



## Negotiating Tradition Archives in a Community Setting

### Sounds of Silence and the Question of Credibility

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Following the digitization of archival records of ethnographic work conducted among Yemeni Jews in the early 1970s, we presented these findings to the same community at the same location, fifty years later. In this renegotiation, our interlocutors radically undermined the credibility of our archival material. We analyze the audience's reactions and the way they reflect different ethnographic dynamics, contextualizing their critical position in the tensions between archival knowledge and lived repertoire in general, and specifically in relation to traumatic experiences of Yemenis in Israel. Finally, we discuss how the suspicion toward the archive is embedded in larger current discourses on "truth" and "facts" and how in this context, it can be beneficial to scrutinize tradition archives in a community setting.

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### Co-constructing Archival Knowledge

The drive to Bareket took only sixty minutes and our excitement grew the closer we got there. We carried an overhead projector, recently digitized 8mm films, an album of reproduced still photographs, and samples of sound recording – all of which were originally produced in the same village nearly half a century ago, in the early 1970s. Bareket, a village of ca. 2,200 people located in the center of Israel, has attracted many ethnographers over the years. We aimed at turning the trajectory around by returning archival materials to the residents of the village. We did not foresee that our attempt to renegotiate this documentation with the residents of Bareket would turn out completely different than we initially expected and that our intentions would be met with skepticism and critique by the members of this community.

We began our study with the assumption that folklore archives are not naïve representations of the past, and for this reason, we were eager to learn more about the blind spots of the archive, following scholars such as Ellen Cushman who notes (2013: 116–117) that decolonial archives

operate through the co-construction of knowledge based on interactions between storytellers and listeners that counter the imperial archive's insistence on expert codification of knowledge. And they operate through linguistic and cultural perseverance rather than the imperialist agenda of preservation of cultural tradition as hermetically sealed, contained, and unchanging.

In our context, the colonial identity of the archive is less evident than in Cushman's case or in other cases that scrutinize colonial sound archives (e.g., Ajotikar & van Straaten 2021). Nevertheless, we borrowed the idea of co-constructing knowledge from such decolonial practices in re-examining archival records in Bareket. Yet our encounter there made us realize that in an age where the very idea of “facts” is put into question, the credibility of folklore archives (and archives in general) can be doubted radically.

Narratives of return to the field in ethnographic disciplines abound (Clifford 1997; Coleman & Collins 2006), as are narratives of revisiting archives (e.g., Gustavsson 2014). Our work does both. After having sifted and digitized ethnographic records at the archive of the Folklore Research Center (FRC) at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, we returned with our findings to the field from which they had originated, hoping we could analyze them together with those who live there today. Our “return” to the field was not a full return since we had not participated in the 1970s' fieldwork. We returned material and followed the footsteps of past scholars and ethnographic work that had taken place before we were born. Additionally, most of the people documented in the

archival records had passed away some time ago. Below we sketch out the institutional history of the FRC and present the corpus we examined in the context of the cultural politics of ethnographic research on Jews from Yemen in Israel. This is followed by a detailed description of our new ethnography and how the audience in Bareket reacted to silent 8mm films by filling the void with their sonic interpretation. Given our interlocutors' strong doubts about the authenticity of the FRC records, we discuss the credibility of our archival material.

Our research started with the acknowledgement that tradition archives reflect power dynamics that have implications for ethnographic representations. Although power relations in the FRC were ambivalent, our examination of archival records in a community setting confronted suspicion which we attribute to systemic social factors in Israel, as well as a broader cultural transformation in the discourse on the meaning of "truth" and "facts". We argue that tradition archives – with their limitations and problems – have the potential of extending the ethnographic dialogical co-production of knowledge.

### **The Folklore Research Center**

Founded in 1970 by folklorist Dov Noy, the FRC was the first academic unit at the Hebrew University to be officially dedicated to the study of folklore. Its agenda was set in the turbulent context of Jewish life in Israel in the 1970s and its archival collection was a link in a long chain of tradition archives in the study of Jewish culture, which by itself reflects the many discontinuities and ruptures in Jewish life in the course of the twentieth century. Perhaps the first concerted efforts to document and archive Jewish folklore was carried out in Vilnius by YIVO – the Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut (Yiddish Scientific Institute) formed in 1925. YIVO formed a network of collectors and the most impressive archive of Yiddish folklore from before the Second World War (Kuznitz 2014). One of the implications of the extermination of entire Jewish communities in Europe during the Second World War and the crushing of Jewish culture was a transformation in the focus of Jewish folklorists who replaced Yiddish culture with the culture of Jews from other communities outside Europe.

