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Questions and answers in the archives: knowledge production through open-ended questionnaires

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Open-ended questionnaires have been used by the Folklife Archives for collecting information since 1932. The intention was originally to explore differences, similarities and possible connections between separate regions. The informants were representatives of their local communities and their role was to record the traditions and beliefs in the area, guided by the questionnaires. Their personal thoughts and experiences were thus not of interest. It was also mainly the past that were in focus.

In the 1970's this began to change and questions could be directed towards both individual practices and present day situations. Today the focus is precisely on the informants' own experiences. The questionnaires often involve questions about the past but from an individual point of view: the informant is expected to relate the narrative of the present day situation to memories of how it used to be in youth or childhood.

Today the archive has some 130 regular informants who receive 2-3 questionnaires every year. The topics are selected based on requests by researchers who want to use the material in on going or planned projects, or by the archivists for documentation of a phenomenon or a condition. In this paper I will discuss the knowledge produced through questionnaires from various periods, the problems and advantages in combining material collected with different intentions, and how the questionnaires through their content, form and themes reflect the research focus and its' changes over the years. My discussion is based on my work both as an archivist and a researcher.

Short abstract

The paper discuss the knowledge produced through open-ended questionnaires from various periods, the problems and advantages in combining material collected with different intentions, and how questionnaires through content, form and themes reflect the research focus and its' changes over the years.