

Archival Authority Records and Encoded Archival Context (EAC)

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**Abstract:**

Encoded Archival Context is a metadata standard for recording contextual information about creators of archival material. Based on an international content standard, it was released in 2004, and has seen only few applications to date. The creation of contextual records for archival materials enables patrons to perform more thorough research by exploring connections between creating entities and their records online in multiple repositories simultaneously. Archivists also benefit from sharing contextual records with their colleagues through this common standard, as EAC also functions as an authority file.

This paper examines the problems archives face associated with providing context in an online environment, and the development of an international content standard (ISAAR(CPF)) and structural standard (EAC) for context. It also discusses some of the current problems with the application and evaluation of EAC in archives. The early adopters of EAC will face significant challenges, but their success will pave the way for smaller institutions to take advantage of the standard.

**Problem statement:**

Traditionally, the principle method of delivering contextual information to archival users is through the agency of the archivist. A researcher would first identify repositories where useful materials might be stored. She would then need to visit those archives in person, consult with the archivist, read finding aids, and identify individual boxes of materials that might prove helpful. Only after looking at these records would she know if they provided the answer to her questions.

This process is time- and resource-intensive for both the researcher and the archivist. However, it has been a successful model for archival reference. By the time the researcher has arrived at the archives, she is familiar with the context necessary to understand the papers concerning her subject.

Now that archives are sharing more and more of their materials online, either through digitization projects or with the use of EAD or other electronic finding aids, the role of archivist as mediator has become less explicit. The archivist is responsible for making records available online, but does not interact directly with the users of those records. In many cases, researchers will retrieve the records they believe to be important before they are adequately prepared to understand them. Many of the items viewed will turn out to be irrelevant, or will only be discovered to have been relevant later in the research process. Rather than making research more efficient, accessing archives online may draw out the process, with many false starts and dead ends.

The solution to this problem would be to provide structured contextual information along with finding aids so that the most important points are recorded and made explicitly available. This will ensure that relevant context is presented concurrently with the records in a manner that facilitates research. Until recently, there has been no metadata standard for encapsulating this contextual material.

**Context:**

The provision of context is extremely important for describing archival material, much more so than for bibliographic material. Books are published with much of the information needed to situate them: authors' names, publication dates and locations, etc.

This is not true of archival materials, which often require a high degree of knowledge of their context in order to be understood.

Context has traditionally been described with the archival records themselves. Archives are organized according to the principle of provenance, which assumes that a fonds comprises the entire records of one creator, be it a person or an organization. Thus, ideally, there should be one contextual description attached to the description of each fonds.<sup>1</sup>

Representing contextual information in archival finding aids is of benefit to all users of archival material, but it can be a complicated problem. The three major archival description standards (Rules for Archival Description, Describing Archives: A Content Standard, General International Standard for Archival Description) each address this task in a general fashion.

RAD recommends that a number of elements be included in the administrative history of biographical sketch; these may be presented in a structured format or as a narrative.<sup>2</sup> DACS also recommends various elements, and says to include “information relevant to the understanding of the life, activities, and relationships.”<sup>3</sup> ISAD(G) also requires an administrative or biographical history. It recommends that “significant information” be recorded, but does not elaborate on any specific elements.<sup>4</sup> What is deemed significant is at the discretion of the archivist. Only a small percentage of each of these standards is devoted to describing context, and in most cases the contextual detail recorded in finding aids is at the discretion of the archivist.

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<sup>1</sup> Pitti (2003) 5.

<sup>2</sup> Rules for Archival Description 1.7

<sup>3</sup> Describing Archives: A Content Standard 10.14

<sup>4</sup> General International Standard Archival Description 3.2

However, the ideal state of context-attached-to-description is not always mirrored in reality. The records of one creator may be split between two or more institutions. Papers in a fonds may be attributed to multiple individual creators (as in the case of a family fonds, or in many collections.) Additionally, the relationships between creators are dynamic and complex, and are not always adequately described in the biographies or administrative histories recommended by descriptive standards.

Context and provenance remain important tools for retrieval for users of archives. In some cases, researchers may be looking for the records of a particular person or institution. Other times, they may be searching for records reflecting a particular activity or a particular type of records creator. Usually, a question like this would require a long period of preliminary background research to identify potential subjects and then locate their papers. A more sophisticated system to identify records creators and their archival resources by dates, locations, or functions would simplify this aspect of research.