Dov Noy earned his PhD at Indiana University, studying under Stith Thompson in the tradition of the Finnish School of folklore. He returned to Israel in 1955, forming the Israel Folktale Archives (the IFA, whose collections are registered in Unesco's Memory of the World list) in Haifa in the newly formed Museum of Ethnology (Hasan-Rokem 1998). Concomitantly, he taught in the Department of Hebrew Literature at the Hebrew University. The formation of the FRC – a research institution within the university – was an important step in the institutionalization of folklore studies in the

Israeli academic landscape. It was soon followed by a minor program in Jewish folklore studies, which later expanded into a major program in Jewish and comparative folklore and is currently a graduate program in folklore and folk-culture studies.

From its inception, the FRC was dedicated to types of folklore that were not addressed by other institutions in Israel. This may explain the FRC's diverse foci, its various media forms, and the lack of folk narratives that characterized the IFA collections. The FRC was launched with a position granted to Dr. Issachar Ben-Ami, who became its director under the academic supervision of Noy. Born in Casablanca in 1933, Ben Ami wrote his PhD in *Volkskunde* in Göttingen (Ben-Ami 1967), and was one of the first Israeli students who studied in Germany after the *Shoah*. His work over the years focused on Jews in Morocco (Ben-Ami 1998), but by 2000 he had left the field and joined a legal firm which focused on intellectual property. We never had the chance to meet him in person and learned of his passing in 2015.

Ben-Ami presided over the following projects: audio recordings of life-cycle traditions (burial rites, marriage customs etc.); audio recording of stories; 8mm film documentation of ethnic folk-dance; written transcripts of folk-medicine traditions; and still photographs of annual celebrations and folk costumes. In the course of the 1980s, the focus of the FRC changed and expanded into other fields such as proverb research and the acquisition of private collections such as the Zidkoni humour collection (e.g., Belinko-Sabah & Kats 2014; Hasan-Rokem 2009; Sebba-Elran 2019).

The FRC and the knowledge processes that have been part of its ongoing activity can be likened to those of similar tradition archives in Europe and beyond; these include the idea of transforming knowledge between different media types, “collecting” and storing recorded performances in boxes and maintaining this knowledge for potential future usage. Many such tradition archives served clear national agendas, and what they contain corresponds to some extent to a national territory (e.g., Harvilahti 2018; Kuhn 2018). The FRC, however, has included traditions outside the boundaries of Israel whose association with the archive is the direct result of the Zionist project; and this is somewhat reminiscent of archival networks that record traditions in immigration contexts, such as the Ukrainian Folklore Archives in Canada (Chernyavska 2018: 33–35).

The collections within the FRC have not followed a clear agenda and there are no permanent archivists that create consistent taxonomies and metadata; each archive or collection has its own internal logic without having it communicate with other collections. Accordingly, the FRC consists of material of many different forms and media. This situation is not unique. In other tradition archives one notices how the choices made by researchers regarding the collection process can be scrutinized and become sources of critique in the present (Mikkola et al. 2019).

### **Returning to the Folklore Research Center**

Over the years, scholars have returned to the FRC archives to retrieve specific documentation on a given topic from a single collection within the FRC. Our return to the archive was a response to a funding call for a study of Yemeni Jews; it provided us with the opportunity to document and digitize materials relating to Yemeni Jewish communities across different collections. With new questions about the nature of power structures in Israeli research (Shohat 2017), much impacted by Said's critique of Orientalism (1978), we were drawn to this topic in the context of social processes in Israel's immigrant societies. Our objective was to forge new connections between the archive and the Yemeni communities it had documented, preferably through family members of the individuals who had been recorded, assuming that most of the interlocutors appearing on film or photo had passed away. We gathered as much contextual information about our archival records from living members of the community while being driven by an ethical commitment to share these unknown records with the community they originated from. Although the repatriation of archival material is not new in the discipline of folklore studies globally (e.g., Lancefield 1998), there has not been a systematic attempt in Israel to follow this obligation, with the exception of some attempts made by the National Library of Israel in response to Gish Amit's critical work (2014). Our material related to three communities: Bareket, Achiezer, and Midrakh Oz.

