouin communities from the bottom – up, fully digital and accessible online. Bedouin towns and development towns are home to thousands of Israelis, and their role in the historical development of the state of Israel is clear. That said, their particular stories have yet to be told, mainly due to the absence of accessible documentation. This ―silence of the archive‖, as it is called in archival studies, inhibits the development of effective research and creates the false impression that ―what you see is what you have‖. Because of the ―silence of the archives,‖ these communities have been portrayed in a similarly passive fashion in public discourse and scholarly research. Their natural growth and development, propelled by internal dynamics as organic communities with ―bottom up‖ growth, has, until now, received little attention from researchers. This project aims to address this gap and to enrich the historical record by including the archival collections of the development towns themselves. The project leans on the theoretical framework and moral motivation of the Canadian concept of Community Archive. We acknowledge that the fundamental challenge for this project is to create authentic archives that will reconstruct the silence of the archive. This paper discusses the meaning of this core challenge, the solutions we formulated and the significant impact this project is expected to have on the thriving field of Israel studies.

Keywords: Digital Archives · Community Archives · Intangible Heritage · Periphery

1. Development Towns in the Israeli Legacy—The Public Image

Immediately after it was established, the fledgling State of Israel opened its gates to Jewish immigrants from all over. In the country‘s first decade, most of them were Jewish refugees from Europe and the Islamic lands. Of all the mighty challenges that Israel faced at this time, absorbing mass immigration on a scale that tripled its popula-

tion was the hardest. Most of the newly arrived had left their property behind and had not brought wealth with them, leaving thestate to shoulder the burden of their integration. The main question was: Where should they be housed?

As it managed the integration project, the Israeli establishment directed the immigrants, sometimes coercively, toareas far from the center of the country—Galilee and the Negev—in order to disperse the population and create an infrastructure for the country‘s socioeconomic development. The establishment then took responsibility for developing the immigrant townships, henceforth known as development towns.

Over the years, the inhabitants of the development towns contended with problems typical of geographic and social peripheries—distance from centers of social, economic, and political influence and inferior opportunities for personal, economic, and professional advancement. This remoteness and its resulting disparities created social stratification that became permanent in the domains of the Israeli legacy. Namely, the Israeli archetype was identifiedwith the decision-makers: members of the Labor Movement, mostly of European origin, well-schooled, secular, middle-class, and civically active. Contrastingly, those residing in the development towns were identified with remoteness from decision-making, Mizrahi origin in most cases, staunch allegiance to the Jewish religious tradition, lower- class socioeconomic status, and civic passivity.

2. The Problem—Lack of Resources of the Community Itself

As Israeli society evolved, the development-town communities became marginalized along with Bedouin society, a nomadic society far from Israel‘s constitutive Zionist ethos. In the 1980s and 1990s, Israel initiated the establishment of Bedouin townships in the Negev in order to draw Bedouin society closer to Israeli society by organizing it—an attempt that, however, enjoyed only partial success. Thus, the development towns and the Bedouin townships remained on the fringes of Israel‘s society and history. In the past two decades, the communities have achieved demographic growth and economic improvement for reasons including developments in national transport infrastructure. Also, during that time, studies have been written and films made about these towns. Their passive and marginal image, however, persists.

The perceived passivity of the development-town and Bedouin-township communities is hard to correct because the communities have no historical documentation. Hardships of daily life, social heterogeneity, lack of organization, and additional factors have obscured the need for historical documentation that belongs to the communities themselves. The absence of documentation in the development towns is felt all the more in view of the meticulous—if not obsessive—documentation that organizations and communities associated with the Israel Labor Movement went out of their way to produce. Thus, the social gap originally created by historical circumstances is being perpetuated by lack of documentation.