### **ISAAR(CPF):**

The International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons, and Families (ISAAR(CPF)) was published in its first edition in 1996, and revised in 2003. It began, as the title suggests, as primarily a standard for authority records in archives, but has been expanded to cover contextual information in great detail.

The elements of ISAAR(CPF) are divided into areas. The identity area acts as an authority record: it contains the name or names used by the creator, identifying authorized names and other names. The description area provides the traditional

contextual material that would be found in the biography or administrative history of a finding aid. The relationships area includes short descriptions of other entities related to the one being described and a description of the nature of that relationship. The control area records data essential to managing the description itself. Most of the elements of ISAAR(CPF) are optional. The four that are required are: type of entity, authorized form of name, dates of existence, and authority record identifier.

There is also a section for relating the authority record to archival resources (in the form of records or finding aids.) An ISAAR(CPF) document can be related to any number of resources, and multiple finding aids can refer back to the same document. This separation of context and description is the major drive behind ISAAR(CPF). This standard is designed to work closely with ISAD(G), in order to provide a full description of archives.<sup>5</sup> Like ISAD(G) and the other description standards, no recommendation is made as to how the information should be formatted or stored.

### **Applications of ISAAR(CPF):**

Since the first release of ISAAR(CPF), it has been implemented by many institutions and projects. One example is the Bright Sparcs register, created by the Australian Science Archives Project and now run by the Australian Science and Technology Heritage Centre.<sup>6</sup> This project has created authority records and brief biographies for close to five thousand records creators. The archival user can follow links from those biographies to related entries and online and published sources (which include archival materials as well as articles and books.)

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<sup>5</sup> Ottoson, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> [Bright Sparcs](#)

In some cases, the information available is sparse, and many entries do not have material associated with them. However, that the system has been constructed and populated with files already benefits users, and further information can be filled in as it is made available.<sup>7</sup>

### **Encoded Archival Context:**

Encoded Archival Context (EAC) is an XML-based standard for authority files and contextual information for archival records. It is based on ISAAR(CPF) and is designed to be interoperable with Encoded Archival Description (EAD), another XML metadata standard used in archives. It is an open standard and is freely available for use at any institution.

EAC is similar to EAD in many respects. It uses a similar structure and many of the same tags. In fact, EAC is designed to accommodate all tags used by EAD, and holds short EAD descriptions within its <archunit> tag.<sup>8</sup>

An EAC document is entirely enclosed within the <eac> tag. This tag contains two main elements, <eachheader> (EAC header) and <condesc> (context description). <eachheader> contains the control data, such as ID number, maintenance history, and declarations of standards. <condesc> contains four main elements: identity, description, relationships, and resource relations (in parallel with the elements of ISAAR(CPF).)

Identity, enclosed by the <identity> tag serves as the authority control for the record. It establishes the name or names used by the records creator, and the dates in

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, many of the records are of living persons, who may donate their papers to archival institutions in future.

<sup>8</sup> [Encoded Archival Context Tag Library](#)

which those names were used. Records creators are divided into three categories – person, corporate, or family – and the category used determines the sorts of tags that are used to define name information.

Description contains a description of the creating entity, including dates and locations, general environmental context, and a biography or administrative history. This is also the container for descriptors of functions and activities.

The ability to describe functions has not yet been fully developed in EAC. Ideally, this field will use an extensive controlled vocabulary to define functions and activities for a records creator, and allow for accurate searching by researchers. However, at this point no appropriate controlled vocabulary has been developed.

The <eacrels> tag surrounds information about other people, corporate bodies, or families related to the subject. For each relation, information about names, dates of association, and a description of the context of the relationship is recorded. Active links can be made to other EAC documents.

Links to resource relationships are contained in the <resourcerels> tag. Each of these relations is contained in an <archunit> tag, which encapsulates an EAD description of archival resources related to the subject. Direct links can also be made to EAD records or to holding repositories, for the researcher's convenience.