The documentation we focused on is the earliest one housed at the FRC, which, accordingly, was in dire need of digitization and processing. It was created at a time when power relations in ethnographic work were not reflected upon so explicitly; most of it was collected at the time Ben Ami managed the FRC, and few people in the folklore world knew of its existence – hundreds of audio reels with just a recording date as well as a title alluding to the content and many other photographs and films, inaccessible and inadequately cataloged. This might explain our fascination with transforming these reels into digital life (Henriksson 2009). As we started digitizing the archival files, we were astounded by the work, which on the one hand included unique and unfamiliar photographs and voices that were still legible. On the other hand, much of the interviews were based on structured questionnaires, which were not always relevant. Most of the material featured the customs of Jews from North Africa and Kurdistan, but there were also some records related to the Jews from Yemen.

### **The Yemeni Corpus and our Research Objectives**

It is hard to imagine the “Jewish ethnographic impulse” (cf. Veidlinger 2016) without considering the long history of ethnography of Yemeni Jews. Early attempts to

study Jews in and from Yemen were based on romantic and orientalist assumptions concerning the representation of the biblical Hebrews (Gerber 2013). Scholars such as Yaakov Sapir in the mid-nineteenth century traveled to Yemen for their fieldwork, but from the turn of the twentieth century as Jews from Yemen migrated to Palestine, fieldwork shifted to these new immigrants. Scholars such as Avraham Zvi Idelsohn in the early 1900s (Loeffler 2010) and particularly Erich Brauer in the 1930s developed an approach of conducting ethnographic fieldwork from afar, namely interviewing informants in Palestine and asking them about their lives as these had been practiced in Yemen. In a similar vein, in the course of the 1950s, the renowned Orientalist, S.D. Goitein, interviewed Yemeni Jews in Israel and set a goal of reconstructing what he considered a typical Jewish village in Yemen. Such ethnographic work in British Palestine and the young State of Israel subjected the actual ethnographic interaction to the story of Jewish life in Yemen. This trajectory continued for a few decades, transforming gradually, in particular from the 1990s onwards as part of the impact the Writing Culture paradigm shift (Clifford & Marcus 1986) made in this context (Abdar 2018; Gamliel 2014; Madar 2006; Sharaby 2006).

The interviews carried out in the 1970s by the scholars at the FRC, were based on the assumption that what mattered was the culture of Jews as it had been performed in its “true” and “authentic” surroundings. This form of salvage ethnography was therefore carried out with older members of the community in different small villages in Israel, hoping to reconstruct Yemeni folklore, and holding to what Alan Dundes called the “devolutionary premise in folklore studies” (1969). In contrast and in parallel to reconstructing the culture in Yemen, our interest was driven by reconstructing life in Israel in the 1970s. Our research focused on knowledge production processes in that time, accounting for the biases of scholars and the implicit messages Yemeni informants transmitted in such interactions. In retrospect, we initially shared with the scholars of the 1970s the idea of sacrificing the ethnographic present in order to reconstruct its recent past.

In our attempt to reconstruct the project of the 1970s, we first approached the researchers who operated within the FRC at that time. Subsequently, we set to speak to members of the communities where this documentation took place, hoping to hear their interpretations of our archival harvest and learn more about the actual ethnographic encounters in the 1970s from older members of the community who might have some recollections of these events. We discovered that the Yemeni films, audio recording, still photographs and transcriptions were collected as part of two main research projects: The Yemeni Seminar and the Israel Ethnic Dance Project.

The Yemeni Seminar, which took place in the spring of 1975, was part of a series of ethnographic surveys that brought together seventy interlocutors to a hotel near Jerusalem for ten days alongside researchers from various disciplines who interviewed them (see **figure 1**). These numbers accord with Noy's penchant for biblical typological figures (seventy men, ten days; see: Hasan-Rokem 1998). The format of fieldwork, too, resembles the idea of a laboratory (cf. Latour & Woolgar 1979; Goldberg & Salamon 2002), seemingly isolated from the real world, although this practice of gathering interlocutors was not unique (see Saarlo 2018). Notwithstanding the implications of this form of ethnography, it yielded much data in diverse formats that reach beyond the scope of our article.

The Israel Ethnic Dance Project was led by Pamela Squires-Kidron who was a research student at that time and who documented and studied folk-dances in Israel. After completing her MA thesis on folk-dance, Squires-Kidron returned to the US but continued to write and publish on the culture of Jews from Muslim countries (Halper, Seroussi & Squires-Kidron 1989). We interviewed her as part of our attempt to understand the footage and films as well as the contours of the entire project. The project, she remarked, engaged mainly "ethnic dances," namely, dances documented in communities of Jewish immigrants from Muslim countries (Yemen, Kurdistan, Iraq, Morocco), which were marked as different from an imagined unmarked Israeli identity.



