

Restoration of Context through the Utilization of Museum Archives: A Case Study of Folklife Archive at National Folk Museum of Korea

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Abstract

Museum collections are frequently standardized, resulting in the loss of their original regional and cultural contexts. In response, National Folk Museum of Korea (NFMK) established Folklife Archive to preserve and reconstruct these unique contextual elements. This article examines how Folklife Archive restores the original meanings of museum artifacts, such as associated practices, memories, traditions, and facilitates their communication to the public.

The article reviews relevant literature on the evolving role of Folklife Archive in enriching collections and supporting research. It then presents three core case studies from NFMK: a special exhibition featuring the Kim Su-nam photographic archive; interactive experiences at Folklife Archive Information Centre in NFMK Paju; and educational programs based on traditional seasonal events.

The digital archiving process, including systematic collection, metadata registration, and the implementation of Folklife Archive Management System, is also discussed. Efforts to integrate archive and collection data, despite system separation and technical constraints are illustrated through the use of public information terminals.

Lastly, the article addresses ongoing efforts to promote shared use of archival databases among regional museums. Although challenges remain in harmonizing classification systems, the article emphasizes the need for user-centred digital platforms that support both institutional diversity and international accessibility.

1. Introduction

In the process of museums collecting materials, materials tend to be removed from their original regional and cultural contexts and redefined with standardized names, uses, and functions. However, in actual life settings, the uses of materials are bound to be utilized in more diverse ways than what is defined. The lifestyles shown by individuals are also varied. The role of National Folk Museum of Korea (NFMK) lies in respecting these diverse lifestyles and revealing and preserving individual and unique contexts.

Therefore, NFMK practitioners must understand the meaning and cultural context of collected materials and restore them in a way that effectively communicates their significance to visitors. In this process, 'Folklife Archive' built by NFMK plays a crucial role. The purpose of this article is to analyze how NFMK's Folklife Archive restores the original context of collection materials and conveys the actions, memories, and traditions associated with the materials. Furthermore, it will introduce attempts to combine Folklife Archive material information with NFMK's collection information and mention the need for improvement.

1.1 Introduction to Previous Research

When NFMK established its archive in 2007 and named it 'Folklife Archive,' it based the establishment on supplementing NFMK's collection materials and restoring the context of materials.

During this period, discussions were conducted on the scope of material collection and role of Folklife Archive (Kim, S.D., 2008). Since then, Folklife Archive has functioned as a major database that enriches NFMK's collection information and supports museum activities and thematic research (Kim, S.D., 2016). Meanwhile, existing research has emphasized the reorganization of material management systems (Lee, J.H.,

2015) and functions as an integrated database (Seo, S.M., 2017) as directions for Folklife Archive development, and improvement measures using artificial intelligence have also been proposed (Ryu, J.Y., 2020).

Based on this previous research, this article focuses on how Folklife Archive materials restore the context of museum collection materials. It also introduces specific cases for linking Folklife Archive materials with collection information and discusses the need for integrated management of material information.

1.2 Research Subject and Method

All materials used in this article were obtained from various projects (exhibitions, research, education, etc.) conducted by NFMK. This article presents the following cases for detailed analysis.

The first is a special exhibition case using the 'Kim Soo-nam Collection.' Photographer Kim Soo-nam donated a large quantity of folk field photographs. These materials are recognized for their value not only at NFMK but also at other institutions and are highly utilized.

Second is 'Folklife Archive Information Centre' at NFMK Paju. Folklife Archive Information Centre is a representative case of experiential archive utilization, showing how Folklife Archive materials convey the context of collection materials to visitors through various contents and programs.

The third case is an education program conducted by NFMK Paju, specifically a program related to *Jeongwol Daeboreum* (the first full moon of the lunar year), one of the representative seasonal events. This article analyzes how intangible traditions are linked with contemporary visitor experiences through the use of Folklife Archive materials.