### **Future Development of EAC:**

The original EAC working group has disbanded since they published the beta version in 2004.<sup>9</sup> Most of the members of that working group are now involved in

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<sup>9</sup> Encoded Archival Context.

implementation and application projects at their home institutions.<sup>10</sup>

EAC was officially presented to the Society of American Archivists (SAA) at the 2005 annual meeting.<sup>11</sup> This presentation described the structure of the standard, and its development status. Although EAC does not yet have an institutional home or official status, the SAA's Technical Subcommittee on Descriptive Standards will soon host an EAC working group.<sup>12</sup> The aim of this stage of the project is to evaluate the current beta version and develop an official EAC Version 1.0 release.

### **Applications of EAC:**

As XML becomes more commonly used in archives, such as for Encoded Archival Description, the transition to using EAC as part of standard processes will be made smoother. For example, the Archivists' Toolkit project, "a suite of open source digital tools designed to decrease the costs of archival processing" includes functionality for name records based on ISAAR(CPF), which can be exported as EAC records.<sup>13</sup>

In the near future, however, adoption of this standard by typical institutions will likely be tentative at best, and will garner less attention than major projects designed to test the efficacy of EAC.

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<sup>10</sup> Brown (2006) 30.

<sup>11</sup> Society of American Archivists, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> EAD Roundtable Meeting Minutes, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Archivist's Toolkit Project Proposal.

<<http://archiviststoolkit.org/toolkit/proposal.html>>

### **The LEAF Project:**

The LEAF (Linking and Exploring Authority Files) was an international, European project that ran from March 2001 to February 2004. The project was intended to try to solve the problem of lack of standardization of authority files between institutions.

LEAF asked participating institutions to submit authority files for personal names, and converted these files of different formats into EAC. Then, links were made automatically between authority files describing the same records creators. This was then connected to MALVINE<sup>14</sup>, a European manuscript search database. Researchers using these systems would be able to locate records held by all the participating institutions on a particular creator, regardless of variation in names used.<sup>15</sup>

### **North Carolina EAC Project (NCEAC):**

The North Carolina Encoded Archival Context project is sponsored by NCECHO (North Carolina Exploring Cultural Heritage Online). Participating are five institutions: four archives and an art museum. Because these institutions are responsible for materials covering the same geographical area, their collections frequently overlap in terms of the creators of the materials. EAC is used in the project to communicate the contextual descriptions that they have generated individually, to build better descriptions and avoid duplication of effort.<sup>16</sup>

The partner institutions have access to a web form that generates XML code

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<sup>14</sup> See the MALVINE website: <<http://www.malvine.org>>

<sup>15</sup> For more information on LEAF, see Kaiser et al, 2003. The LEAF Project site is no longer available online, but can be found through the Wayback Machine.

<sup>16</sup> [North Carolina Encoded Archival Context Project](#)

automatically from their input. The contributors to the project thus need little or no knowledge of XML, or of the EAC standard itself. Currently, all content submitted through these forms is sent to an editorial board, to ensure quality.

The project is still young. Only a few records have yet been created. However, when more have been added, the project will benefit both the repositories contributing to it, and their researchers.

### **National Name Authority File project:**

The UK's National Archives is currently working on a National Name Authority File project, which will create ISAAR(CPF) records for all records creators represented in their archives. They have obtained funding to create and encode these records in EAC.<sup>17</sup> The project is still underway as of 2006,<sup>18</sup> but has not yet been released to the public in any way.

### **Discussion:**

It is difficult to properly evaluate a standard as new as Encoded Archival Context. There have been very few practical applications to date (and those few are still in their early stages), nor any evaluative studies. ISAAR(CPF) has seen somewhat more use, but again is so recent that its effects for archivists and researchers have not been measured.

Complicating the problem of evaluation of these standards is that there is little to compare them with. The other method of describing context – as part of archival description – is well established, but it has clear flaws when compared to separate

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<sup>17</sup> National Council on Archives Interoperability Protocol, 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Brown, 2006 and Archives UK Technical Working Group, 2005.

contextual records.

Although EAC looks wonderful on paper, its expected benefits have not yet been documented in any way. Thus, it should not be unreservedly embraced by all archives. Significant costs may be incurred in the course of adopting EAC as an institutional standard, including training time and costs, and the hurdle of setting up an internal infrastructure to handle the records.