**Figure 1:** Filming Yemeni Jewish dance at the Yemeni Seminar. Sa'adya Gur-Esh (right) singing and drumming, and Shalom Cohen dancing. (Photo: Pamela Squires-Kidron, Jerusalem 1975).

While the obvious goal of the project was to document and study these dances, it knowingly aimed at “reviving” ethnic dances, while drawing on the authority and participation of the most senior person in the project, Gurit Kadman. Having immigrated from Germany in the 1920s, Kadman was known for establishing the idea and practice of Israeli folk-dance and making it famous around the world (Kadman 1952). The Israel Ethnic Dance Project was initiated within the FRC when Kadman was in her seventies after many decades of studying and instructing folk dancers across the country. The project’s two purposes – documenting folk dances and at the same time reviving them – were achieved by creating local performing groups. In the Yemeni case, about ten groups were established by Kadman, while documentation and research were carried out by Squires-Kidron, assisted by Cyrelle Forman-Soffer (who was also born in the United States).

There is an obvious tension between documenting traditions and reviving them, which is not unique to our case (Bakka 1999; Felföldi 1999). This tension was made slightly smoother by the different personas involved in the project. However, the implications for their Yemeni interlocutors in the 1970s were immeasurable as they played a dual role of custodians of tradition whose unique knowledge was to be documented by Squires-Kidron, as well as actors on a stage that followed the views of Kadman on what had to be kept alive and how, her biases included.

Kadman did not study Yemenis who lived in cities but opted for an ethnography in rural settings where she assumed the community fabric would resemble life in Yemen. She was usually accompanied by a Yemeni translator, who mediated between her and the men and women she met. Miryam Hubara,<sup>1</sup> one of the dance groups’ leaders, told us in an interview we conducted with her at Ma’or village, of the way Kadman approached her and asked her to assemble the village women that formed a dance group:

Gurit Kadman, may her memory be blessed, I loved her very much. We did not have our folklore group yet. She came to me and said – “I want it to be vivid: what does it mean to make bread, what does it mean to be a bride [in Yemen].” So I told her: “look, I have these elderly women here, they have experience, and I am trying to follow them.” Our first rehearsal took place in a (...) Kibbutz.

The folk-dance groups performed at festivals, such as the *Bo’i Teman* festival in 1973 in Tel Aviv (see **figure 2**), and were documented by the researchers of the FRC using 8mm films and still photographs, while the music was recorded separately. Four films

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the article we use actual names of both ethnographers and their/our interlocutors.



of different Yemeni dance groups are housed at the FRC archive, along with ca. 800 black-and-white photos and twenty-five sound recording hours. These records reflect the ambivalence that we discussed above, portraying representations of folk-dance traditions as well as staged performances at festivals.



**Figure 2:** The members of Ma'or Yemeni Dance Group, wearing traditional clothes and presenting traditional Yemeni pottery at the front, at the *Bo'i Teman* festival. Sitting third from the left is Gurit Kadman, and fifth from the left is Miryam Hubara. (Photo: Pamela Squires-Kidron, Tel Aviv 1973).

### Sounds of Silence

Back to Bareket, where we presented documentation that had been recorded there in the 1970s to the residents who live there. Bareket was established by Jews who originated from Habban, on the periphery of Yemen, and who immigrated to Palestine/Israel in the 1940s–1950s. Habbani Jews attracted particular ethnographic attention given their status as the most peripheral Jewish community in Yemen; they displayed a distinct cultural variety in comparison to more central Yemeni communities in the west of the country. From the outset of their so-called ethnographic discovery, the Habbanis were considered by some as the “exotic among exotics” (Edith Gerson-Kiwi in an interview: Friedhaber 1997: 7) and were, accordingly, the focus of dozens of studies, particularly in the work of Carmela Abdar (2004) and the late Ya’el Shai (2000).

The community of Bareket maintained much of its social fabric and connections by keeping Habbani tradition and heritage present in the daily life of the village. We had previous acquaintance with one interlocutor, Shemesh Efrati, who had also been a

member of the Habbani dance group, and who established her own Habbani museum in her private home. We contacted Efrati and let her know we had some old pictures and films of the Habbani dance group and that we were eager to present them at her house to the residents of Bareket. Efrati agreed willingly and invited some of her friends and family members in addition to Bareket's younger cohorts who are in some way active in preserving the heritage of the place.