Finally, Information search stations and Specialized research PCs in Folklife Archive Information Centre are key examples. These are cases that specifically realize the combination of archive material information and collection information that Folklife Archive has continuously worked toward. Through this system, this article aims to mention current challenges and propose prospects.

Additionally, NFMK currently manages archive materials and collection materials through separate systems, and this article develops content based on this current situation.

2. Material Collection and Organization, Including Digitization

Before proceeding to the main discussion, it is necessary to briefly outline the collecting and organizing Folklife Archive materials. Material collection forms the basis of museum activities, and collected items must be processed into suitable formats to facilitate their effective use. This need has become particularly important in the contemporary museum environment, where digital utilization is increasingly emphasized. Similar to most museums, NFMK conducts this process systematically in the sequence of collection → organization → registration.

Collection primarily occurs through two channels: donation and institutional transfer. Donations mainly focus on materials held by individuals and organizations, materials entrusted by senior scholars in related fields such as folklore, anthropology, and museum studies, and audiovisual materials held by photographers or cameramen.

Additionally, NFMK systematizes the collection and management of internally produced materials through its own archive material management regulations. For example, Article 25 (Archive Submission) of Section 4, Chapter 2 of NFMK regulations states that "Museum staff may submit materials deemed to have utilization value among materials acquired for business or other reasons to Collection management division for utilization."

Consequently, each department submits physical materials such as published books, posters, leaflets, cultural products, and educational materials, as well as digital original materials such as photos, videos, and audio files, along with metadata and copyright transfer contracts to Collection management division.

Materials donated or transferred in this way go through an organization process according to the museum's organization guidelines. In this process, analog materials are digitized using equipment such as scanners. This is to establish a dual preservation system by creating copies of originals that may be damaged due to acidification, while also enabling use as reproduction and service support materials.

Digitization targets were initially selected with priority given to high-value materials, materials with many reading requests, and materials at risk of damage from repeated reading, but recently most analog materials subject to registration are being digitized. Materials that have been organized are registered and databased through Folklife Archive material management system, enabling free utilization in digital environments. Folk Archive materials systematically built in this way become the foundation for various museum activities such as exhibitions, research, education, and publication.

3. Seeing is Believing (백문이 불여일견): Case Studies on Reviving Context

Thus, Folklife Archive materials are systematically accumulated according to standards and procedures from collection, organization (digitization), to registration. However, for Folklife Archive materials not to simply remain dormant in storage, they must be utilized from various angles in the museum. This section presents three cases demonstrating how Folklife Archive materials have been effectively integrated with museum collections in exhibition, experience, and education settings to revive past contexts and connect with visitors.

3.1 Special Exhibition Case: Bells and Fan

In 2015, the family of Korean photographer Kim Soo-nam donated 171,378 photographs he had taken to NFMK. Kim Soo-nam had been photographing vivid Korean shamanic ritual scenes since the 1970s. To honor him and present his photographs to visitors, NFMK held a special exhibition titled "*Speaking of Kim Soo-nam*" from April 6 to June 6, 2016 (planned by Kim Hyung-joo, NFMK Curator). The exhibition hall displayed photographs capturing various aspects of people participating in "*Gut*," Korean shamanic rituals.

There are priests who preside over gut. They have names such as *Mudang*, *Baksu*, and *Mansin* (a shaman of countless gods). There are two main paths to becoming these priests: being chosen by the gods or inheriting the family shamanic profession passed down through generations. While leading gut, they mourn the dead, commune with the living, and pray for blessings for those gathered at the gut. In conducting these ritual, shamans utilize various ceremonial attire and tools. Among Kim Soo-nam's photographs were images of Woo Ok-ju, a respected mansin.

NFMK had received various shamanic tools used by Woo Ok-ju during her lifetime as donations in 1993. Woo Ok-ju was a *gangsinnmu* (spirit-possessed shaman) chosen by the gods, and among the tools she used were 99 *Sangsoe bangul* (99 brass bells) and *Seongsu buchae* (Shaman Deity fan). These are used when calling gods or demonstrating divine powers. The bells have ninety-nine bells attached, and the fan beautifully depicts various gods served by the mansin in vibrant colours.