Also, as with EAD, there seems to be very little benefit resulting from creating only a few EAC documents. One result of EAC is the ability to search the repository's entire collection by creators, locations, dates, or functions, and perhaps even the collections of many repositories concurrently. This has little impact when only a few records are available for searching. (Archivists will also benefit from the authority control function, but this will have a lower overall impact.) Thus, during the early stages of implementing ISAAR(CPF) and/or EAC in an archives, there may seem to be little benefit when compared with the cost.

Likewise, the first few archives to implement EAC will face more challenges than latecomers, as they will be unable to take advantage of any existing networks. In future, infrastructure will be set up for smaller repositories to contribute their EAC records, much as networks currently exist for sharing of EAD descriptions.<sup>19</sup> These networks would be designed and managed by large, frequently national or international bodies, and would solicit materials from all repositories within their jurisdictions. (An idealistic situation might have one archives network serving the entire world, though considering the diversity and sheer number of repositories that may be contributing, this seems

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<sup>19</sup> For example, [Archives Canada](#) or [The Archives Hub](#).

unlikely.)

One of the more useful features of EAC is that it can be implemented by many different types of institutions, including not only archives but also museums and libraries.<sup>20</sup> Archives are in an ideal position for pioneering this new system. Archival material is more commonly organized by provenance than material held by other institutions, so archivists should be among the first to benefit from networks of contextual description. Success in archives will then encourage other institutions to participate.

Active links between EAC and EAD records add context to the records.<sup>21</sup> A researcher will be able to get a sense of the greater picture of the documentary record connected to a particular person or corporate body, as well as access information about these additional records quickly and efficiently. However, this sort of environment may have negative effects as well. Fonds which are actively linked to, and those which are available online, will be most prominently available to researchers, which may lead to others being overlooked if traditional methods of research are abandoned. Not all information can be found online, but giving the impression that it can may cause tension between repositories using online finding aids and those without.

It has been suggested that EAC records may be easier for small institutions to create than EAD.<sup>22</sup> The records tend to be shorter and less complex, and it would perhaps be easier to transform a non-standard contextual document into EAC than a non-standard finding aid into EAD. In this case, EAC may be a better standard to begin with in creating networks between small repositories. In addition, the authority record

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<sup>20</sup> This list is not restrictive. Any institution which uses metadata to describe works which are the creations of groups or people could potentially make use of EAC.

<sup>21</sup> Vitaly (2005) 248

<sup>22</sup> Ottosson (2005) 267

functionality will immediately benefit archivists.

**Conclusion:**

Encoded Archival Context does what it sets out to do: encodes contextual information in a form that is tangible and can be accessed by archivists and researchers alike. This information can then be used for a number of purposes: as authority control for archival description, for sharing of records between repositories, to provide background knowledge to understand archival records, to demonstrate the relationships among records creators that form such an important part of their context, to help answer research questions.

This is accomplished by setting a structure and requirements for descriptions of context. However, these records require a significant dedication of time and effort to create. Archives do not have a long tradition of separate contextual documents, so the initiation of an EAC project is a significant new source of work for archivists. The challenge is greater if the archivists are not already familiar with XML or EAD. The effort of creating a searchable network of EAC documents may not be worth the effort, especially for smaller institutions.

Larger institutions (including several countries' National Archives) are taking advantage of the benefits of EAC nevertheless. As they lead the way in creating network infrastructure and best practices guidelines, other institutions will find the way clearer, and it will become possible to study the efficacy of the standard. As best practices for metadata become more stable and the requisite technological knowledge becomes more common, EAC will likely become an effective tool for more and more archives.

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c/documents/tl\_beta.xml&style=/eac/shared/styles/tl.xsl>