Those who wished to acquaint themselves with the past of these communities via archive documentation found some in the Israel State Archives. Mainly, however, what they found there were references to the development towns in administrative

archive material at the state level. Since this material reflects the state‘s official relationship with the towns‘ municipal authorities, it is typified by a top-down perspective. One who studies the state-level administrativedocumentation sees the communities en passant and on a small scale, if at all, and encounters nothing of the communities‘ independence and dynamism. Due to its administrative nature and its top-down point of view, this material does not— cannot—allow the communities‘ voices to be heard. In other words, although there is archive material about these towns, there is none *of* them.

The detriment occasioned by the lack of documentation is not confined to the community of researchers and other interested parties. It also, and mainly, affects the communities themselves. The lack of community archives in the Israeli periphery has shunted the community legacy to the fringes of the Israeli story and left it at an oral parochial level. The rich community heritage, one that combines partnership in fate, a shared past, surmounting of obstacles, andmanagement of processes has a definitive role to play in the coalescence and cohesiveness of the community and the forging of community resilience. In its absence, the community loses.

3. The Solution—Community Archives

It is this double necessity—that of the community and that of research—that gave rise to the community archives project. It is a joint project of the Ben-Gurion Research Institute for the Study of Israel and Zionism and the communities that populate Israel‘s periphery. Within this joint structure, the communities gather historical materials from their own settings and arrange it in the order of their choosing, whereas the Ben-Gurion Institute redacts the collection to meet archive standards, scans it, and makes it accessible online as a self-standing database atop the digital-management system of the Ben-Gurion Archives[25].

4. Constructing the Project Framework

At the very beginning of the work, many questions that threatened the project arose. First, what is the conceptual space of the community? A community is a voluntary entity; its conceptual demarcation is vague. This awareness brought up additional questions: Is the municipal authority part of the community or is it the long arm of the state? What about public or semi-public entities such as the community center? — are they part of the community that cannot make its voice heard, or do they belong to the central establishment, whose voice is heard loud and clear? What municipal documents should be included in the community archive? Do engineering-department files, town building plans, and building authorizations tell a community‘s story? What about private individuals—how far should the archives go in reaching out for residents‘ personal collections? Such collections are indeed very important, but the col-

[25] The Community Archives website. http://www.infocenters.co.il/amc

lection should not be made overly eclectic. What we considered clear and well defined at the outset turned into something like mercury beads scattering across a floor.

To demarcate and model the project, we strongly availed ourselves of the Canadian community-archive model. The idea of the community archive began to blossom in Canada in the protest era of the 1960s. At that time of flourishing social-history and protest movements, the community archive jelled as a contrast to mainstream archives [7]. As awareness of the power of an archive to create a shared social memory grew, so was the Canadian administration increasingly inclined to establish archives by promoting community awareness and collecting materialsof national historical value to ethno-cultural communities [5]. In the Canadian context, the communities at issue were ‒other‖—neither British nor French. However, archives such as the Canadian National Ethnic Archive (NEA), established for this purpose in 1972, evolved differently from community archives such as those of the Canadian LGBTQ community, established a year later. While the former came about as a top-down legacy institution that had thegoal of collecting material of national value, the latter rose from the grassroots due to community members‘ growing awareness of their community affiliation. Much time passed, however, until the community-archive idea would jell intoa model [4].

Andrew Flinn [3, 4] associated a community archive with three elements acting in concert: autonomy, independence, and authenticity—autonomy because the archive is created for the purpose of promoting shared community goals and not national or governmental aims; independent because it is managed independently of theestablishment; and authentic in the sense that it revolves on the axis of community events and ideas.

Following Flinn‘s [4] model, we adopted these three elements—authenticity,autonomy, and independence—as fundamentals of the project. We implemented two of them, authenticity and autonomy, at once.