However, the mansin Woo Ok-ju who actually used these tools passed away in 1993. Now it is no longer possible to know directly how she conducted gut with these tools. Media materials containing scenes of her performing gut are scattered across various institutions. However, materials specifically documenting these collection items were difficult to find. If these were exhibited, visitors would have countless questions. For example, they may wonder in which type of gut the bells and fan were used, and which hand held the bells. they may also ask how the bells and fan were shaken, whether the fan was used open, or if the bells and fan were held together in one hand. Although Woo Ok-ju's successors are transmitting the content of gut, there was an absence of materials clearly showing how Woo Ok-ju personally utilized them. Then, among Kim Soo-nam's donated photographic materials, scenes were confirmed of her leading gut with these tools.



Figure 1. 99 Sangsoe bangul (Folk Item No. 11325)



Figure 2. Seongsu buchae (Folk Item No. 11325)



Figure 3. Hwanghae Province Jinogwi Gut - Daegam Gut – Woo Ok-ju (Archive No. 00483689)

Woo Ok-ju's photograph was taken during the process of conducting *Jinogwi gut*, a ritual to comfort the deceased. In the photo, Woo Ok-ju holds bells in one hand and a fan in the other, invoking the gods on behalf of deceased and manifesting divine authority. This scene was displayed alongside the actual tools in the special exhibition "Speaking of Kim Soo-nam".

Visitors could understand the context of their use more clearly by viewing Woo Ok-ju's photograph alongside the actual items on display in the exhibition hall.

This provided a natural opportunity for them to learn how the shaman used the bells and fan within the context of gut, a ritual rarely encountered in everyday life. This case illustrates how archival materials from the Folklife Archive can help restore the original context of collections and move beyond simple visual presentation.



Figure 4. Display of Photo and Items in the Exhibition hall (From National Folk Museum Video Channel)

3.2 Folklife Archive Information Centre Case: Touch to Revive Memory

In July 2021, when NFMK Paju officially opened in Paju, Gyeonggi Province, Folklife Archive Information Centre also opened its doors (planned by Kim Seung-yu, NFMK Curator). The centre was designed as a complex cultural space integrating experiential areas, reading zones, and exhibition spaces. It serves as a comprehensive access point where visitors can explore all materials and information related to the 1.09 million photographs, audio recordings, videos, and other materials collected by Folklife Archive of NFMK.



Figure 5. Folklife Archive Information Centre Overview (Photograph by Choi Ji-hyun)

Inside the centre, visitors can freely browse both publications by NFMK and children's books. Exhibition and interactive contents are strategically placed throughout the facility, allowing visitors to experience various aspects of Folklife Archive collection in a holistic manner.

In 2023, the experiential components were further expanded. New installations included "Folklife Archive Factory," introducing the archive organization process; "Folklife Archive Collection," showcasing representative materials by era; a search station where visitors can listen to work songs from everyday life; and "My Own Archive," where visitors can create archive records using their own photographs. These were implemented in addition to existing elements, such as a donation exhibition room presenting newly donated materials annually.

To enable visitors to engage with both museum collections and archive materials while minimizing the risk of damage to original items, the centre actively adopted hands-on experiences using 3D-printed models. Five artifacts were selected for reproduction: *Jangseung* (village guardian posts), *Onggi* (earthenware), *Jige* (A-frame carriers), *Gat* (traditional hats), and *Tal* (masks). Each model is embedded with an electronic recognition chip. When a model is placed into a designated reader box, the system automatically displays related photographs and archive information on an overhead monitor.



Figure 6. Folklife Archive Collection Available for Experience
 (Photograph by Choi Ji-hyun)



Figure 7. Visitor Experience Using 3D Models with Folklife Archive Materials

This approach allows visitors to gain a deeper understanding of how such objects were used in their original context. For example, jangseung—wooden or stone guardian figures placed at village entrances—once ubiquitous, have largely disappeared due to rapid industrialization and social transformation. By using the model alongside photographic archive materials, visitors can observe the original placement of jangseung, people's interactions with them, and their cultural significance.