On a rainy October evening in 2021, about twenty-five people gathered at Efrati's home, while we mounted a camera on a tripod to document this event. Guests were of three generations, mostly women, but also men, consisting of friends of Efrati from her age group, her extended family members, neighbors, grandchildren and three heritage enthusiasts. We introduced the FRC and its activities to our listeners and gave Efrati an album with copies of the photos as a gift. Afterwards, we began screening the films and photographs with an overhead projector, while shortly introducing each. We presented photos of people and situations, *silent* films of dancing, and some audio recordings of Habbani folk songs. Upon watching the films, an awkward silence took over the space. As we would later realize, it was almost unbearable to watch these mute Habbani folk dances devoid of sound, which is part and parcel of the vividness and dynamism of the documented setting. We did not anticipate the awkwardness of this moment nor the response of the audience in Bareket. At least on two occasions, older members of the audience began singing a song they associated with the dance shown on screen. Efrati started singing when the screen showed four women dancing, and she began singing again while another guest asked her: "Do you think that's the original song?" Notably, Efrati and her friends sang in sync with the dancing bodies presented in the silent film. This intervention suggests that the media on which the dances were recorded was of much importance as silent films invited interpretation and intervention.

Ethnographic imagination, as well as tradition archives, grew exponentially with the increasing awareness and fascination with media and technology (Gustavsson 2014). The introduction of recording devices at the turn of the twentieth century, too, was a crucial catalyst. Often audio recordings were used manipulatively by ethnographers who mobilized this new technology to perform tricks in front of audiences (e.g., Deutsch 2011), allowing some to hear their own voice for the first time. Media, therefore, is a component in the way audiences – scholars or other interlocutors – react to the content presented to them.

By the 1970s, the recording of voices and still photographs were already old news. Although the use of film in ethnographic work was not new (Karin Gustavsson mentions the production of ethnographic films of rural life in Denmark as early as 1927; Gustavsson 2014: 69–70), the use of 8mm color films in low budget contexts was

revolutionary and also had a profound implication on the recording of performance and on performance-art. In 1976, Steven Feld, an ethnomusicologist, reflected on the abrupt rise in discussions on the use of film as a basic research method (Feld 1976). Ethnomusicologists of course focused on the sound, and the film offered an additional sense, but for those who documented dance, video footage had undoubtedly opened new vistas. Galit Hasan Rokem discusses the impression video recordings had made in the 1960s on folktale research (Hasan-Rokem 1988: 31), arguing that although they seemed to capture the entire performance, they were only partial representations of the narrated event.

The folk-dance films from the 1970s at the FRC focused on the movement of the body, and particularly leg and hip movement. The lack of sound was the price researchers were willing to sacrifice, as Kadman noted:

The most problematic section of documentation is of folk-dances (...) probably, the most accurate method is a synchronized filming of picture and sound (...) at this present seminar we had limited means. There were many gifted dancers, but there were only a few experienced folk-dance researchers, and limited technical equipment. (Kadman quoted in: Tobi 1976: 24)

Kadman's decisions affected our own choices fifty years later. Still photographs from the 1970s can be viewed today directly with no need to convert them into other formats, just like looking at an old photo-album. 8mm films, by contrast, could only be accessed after a process of frame-by-frame digitization which disclosed what had been sealed from view all these years. Watching these films in the present was therefore much more emotional to us as it was based on an experience of *rediscovery*. Archival imagination can be triggered by unique items found in the archive, but it can also be elicited by encountering old media forms. The metaphor of "bringing back to life" became very much present in our own private re-encountering, prior to our presentation in Bareket. No matter how critical one tries to be at such moments, our first reaction after watching the digitized 8mm film was of amazement and amusement.

But having watched the film the second time, other ideas entered our minds while some questions emerged: When was this filmed? Where exactly? Who was holding the camera? What was the purpose of filming? What was the broader frame of analysis that governed this form of documentation? All these queries resonated with some of our thoughts as to how the audience would react to this footage. We imagined they would talk about the interlocutors on film and perhaps even recall the very occasion; furthermore, watching those who had already passed away being brought to life on film

was bound to be emotional. In short, we believed that our research questions would be addressed and that the interviewees would shed new light on the various lacunae as far as the research dynamics and context were concerned. At the same time, we felt that our public duty would be fulfilled by sharing this “message in a bottle” and returning it to the community.