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## Appendix: Sample EAC Record

```
<?xml version="1.0" encoding="UTF-8" standalone="no"?>
<!DOCTYPE eac SYSTEM "file:/Users/sarajanes/eac.dtd">
<eac type="persname">
  <eachheader countryencoding="iso3166-1" dateencoding="iso8601"
    langencoding="iso639-2" ownerencoding="iso15511" scriptencoding="iso15924"
    status="draft">
    <eacid>AU 93-435878</eacid>
    <mainhist>
      <mainevent maintype="create">
        <name>Sara K. Janes</name>
        <maindate normal="11302006">30 November
          2006</maindate>
        <maindesc>Document created for GLIS609 research
          paper.</maindesc>
      </mainevent>
    </mainhist>
    <languagedecl>
      <language languagecode="eng" scriptcode="latn">English in Latin
        Script.</language>
    </languagedecl>
    <sourcedecl>
      <source>ISAAR(CPF) 2</source>
    </sourcedecl>
  </eachheader>
  <condesc>
    <identity>
      <head>Identity</head>
      <pershead authorized="">
        <part type="family name">Mabo</part>
        <part type="first name">Eddie</part>
        <existdate>1936-1992</existdate>
      </pershead>
      <pershead>
        <part type="family name">Mabo</part>
        <part type="first name">Edward Koiki</part>
        <existdate>1936-1992</existdate>
      </pershead>
    </identity>
    <desc>
      <head>Description</head>
      <persdesc>
        <existdesc>
```

```

        <existdate>1936-1992</existdate>
</existdesc>
<location>
    <date>1936-1957</date>
    <place>Mer [Murray Island], Torres Strait</place>
</location>
<location>
    <date>c. 1960-1992</date>
    <place>Townsville, Queensland</place>
</location>
<funactdesc>
    <p>Trochus fisherman</p>
    <p>Sugarcane cutter</p>
    <p>Railway labourer</p>
    <p>Trade union official</p>
    <p>Waterfront worker</p>
    <p>Indigenous community leader</p>
    <!-- Functions list truncated -->
</funactdesc>
<env>
    <p>Edward Koiki Mabo was born in 1936 on the
    island of Mer, one of the Murray Islands, which are
    located at the eastern extremity of Torres Strait. In
    June 1992, six months after his death, Mabo
    achieved national prominence as the successful
    principal plaintiff in the landmark High Court ruling
    on native land title. The High Court ruling, for the
    first time, gave legal recognition to the fact that
    indigenous land ownership existed in Australia
    before European settlement and that, in some cases,
    this land tenure was not subsequently extinguished
    by the Crown.</p>
</env>
</persdesc>
<bioghist>
    <chronlist>
        <chronitem>
            <date>29 June 1936</date>
            <event>Born on Mer, the son of Robert
            Zezou Sambo and Annie Mabo of the
            Piadaram clan. Because his mother died in
            childbirth, he was adopted under customary
            law by his uncle Benny Mabo and aunt
            Maiga.</event>
        </chronitem>
        <chronitem>

```

```

        <date>1953-57</date>
        <event>Worked on trochus fishing luggers
        out of Mer.</event>
    </chronitem>
    <chronitem>
        <date>1957</date>
        <event> Left Mer and moved to the
        mainland. Worked at various jobs including
        canecutter and railway labourer.</event>
    </chronitem>
    <!-- Chronological list truncated -->
</chronlist>
</bioghist>
</desc>
<eacrels>
    <head>Relations</head>
    <eacrel reltype="associative" type="spouse">
        <persname>Mabo, Bonita</persname>
        <date>1959-1992</date>
    </eacrel>
    <eacrel reltype="associative">
        <corpname>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
        Advancement League</corpname>
        <date>1926-1969</date>
        <descnote>Served as secretary. Mabo resigned from the
        League because of the involvement of people he considered
        to be insincere 'do-gooders'. He then established the all-
        black Council for the Rights of Indigenous People.
        </descnote>
    </eacrel>
    <!-- Relations list truncated -->
</eacrels>
<resourcerels>
    <resourcerel reltype="origination" type="Personal papers">
        <archunit>
            <unitid>AU NLA MS 8822</unitid>
            <unittitle>Papers of Eddie Koiki Mabo</unittitle>
            <unitdate>1943</unitdate>
            <unitdate>1959-1992</unitdate>
        </archunit>
    </resourcerel>
    <resourcerel type="Finding aid">
        <archunit>
            <unitid>http://www.nla.gov.au/ms/findaids/8822.ht
            ml#sd</unitid>
            <unittitle>Guide to the papers of Edward Koiko

```

Mabo in the National Library of  
Australia</unittitle>

<unitdate>1995</unitdate>

</archunit>

</resourcerel>

<!-- Resources list truncated -->

</resourcerels>

</condesc>

</eac>