Figure 8. Folklife Archive Materials Related to Jangseung
 (Archive No. 156081)

Onggi and jige were also tools closely used in daily life. Onggi was used as storage containers, and A-frame structured jige as carrying tools. While onggi is still used as food storage containers today, its proportion in Korean life has somewhat decreased with the appearance of containers made from various materials. Jige has also become a tool difficult to encounter easily in daily life. Through this model, visitors can clearly see how people historically utilized onggi and jige, including the types of items carried and their usage context, supported by Folklife Archive materials.



Figure 9. Folklife Archive Materials Related to Jige and Onggi
 (Archive Nos. 10860, 10876)

Thus, the centre's experiential strategy goes beyond displaying objects. It is structured to allow visitors to understand not only the forms they see but also the lived experiences and cultural environments associated with them. While handling actual artifacts may offer the most direct connection, preservation and safety concerns make this impractical. Miniature models offer a viable and accessible alternative, increasing both interpretive clarity and visitor engagement.

This exhibition method provides visitors with the following experiences. Through 3D models, they can directly touch and see the form and structure of collection items. Of course, doing this with actual artifacts would be the closest experience, but it is realistically difficult due to artifact preservation and safety issues. Therefore, providing miniature models that satisfy both safety and accessibility can effectively increase the utilization and communicative power of collection items.

The subsequent Folklife Archive materials do not simply show what the collection items looked like but convey the everyday context such as specific times, places, and usage methods where they were used. Through this, younger generations learn about unfamiliar past lifestyles for the first time, while older generations revive familiar memories, allowing all generations to emotionally empathize.

Folklife Archive materials thus complement meanings that are difficult to fully convey through collection items alone and help visitors approach past life more three-dimensionally. As a result, archives function as devices that restore everyday contexts surrounding collection items while connecting memories between generations.

3.3 NFMK Paju Education Case: Imagining the Full Moon

NFMK Paju, reflecting its spatial characteristics as an open storage facility, plans and operates experiential education programs centred on collection materials. In particular, education related to seasonal events is composed around traditional holidays or the 24 solar terms (24 절기). The 24 solar terms divide the year into intervals of about 15 days and are used as guidelines for farming and standards for seasonal behavioral patterns. Seasonal event education conveys the cultural meaning of traditional customs while also serving as a practice connecting cultural memories among visitors from various generations and backgrounds.

The Jeongwol Daeboreum seasonal event "Store Blessings in the Storage" conducted from February 11-16, 2025, was an education program that faithfully reflected these intentions, including experiences such as 'writing soji (traditional wish papers)' and 'making evil-warding kites' (planned by Choi Mi-ok, NFMK Curator). This case examines the utilization methods

and context restoration effects of Folklife Archive materials, focusing on the 'writing soji' activity.



Figure 10. Exhibition Hall Overview

'Writing soji' is an experiential activity where participants write their wishes on paper and hang them on straw ropes installed in the event space. This was inspired by *Daljip burning*, a representative custom of Jeongwol Daeboreum. Traditionally, daljip is a large structure - like a Christmas tree - made by village residents stacking pine branches and straw around the 15th day of the first lunar month. By lighting this daljip on fire and burning papers with wishes written on them, a communal ritual praying for peace and abundance for the year takes place.

However, with rapid urbanization and changes in living environments, opportunities to experience actual daljip burning are gradually decreasing. Especially for generations who grew up in urban areas, opportunities to understand and experience this custom are inevitably very limited. Accordingly, rather than simply recreating the custom, the museum utilized Folklife Archive materials together to allow experiencing the cultural meaning contained within.