But the reactions to the silent film in Bareket indicated that there was an unforeseen gap between watching this footage at the FRC and watching it in a communal setting. In fact, we also brought archival material to another Yemeni village, Achiezer, where we met the daughter of one performer who was documented in the archive at her home. Watching the silent footage in this private context was similar to watching it in the archive. By contrast, the social dynamic of watching a film together was reminiscent of going to the cinema or a concert. There are unwritten rules about such events. In her ethnography of listening to a classical concert that took place outdoors in the Austrian Alps, Regina Bendix examines this awkwardness when people did not know “how to behave during this unusual listening experience,” as there was “no code of conduct” (Bendix 2000: 38). In a similar vein, many of us have experiences watching silent movies; in practice, silent films are rarely silent – they typically include a soundtrack of some sort (silent movie theaters used to include a live orchestra, chamber ensemble, or an improvising pianist, who later were substituted by recorded music). It is in fact, quite unusual – and unbearably dry, sonically speaking – to watch a film in total silence, and all the more so when it is part of a social event (cf. Srinivas 2002).

Watching the footage together in Bareket under such circumstances unintentionally created a peculiar ethnographic moment. The audience’s reaction was probably the only apt one; they filled in the sonic vacuum by creating the right sounds for what was shown on screen. Were these songs the ones that were actually danced to during the filming? Possibly. We see here the tension between archival memory and repertoire (Taylor 2003), and although we foresaw porous boundaries between the two, in this case, the authority of the repertoire was evident. The critique of authenticity (Bendix 1997) renders such questions irrelevant *analytically*, particularly at an etic level. However, the question of the authenticity and credibility of our archival materials bothered the audience in Bareket at the emic level, some of whom wondered whether this dance shown on screen was “real” or “a show.” Efrati concluded it was the latter.

### **Archives, Power, and Credibility**

The idea that one should put archives under suspicion (García 2017), and that colonial regimes and, more broadly, power structures underlie archival practice and ethnographic collections, was clear to us at the outset. Although archives are part of a

“principle of credibility” (Osborne 1999: 53), in the last generation scholars have learned how to read the archive with the grain and against it (Stoler 2010), and to consider how archival sources have been formed (Blouin & Rosenberg 2011: chapter 7). Decolonial approaches to archives emphasize that such archives were created by “mostly white, elite, male[s], who all received their higher education in Western Europe” (Ajotikar & van Straaten 2021: 7; see also Dirks 2001).

The FRC presents us with further layers. As noted, in the 1970s it was directed by Ben-Ami who himself was never tenured: an immigrant from Morocco in times when it was (and to some degree still is) rare to have non-European faculty members in Israeli academia. The actual interviews, photographs and recordings were carried out by women in their early careers, Pamela Squires-Kidron and Cyrelle Forman-Soffer who came to Israel from the United States. Kadman in contrast, was an established figure in mainstream Israeli cultural circles. On our side, Tom Fogel is a cultural activist among Yemenis in Israel whose position enabled him to approach Efrati and some of the younger generation of Bareket to begin with. The entire event was hosted and overseen by Efrati, undoubtedly the authority on the cultural heritage of Bareket, who took us and all the guests to her private museum of the Habbani culture (see **figure 3**).



**Figure 3:** Shemesh Efrati at her private Habbani museum in her home at Bareket, presenting a reconstructed jewelry workshop and a traditional bride costume. (Photo: Tom Fogel, Bareket 2021).

The event was framed with the acknowledgement that we hold partial knowledge and that we wish to learn about our archival records from those who live in Bareket. We knew that the archive would confront a community whose members are well-known for keeping their repertoire alive, and for that very reason we approached them. The duplicates of material from the FRC that were printed in an album and that we ceremonially gave to Efrati and her museum as a present at the beginning of the event symbolically marked that we wish to form relations of mutuality and conviviality. This atmosphere and the framing of the event were a crucial factor in re-framing the archival records by the audience. In short, power relations in Bareket were different from clear-cut binaries that may be more present in colonial cases. However, the objections by the people of Bareket were more radical than our anticipated framing of the renegotiation.

The audience viewed the films and photographic presentation actively; in hindsight, they could not have done so otherwise. In addition to animating the missing soundtrack, they named names, told some anecdotes about the deceased members of the community appearing on the screen, and continued chatting. Older members of the community were naturally able to add more details about the events recorded fifty years ago, yet Efrati was the only one present who was a member of the original Habbani dance group from the 1970s and was considered the authoritative person in this setting.

