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Islands Archiving

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By its very nature, audio archiving tends to focus on things -- recordings -- and how best to conserve them. That kind of archive is in effect a scientific institution. But the contents of archival recordings were created, by and large, by humans and human interaction occurs whenever access to those recordings is given. That kind of archive is in effect a social institution. Clearly, those two statements are extreme, and archives routinely combine scientific and social responsibilities in order to be relevant in and beyond the 21st century. In this paper I speak of audio archiving in five Pacific regions where my own archive has played both a scientific and social role, and then offer some comments -- and a request.

Audio archives in the Pacific are few and far between. Most are incorporated within the libraries of radio stations.

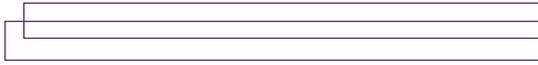
Tonga

I lived in Tonga for some 18 months in the early 1970s, undertaking ethnomusicological fieldwork. Tonga has no formally constituted audiovisual archive, and relies on the holdings of its government radio station (A3Z) for access to recordings dating back no more than 47 years. I spent many days at A3Z, where I had permission from five successive station managers to examine and copy any of their archival recordings. These mono analogue tape recordings had no documentation other than a date, place and recording occasion, and it was said that only the senior announcer was familiar with the details of their contents. Worse still, the station had a policy of erasing entire reels whenever they had insufficient blank stock to continue their ongoing recording activities. I dubbed 20 hours of archival material dating back as far as 1961, and deposited them, along with my own collection in the Archive of Maori and Pacific Music. (In this paper, I'll refer to my institution as simply "the archive".)

In 2001 a technician from A3Z spent three weeks at the archive in Auckland being trained in digitisation. The station manager accepted our offer to keep an off-site security copy of the CDs generated in those three weeks, and that permission was duly written into the contract that both parties signed. In 2007, the station manager informed us that all the CDs copied as part of that exercise had been removed by an employee, and they requested a duplicate copy -- which we duly provided.

Niue

Niue, a single-island state in free association with New Zealand, has had its owner-operated Radio Sunshine for some 25 years. In 1984 I undertook a UNESCO-funded survey of Niuean music and, in a country of some 1600 persons, was able to interview every adult over the age of 40. At that time, Radio Sunshine had a supply of reel tapes but no working tape deck to play them, only a cassette deck. I offered to provide them with a cassette copy of their archival recordings, and duly did so. In 2006, the Niuean Cultural Centre, which incorporated Radio



Sunshine, informed me that a cyclone had devastated their building, including all its audio recordings, and asked whether we knew of any recordings made on the island. We were able to supply them with a copy of my own recordings, as well as a further copy of their own archival tapes. Perhaps significantly, the present Cultural Centre staff said they were quite unaware of the existence of the earlier set of cassette tapes.

Samoa

Samoa, formerly Western Samoa, has a single government radio station. 2AP. In the 1960s I spent more than two years in Samoa recording traditional music. I also copied from 2AP songs recorded by the then New Zealand Broadcasting Service (NZBS) in the 1940s on 78 rpm discs. My own recordings and those from 2AP were deposited in the archive. In the 1990s I discovered that the old 78s were no longer in existence. I also discovered that the successor to the NZBS -- Radio New Zealand Sound Archives -- had no information about these recordings, and no copy of their own. In 1999 I repatriated to Samoa copies of the dubs I had made 35 years earlier. The event was covered by radio, television and local newspapers. And then something very interesting happened.

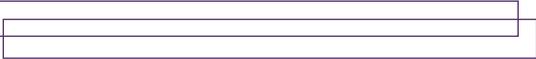
Among the old material dubbed were songs dating back to a nationalist movement of the 1930s called Mau (lit. opinion), whose principal focus was the removal of New Zealand administration of Samoa. When 2AP took the copies of these songs and began broadcasting them in 1999, the phone lines ran hot: the descendants of people who agreed with the political opinion in their lyrics asked for them to be played again. But the descendants of those who opposed the contents of the lyrics insisted that broadcast be prohibited, even to the point of making personal threats against station staff. The Minister of Broadcasting eventually intervened and stopped all further broadcast.

This incident highlights a broader issue among Pacific nations -- that there is no such thing as completely objective history. The history of people is essentially the history of politics, and no matter how benign the intentions behind an exercise in repatriation, even the repatriation of songs, we are dealing with essentially political material which has the enduring ability to re-ignite old loyalties and old wounds. And we -- as people involved in making available now recordings from the past -- need to be mindful of variation of response, even unwelcome variation of response, in the recipient country.

We in our archive also gave training to a senior technician in 2AP in 2003. And this was so successful that the station wanted our audio conservator to travel to Samoa and train the entire technical staff; we are still awaiting news about funding for that project.

Cook Islands

In the late-1990s we were informed about boxes of analogue tapes in the Cook Islands Museum --- leftovers from when the government radio station was privatised and replaced by a cassette-only private station. Those boxes, we were told, were languishing in non-air-conditioned premises. As with Samoa and Tonga, we offered a digitisation package to the Cook Islands Ministry of Cultural Affairs, who managed the museum where those analogue



tapes were located. But, unlike Samoa and Tonga, the deal fell through after our contact in the Ministry insisted first that the contract be based on Cook Islands law rather than New Zealand law, and then that all contract monies (for travel, air cargo, insurance, accommodation, training and materials) be sent to him personally and in advance. On formal advice from my university, I declined. The fate of that particular tape collection is unknown, although a colleague visiting some years later reported that the reels were still sitting in the museum.