In the space where the education program was conducted, videos related to daljip burning collected from NFMK were shown. These videos contained the entire process from preparing to make daljip, residents' participation, scenes of hanging soji, to the ritual of lighting fire. Visitors naturally learn the full story and meaning of the daljip burning custom while watching these materials. Then through the soji writing activity, they personally practice that meaning; praying for abundance and blessings. Here, Folklife Archive materials play a role in connecting experiential activities with cultural meaning.

This case shows that Folklife Archive materials can simultaneously draw out visitors' experience and understanding of intangible acts that NFMK importantly handles.

Visitors first visually encounter the flow of daljip burning through archive videos and then participate in the act by directly writing soji with their own hands. This composition can be said to be a structure that connects not just 'hands-on' activities but also the context and cultural meaning contained within to 'minds-on' activities.

Folklife Archive materials play a crucial role in this process. Rather than presenting specific customs as fragmentary images, they compose the entire process in video to help visitors specifically understand the sequence and meaning of experiential activities. As a result, visitors can feel that the activity they participate in is not simple wish-writing and can equally experience tradition and present experience.

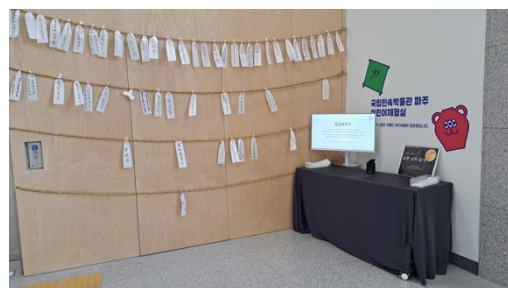


Figure 11. Writing Soji Experience Area

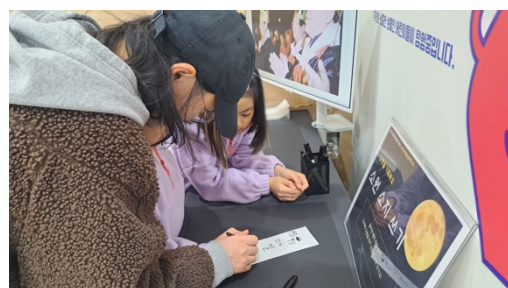


Figure 12. People Writing Soji



Figure 13. Part of Daljip Burning Video Scenes (*Archive Nos. 87679, 87834*)

Thus, Folklife Archive materials combine with educational activities to play a role in reviving intangible memories, practices, and transmissions that are difficult to convey through collection items alone. And museums become spaces connecting long-continued collective memories with current visitors' experiences, with archive materials functioning as stepping stones enabling this.

4. Connecting Dots: Combining Data

The previously introduced cases illustrate approaches developed by curators to deliver content to visitors. However, the museum's role does not stop here. It is also an important duty of museums to help visitors explore information themselves and construct meaning within it.

This chapter introduces NFMK's attempts in that direction. These attempts focus on integrating museum collection information of NFMK with Folklife Archive information. The specific practical measures are 'Folklife Archive Material Management System' and information search stations in Folklife Archive Information Centre based on this system. Furthermore, we will mention the current status of NFMK promoting joint database utilization with various museums based on Folk Life History Museum Cooperation Network.

4.1 Folklife Archive Material Management System and Information Search Stations

NFMK operates the 'Folklife Archive Material Management System' to exclusively handle registration, management, and reproduction services of Folklife Archive materials. The predecessor of this system was the 'Photo Material Management System' developed in 2004, which could mainly only manage photographic materials. It also lacked an archival classification system and made metadata-based registration and systematic management difficult.

Therefore, the museum began building a digital archive system in earnest. With the goal of a portal service providing integrated collection information and archive material information, both web and client-server (C/S) versions were developed. The C/S version was used at the time. Additionally, by establishing a material management process from collection-cataloging-preservation-service, registration and management of materials in various media became possible. Furthermore, a public service website was built so general users could access materials.