Many other reactions furthered this critical purview. When we played sound recordings from the 1950s that were, according to their archival records, classified as Habbani folk songs, the listeners were quick to dismiss them as non-Habbani, saying the archival record was erroneous. Some people in their fifties reacted quite harshly to a film showing Habbani men and women dancing together on stage: comments like “this is not *our* tradition” or “a choreographer told them to dance this way,” revealed the tension inherent to the idea of tradition (Briggs 1996; Noyes 2009). Similarly, upon examining a still black and white photograph of a woman from Bareket without a head cover that was presented at Efrati’s museum, one young ultra-orthodox participant rationalized it by telling us that the photographer must have asked the woman to display her braided hair arrangement, thereby asserting that this photograph does *not* portray an authentic representation of Habbani women. In short, the people of Bareket undermined the archival material in relation to: (1) the film’s status as a true representation of a folk tradition; (2) the sound recordings’ metadata; and (3) representations of women and gender boundaries on film and in a still photograph.

We did not respond to these reservations during the event. On our drive back from Bareket as we processed the experience, we related to the way the guests at Efrati’s house kept subverting the authority and credibility of our archival material. It was

as if in this case the only naïve people who still believed in what they saw were the researchers, while those in Bareket read the archive against its grain more critically (Stoler 2010).

The audience's radical skepticism pushed us to reflect on the credibility of our material. As noted earlier, the relations between documentation and revivalism were inherent in the Israeli folk-dance project with its dual objectives, and so the audience's critique of the filmed dance as inauthentic touched on a key issue that were blurred by the films, recordings and photographs from the archive.

As for the authenticity of the sound recordings from the 1950s and their metadata, the people of Bareket prioritized their current knowledge of musical repertoire over the archival memory from seventy years ago. This presented us with an epistemological dilemma: could it be that some songs were forgotten? Or did the technical quality of the recording confuse the listeners? Since we took for granted that the archival records were precise, during the event we thought the audience may have not recognized the song played because it belonged to a genre that was rarely performed. In addition, the recording was very old and its quality dubious, which may have contributed to their confusion. However, when we returned to the archive with their skepticism, we re-examined the recordings and the metadata, concluding that their suspicions were well founded and this was indeed not a Habbani song. We realized that their confidence in dismissing the recording was not based on their lack of familiarity with the specific melody, but rather they immediately recognized that the musical texture was not their own.

We have remained more ambivalent regarding the remarks about mixed dancing and about the photograph of the woman without a headcover. The objections to the footage came from those from the second generation in Bareket who dismissed the mixed-dance performance of their parents' generation. Their gaze was infused by broader societal changes that Israeli society has undergone in the last two generations – first, a modernizing secularism which was then countered by ultra-orthodox currents. This is even clearer in the case of the young ultra-orthodox man who expressed his dismay over the photograph. He assumed that the photographed woman's power was robbed by a researcher, but simultaneously he ignored the woman's agency. This view was strengthened by the researcher being a woman herself and that Efrati, who belongs to the older generation, willingly presented the photograph on the wall of her home-museum. Similarly, she did not express objections toward the footage of mixed-dancing. This complexity is enhanced when we consider the ethno-history of gender dynamics in Habban, in which Jewish women exhibited considerable agency (Abdar 2004).

There is another archival dimension regarding the Yemeni community in Israel, which hovered in the background of the event. The so-called Yemeni children's affair surfaced in the 1990s in a series of protests after many decades of silence. According to Gamliel who studied it (2022: 1656),

The civil protest in question was mounted against a collective trauma experienced in the 1950s and 1960s by Jewish families that had immigrated to Israel. Thousands of these immigrants' children were abducted by someone or something of still-unknown identity. Parents – most of Yemenite-Jewish origin – realized after the fact that they had lost their children by having complied naïvely with an uncompromising demand by their hosts to surrender them for medical care. The traumatic storyline began with news of the “death” of their children, reported to parents shortly after they had handed over the youngsters...