5. Authenticity

We vacillated about including municipal authorities‘ administrative archives in the community archive. In Israel, municipal authorities are closely tethered to central government and sometimes appear to be long arms of the state. However, municipal authorities have salient characteristics of leadership, not only because they were democraticallyelected. Municipal politics is typified by an intimacy that evolves from close circles of acquaintance within the community. It emanates from the mayor‘s office to the town square, the street, and the local café. The mayor and his or her staff are highly accessible to the public. The time that passes between an authority‘s action and its outcome, although relatively short, is long enough to allow public debate to take place. Plainly, a municipal authority is above all a local leadership that grows from the grassroots together with the community. For this reason, we decided to include municipal-authority materials in the archive. Like the municipal authority, public and semi-public companies that operate in the community typically have local-leadership characteristics and we included them, too, in the community archive. We

found reinforcement for our decision in the commonality of this model in municipal or local archives abroad, which acquire archive material of importance to the community that traces its origin to the domain of municipalgovernment [3].

We also wrestled with the question of what administrative-archive documents to incorporate into the community archive. We decided first to deal with files of historical and social value for the history of the community. By and large,community affairs and energies are channeled to the mayor‘s bureau, the municipal council, and the education, culture, and welfare departments. Consequently, these are our top-priority blocs. Turning to internal prioritization within each bloc, we also sought the community imprint that was created in the records. Therefore, we chose to prioritize the following: minutes, correspondence, financial statements, photographs, audio and video clips, and, finally, press clippings and official publications. We did not gather materials from engineering and revenue departments even thoughthey are of much interest. Engineering departments retell the story of a town‘s physical development; obviously, a community archive is interested in their files. In practice, however, collecting them is problematic due to their enormous quantity. Given the time and budget limitations of the project, we cannot deal with recording, describing, andscanning such voluminous records. Due to the painstaking management of engineering-department records, however, anyone who is interested in these materials can access them on their own, with no need for the mediation of the community-archive project. Thus, due to a technical constraint but one that has a worthy explanation, we decided to forgo the treatment of engineering-department files [8].

Irrespective of what one might think, revenue-department files contain fascinating data for an understanding ofcommunity dynamics. For example, the community‘s payment ethic can signal times of plenitude or distress, community awareness or its absence; it can also serve as an excellent overall metric for community resilience. From theresearch standpoint, however, such materials should be approached by distant reading and statistical data processing. To deal with these materials, one needs to access the body of documents itself by means of optical character recognition (OCR) decoding. Here again, time and money constraints forced us to do without these materials for thetime being.

The third question was how to deal with residents‘ and organizations‘ private collections. The main problem that we faced was eclecticism. We were concerned that the materials to be gathered into the archive would reflect the extent of motivation of those submitting them and not their degree of importance. We also feared that some important materials would be collected but others, no matter how important, would elude us totally. As a result, the community tapestry would be missing some of its fibers. For example, if the Smiths and the Joneses submitted their collections and the various John Does did not, the community‘s features would be illuminated only in the light of the two families that submitted their materials; the roles of all the others would not come through at all. In other words, the problem traces not only to the materials submitted but also to those not submitted.

We found it better, however, to start gathering some private collections and work our way up than to collect none. Thus, we opened a door through which others would come forth and donate their collections. Our guiding rule was to collect materials that

pertain to the community—photographic and written local documentation and personal interviews.

6. Autonomy

How should a community act when it initiates the establishment of a community archive? The participants in the project should act as members of the community and not as representatives of the establishment in order to retain the diverse social dimension. As Howard Zinn says, the archive should reflect the ordinary people—the peasant, farmer, artisan, and midwife [7]. The community as a group has much power, immeasurably more so than an individual, in making order out of a voluminous archive. Thus, the evaluation, organization, and description of the archive material should accord with community traditions and agenda [7]. For this purpose, each community appointed a steering committee for its archive. This committee determines the archive‘s priorities—which materials to collect first, which later on, and which not all; it also determines the structure of the archive and the activity by which it reaches out to thepublic and collects its materials.