The current Folklife Archive Material Management System was developed in 2015 and considered joint utilization through Folk Life History Museum Cooperation Network from the beginning. By converting to a web-based application accessible from anywhere simply through an internet environment, the development language was also changed to JSP. Additionally, by introducing WAS (Web Application Server), information processing performance was greatly improved, and by applying responsive web application technology, convenient use became possible in various user environments.

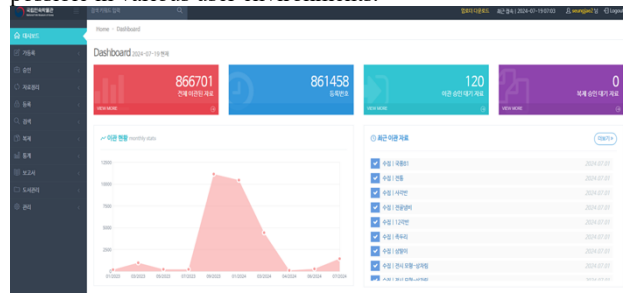


Figure 14. Currently Used Folklife Archive Material Management System Main Page

Folklife Archive Material Management System reflected operational experience accumulated since 2007 on a metadata structure based on the international archive standard ISAD(G). In particular, collection numbers, project information, and GPS values that could serve as key values for relational databases were added as new columns. Based on this, it became possible to link Folklife Archive materials with collections or enable future GIS-based visualization. Additionally, the efficiency of material management was improved by subdividing the input method of address values into administrative district units.

Despite these improvements, complete integration of collection information and Folklife Archive material information is realistically difficult. The database of Folklife Archive Material Management System operates in internal storage at the National Folk Museum. However, collection information is managed in a separate "Cultural Heritage Standard Management System(문화유산표준관리시스템)." Due to technical and security issues between the two systems, direct data combination across systems is currently impossible.

However, NFMK sought realistic alternatives. A representative example is the 'information search stations' installed in Folklife Archive Information Centre. The information search stations are implemented so that when visitors search for specific archive materials, they can check related books, multimedia, and collection information together on one screen. This can be said to be a case that realizes an integrated approach connecting collections, Folklife Archive materials, and visitors, which is the aim of Folklife Archive.

Folklife Archive Information Centre operates seven information search stations and two specialized research PCs. These stations allow visitors to access Folklife Archive materials and related content. Visitors can directly browse related books, multimedia resources such as videos and audio, photographs and descriptions associated with archive materials. As mentioned earlier, since Cultural Heritage Standard Management System database - where collection information is stored - is not accessible, the relevant data is separately managed within Folklife Archive Material Management System. Users can view Folklife Archive, Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Culture, NFMK's Fieldwork Records, published materials, and NFMK's collection information, all on a single screen of the specialized research PC.



Figure 15. Information Search Stations (Photograph by Choi Ji-hyun)

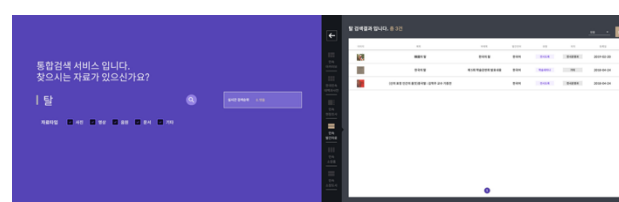


Figure 16. Specialized research PCs Main Page

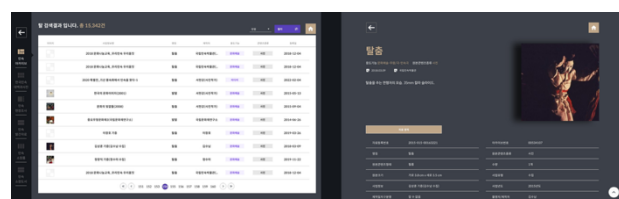


Figure 17. Specialized research PCs Detailed View Screen

By specialized research PC, users can access Folk Archive materials that are not publicly available online. Among Folklife Archive materials, those approved for public access are currently available on the service website (www.nfm.go.kr/paju/archive/search). Materials not available online must be viewed on-site at specialized research PC or formal reading requests must be submitted to NFMK due to disclosure restrictions. The decision regarding public access is determined in advance through Folklife Archive Material

Management System, based on criteria such as copyright ownership and the presence of portrait rights for identifiable individuals. Additionally, as a distinctive features of Folklife Archive materials, certain photographs depict scenes of animal sacrifice in gut rituals, such as *gunung-geori* (a gut ritual for military gods). These materials are likewise not made publicly available on the service website.