Papua New Guinea

In 2008, the archive brought to Auckland the audio technician from the Institute for Papua New Guinea Studies for three weeks of training in digitisation. Unlike earlier visiting technicians, this one brought with him a wide cross-section of types of materials stored in Port Moresby. The archive of the Institute consists of a shipping container only partly under cover, with an air conditioner strapped to the side. During the power cuts for which Port Moresby is justifiably infamous, temperatures inside the container rise to levels damaging to analogue tapes.

For the Institute, we were able to provide not only training but also two reconditioned Revox tape decks, and a multi-speed turntable, as well as the same computer on which the technician received his training. Using equipment he was already familiar with, the technician could carry on his work in his home environment.

But not quite the happy ending. When these goods arrived in Papua New Guinea, the Institute was charged 9000K duty. The Customs Department did not doubt that they were indeed a gift to the Institute, but there was no legislation which allowed the duty-free importation of gifts to a government department.

Conclusion

Most of us are well aware that the contents of our archival recordings may constitute cultural property, and that cultural expectations can be just as influential as legal requirements. Let me relate one more phenomenon all too common in the Pacific -- of a radio station manager considering that the contents of the station tape archive, being under his/her personal jurisdiction, represented his/her own personal property and therefore could legitimately be removed when that manager's employment there ended. At least, that's how the rumours interpret the sudden disappearance of tapes from archive shelves at the time that the manager leaves.

Radio (and television) station staff routinely make unauthorised copies of material for friends and acquaintances, as well as for others who formally pay for the materials. Only rarely are prosecutions for piracy brought. When weighed up against company policy, pressures of family and friends sometimes are prioritised. And it's not called 'theft', but rather 'love for family'.

Against these kinds of factors and influences, there is little that archivists can do other than attempt to have duplicate files kept in a remote location. Our own archive is well placed

geographically to offer such a service. We are a single plane ride away from all but one of the countries I've mentioned in this paper, and Pacific Islanders resident in New Zealand now number more than 250,000, some 16% of the total national population.

Our archive is also well placed historically because of New Zealand's long history of association with islands of the South Pacific. Three island nations -- the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau -- enjoy what is formally called "a free association with New Zealand", a situation giving the inhabitants certain privileges, including New Zealand citizenship as a birthright. Additionally, the UNESCO-funded 'Territorial Survey of Oceanic Music' which recorded representative samples from 11 little-recorded part of the Pacific between 1984 and 1993, has broadened the Archive's profile among Pacific nations.

In 2009, management of the Archive will move from the Faculty of Arts to the University Library, which for many years has declared an interest in incorporating it into its own network of specialist services.

I think this will be a happy marriage, since both parties see practical benefits:

- the archive has direct access to professional cataloguers and cataloguing software,
- the archive will also have access to experts in digital technology willing to apply their skills to archive purposes and projects, particularly for print documentation of audio collections.
- the archive will be able to afford to put the archive catalogue online, complete with 10-second sound bytes of each item to allow users to confirm their selections before requesting copies.

Let me summarise some of the challenges throughout the Pacific that audio archives face.

challenges of place

There are ongoing issues of high temperature, high humidity, unreliable power supply, non-air-conditioned premises -- all of which contribute to comparatively rapid degradation of recordings and equipment;

challenges of space

Island archives are usually attached to a radio station or cultural centre; they are small, and their contents frequently uncatalogued (relying on the familiarity and memory of individual staff members to locate specific material);

challenges of geography

The remoteness of Pacific islands nations prevents easy or fast access to equipment repairs, or training facilities, or professional advice on archiving;

challenges of size

The economies of scale work against Pacific Island archival practices; they represent a low priority in government budgets largely focusing on economic growth;

challenges of policy

Radio station archives consist almost entirely of recordings made either in the studio or -- more commonly -- live in the field

Station policy may prioritise ongoing recordings and have no archival policy at all;

in the pre-digital era (which, in fact, is what we tend to focus on) at least one station had limited funds to buy blank tape stock, and so resorted to erasing and re-recording tapes in an ad hoc manner.

But perhaps the biggest challenge is the

challenge of culture

logic: If the archive is intended to serve the people, then the contents should be freely available to the people. The results:

- family interests may be prioritised over best practice or company policy
- cultural influences may determine what is or is not recorded or archived

I conclude with a request:

It would be useful for IASA to consider the possibility of larger audio institutions adopting a Pacific Islands archive

- to offer practical and technical advice in response to particular archiving situations or when purchasing new equipment
- to be a supportive name that could be invoked in funding applications for equipment;
- and perhaps also to be a location offering further or ongoing technical training under some form of secondment programme.

So, what about it -- Library of Congress, ABC, BBC, National Film and Sound Archives, National Archives of Australia?

Will the 2008 conference theme -- 'no archive is an island' -- be of interest only for this week as a topic for academic debate in the comfortable insulation of our Sydney venue here? Or will the social dimensions of ethnographic archiving, and the social responsibilities inherent in managing Pacific Islands cultural property motivate you to motivate your institution to offer practical help where practical help is sorely needed, now?