However, these parents were never shown a grave and the mystery of the disappearance of their children has always been present among these families and the Yemeni community at large. In reaction to the growing protest of the Yemeni community, Israeli authorities conducted several investigations that downplayed the scope of this phenomenon and dismissed almost all of the allegations. Their conclusions were based on the lack of archival evidence for the abductions, and they minimized the weight of oral testimonies in this process. Dismissing memories because of their absence in archival records is a very powerful illustration of hegemonic discourses as a way of discrediting their adversaries.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Yemeni activists were accused of choosing conspiracy theories over facts. As part of this public debate, folklorist Amos Noy published an op-ed in the Hebrew daily newspaper *Ha'aretz* (August 14, 2022) in which he pointed to the role that oral testimonies typically play in issues that involve social suffering and archival cover-ups. In the ensuing debate, archival knowledge contradicted deeply rooted and intimate traumatic narratives. This is reminiscent of the instrumental way in which “post truth” is used to paint others' arguments as mere opinions that are self-serving, in the name of sound objective reason (Rommetveit 2021: 2). The objections to our archival material in Bareket had therefore wider connotations than the actual footage and the immediate event.

## Conclusion

There were numerous *good* reasons for the suspicion exhibited by the people of Bareket when they confronted the footage from the FRC. The suspicion in some of the archival

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<sup>2</sup> We would like to thank one of the reviewers for helping us realize this point.



evidence we presented was reasonable. It related to their understanding of the process of the creation of the original performances, their active knowledge of their tradition, inter-generational differences, and the broader meta-archival discourses regarding power relations in archives in general.

Nevertheless, we suggest interpreting the radical skepticism of the people in Bareket in light of the current *Zeitgeist*, which calls into question what used to be regarded as reliable sources of information. Mistrusting what one sees on screen and not accepting scholarly facts is rooted in current political, popular and vernacular discourse and practice. In his *Pandora's Hope*, Bruno Latour recalls a situation when he was asked if he believed in reality (Latour 1999); in his critique of critique he takes this question even further (Latour 2004). Since then, “fake news” and its sister term “alternative facts” have become part of our everyday life. Folklorist Andrea Kitta follows Kelleyanne Conway in describing so-called alternative facts as “additional facts and alternative information” (Kitta 2018: 405). Our position is that it makes little sense to follow the archives blindly, but we do not wish to ignore them; rather, ethnographic studies can add further layers and offer alternative interpretations, which together add facts to complex realities.

We can expect that questions of authenticity and credibility will resurface in unexpected ways in the future by those communities whose traditions were archived, to begin with. Accordingly, rather than serving the ideal of truth the role of tradition archives may allow actors (like us) to push for reflections on traditional knowledge: footage that one brings from the archives does not have to end the discussion – it can be the beginning of a fruitful renegotiation. The retrospective addition of a recorded song to our silent film was a case in which sonic knowledge drawn from a repertoire filled gaps in archival footage without undermining it. When faced with another film that showed mixed-gender dancing, our audience in Bareket dismissed what they saw by *adding facts* (“we never have men and women dance together”) as well as by adding information that is not so much alternative as much as it is prosaically plausible (“they must have been instructed to dance in this way by the choreographer”). They eschewed the authority of the footage by claiming it does not document tradition as seen by them, but rather stages a performance which is unreflective of their tradition. Ultimately, this re-negotiation contributed to our knowledge of the archival material in the FRC and of this group’s current interpretation of tradition.

In the post-truth era in fields of policymaking in relation to lockdown and Covid-19, or climate change, there have been calls for strengthening a dialogue between scientists, policy-makers and the broader public (e.g., Fischer 2021; Woods 2019). This is relevant both in the case of empirical gathering and interpretation of information. Tradition

archives developed with the recognition that collecting involves the engagement of the so-called folk in interactions in the field, and the mediation of local actors and questionnaires. Yet, interpretation was mostly left in the hands of scholars. The current tensions between different interpretations of information and the balancing between facts and values offer an opportunity to engage in a deeper introspection. This may further the dialogue between scholars and the community as part of an understanding that ethnographic knowledge is co-produced in constant negotiation and renegotiation. As scholars who often engage with tradition archives and tend to be enthusiastic about our findings there, we realize that although archives speak the language of facts other interlocutors may have a lot more to say. We are currently following this realization in an on-going project that examines the ethnographic notebooks of Haim Hazaz (1899–1973), one of the most important Hebrew authors of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> The case of Hazaz involves literature and eighty years of literary reception and critique to which we are adding these hitherto unknown ethnographic findings in his archives – and just like in the case of Bareket, interviews carried out with descendants of his original Yemeni interviewees. Rather than considering facts in this project, we confront different competing imaginations that shape ethnography, literature, history and biography.

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<sup>3</sup> The project is conducted together with Dudu Rotman and Michael Sade.

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