4.2 Joint Database Utilization and Challenges

NFMK is advancing 'Folk Life History Museum Cooperation Network Project' involving 395 institutions to foster exchange, collaboration, and capacity building regional museums. And it is exploring ways to resume joint database utilization of archive materials with museums belonging to this cooperation network. The specific method is to jointly use Folklife Archive Material Management System to store each institution's archive material information in a single database managed by NFMK.

Partial implementation of this initiative took place from 2016 to 2017. At that time, 4 institutions included in the cooperation network agreed to joint database utilization and shared each other's archive material information within one storage. The effort was suspended after 2019 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the concurrent establishment of NFMK Paju, which continued through 2021.

NFMK plans to relaunch the initiative in 2025. The biggest purpose is to build an environment where archive materials held by each institution can be freely utilized by each other. At present, if institutions wish to use nondisclosed Folklife Archive materials, they must navigate a complex approval process. NFMK would experience similar difficulties when using materials from other institutions. However, in the case of NFMK internal departments, they can use materials by simply applying for reproduction in the system as if shopping online.

A user-friendly shared database would enhance the operational efficiency of museums and elevate the quality of activities such as exhibitions, research, and education. Ultimately, richer content can be provided to museum users including visitors. Moreover, if small-scale museums with insufficient archive collection and management conditions participate in joint database utilization, it will also be an advantage that the burden of management and operation can be reduced.

Nonetheless, several challenges must be addressed to ensure the project's scalability and sustainability. Administrative procedures are problematic, but fundamentally, the key is whether uniform classification standards and metadata structures can be consistently applied to each museum when utilizing joint databases. Individual museums have different establishment purposes. The nature of materials they focus on also differs. Differences in classification systems are therefore unavoidable.

In fact, Jeju Folk and Natural History Museum and NFMK, which are conducting joint database utilization discussions, have differences in the scope and classification standards of archive materials. Specific compromise proposals are being sought to overcome these differences. For example, a plan to add metadata items that can be commonly used by both institutions has been proposed. Additionally, a lightweight version of the platform with a streamlined set of metadata fields is under consideration to accommodate smaller museums with limited resources.

5. Conclusion

The collection and organization of Folklife Archive materials - including digitization - should not merely result in the accumulation of database entries. Rather, it constitutes essential work that enables visitors to vividly experience past lifestyles and grasp their cultural contexts. A museum becomes a dynamic cultural space only when digitized archive materials are meaningfully integrated with real-world practices.

Achieving this goal requires the ongoing development of Folklife Archive Material Management System. Moreover, practical cooperation in joint utilization of database across museums is urgently needed. For small-scale folk life history museums with limited capacity for archival management, such as collaboration could serve as a viable alternative.

However, imposing unilateral "standardization" on museums with unique characteristics risks replicating the very issue this article seeks to address - namely, the disconnection of materials from their original contexts. Therefore, efforts toward joint utilization must proceed with full respect for each institution's distinctive identify and operational context.

Despite these challenges, the primary motivation for pursuing joint database utilization lies in enhancing the experience of museum users, including both researchers and visitors. If full-scale integration is difficult, at least a service like E-Museum, a collection information provision website currently operating in Korea, should be established specifically for archive materials.

Providing a platform enabling convenient access to diverse archive materials from multiple institutions, without the inconvenience of individual searches, will greatly enhance the values users can discover in this vast ocean of resources. Furthermore, an accessible environment for overseas researchers should be created through multilingual support and application of international standards.

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