As we worked on the community archive in Hura, a Bedouin township, we found an epitomic example of the autonomy of an archive, one that illustrates well how much autonomous management creates an authentic archive. In one of the working meetings where the hierarchical structure of the archive in Hura was to be determined, we suggested an internal division that had been established for a community center in another development town where we were active subdivisions for sports, culture, and advertisements. The coordinator, a member of the Hura community, proposed an additional subdivision: women, divided internally into sports and culture. Here is a good illustration of the importance of an internal order that reflects community traditions and agenda: In a traditional religious society such as that of the Bedouin in Hura, integrating women into culture and sports activity is so important as to deserve separate expression. What was right for the community in Mitzpe Ramon, for example, is not right in Hura. Therefore, to allow the archive to reflect the Hura community‘s singularity and authenticity, we went out of our way to hire a local coordinator to build the archive and appoint a steering committee that would help to determine its structure and priorities. The steering committee was composed of representatives of the community‘s sundry groups in order to fullyreflect the diversity of the community mosaic.

In sum, unlike a municipal authority or an organization that has a clear organizational structure derived from legislative provisions, a community has no clear contours. Over the years, it waxes and wanes as a living organism andleaves the imprint of the changes that it undergoes in its history. Its image takes on and sheds form; there is no similarity between its image at one point on the community timeline and at another. Therefore, when we wish to createan archive that will reflect the community over the years, we must first define what the community is in order to specify the nature and type of materials that should be incorporated into the archive. To model the project and limit it so that we do not scatter it in all directions, we avail ourselves of the Canadian community-archive model and the anchors that Andrew Flinn [3, 4] set

forth. As we have seen, two of Flinn‘s anchors serve well in sketching the demarcation lines of the communities in our project: authenticity and autonomy.

7. Future Possibilities

The Community Archives project is still in its infancy. Four archives have been established thus far and another one is about to start up this year. The interest the project has aroused, however, illustrates its immense potential. The future possibilities of the project may be divided into two. The first is quantitative growth. In Israel, dozens of communities are situated in cities established by government decision and do not maintain archives. The Community Archives project, or parallel projects, may expand and grow in future years and enrich the reservoirs of historical information. The second possibility relates to technological development. The materials already being gathered for the project are analog—documents, photographs, and magnetic media—that were digitized and made accessible by the project‘s pool of information. The copious thus information gathered can and should be upgraded technologically. The use of OCR can allow photo files to be put to full-text computational uses. Town-building plans uploaded to GIS systems will become computational tools for studies in social geography. The digitization of local folklore— Bedouin dance, community memorial rituals, folk dance—by means of projects such as TERPSICHORE can provide a basis forcomputational use in the field of culture studies [1, 2, 6]. Thus, the Community Archives offers a huge number of possibilities.

8. Conclusion

In one of the planning meetings for the establishment of the community archive in Ofakim, a participant from the community told a story that went more-or-less this way: ‒We have a legacy. It isn‘t written down. But if I go out on Friday afternoon into the neighborhoods of the city with a guest from elsewhere, I can tell him the history of each and every family by the aroma of the food they‘re cooking at home for the Sabbath.‖ Each community taking part in the project has a glorious legacy, a vernacular legacy, an oral legacy that stayed within the community‘s boundaries and failed to enter the Israeli textbooks and the pastures of memory in Israeli time and space. As a result, it was doomed tooblivion and its bearers to marginalization in the country‘s narrative. In the community-archive project, we wish to gather up the written, photographic, and narrated testimonies and organize them into the template that the community established. The priorities and management of each and every archive are autonomous, flowing from the community itself; the university merely stewards them. Residents are mobilized largely to submit materials, and many gave their consent to be interviewed for the project. The authenticity of the archive is evident also in that the more involved archive managers are in the community, the more responsive are the community residents.

We hope and believe that the project will yield a harvest of documentation with which the community and researchers may tell the communities‘ story and heritage

beyond their borders, empower the communities, and narrowtheir distance from the social periphery to the center.

How badly does the belated construction of documented legacy crowd out oral legacy? How much does the eagerness to tell a community‘s story, in order to move the community from periphery to center, obscure the community‘s vernacular legacy? It is too early to tell. These and other questions will become clear in the course of comprehensive future research on the topic.

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