

Summary Presentation

Preserving and Accessing Knowledge in a Digital Age: The Sudan Open Archive

This short presentation introduces a new project, the Sudan Open Archive. This new digital archive aims to preserve and provide public access to a comprehensive range of historical and contemporary knowledge about Sudan, including that relating to intangible heritage. Through this case-study, I want briefly to highlight the potential for appropriate digital technology to assist with the preservation of intangible heritage in Sudan and also to stimulate thought on the application of digital methodologies of preserving, organising and accessing aspects of Sudan's intangible heritage.

Digital Archives

The purpose of a traditional archive is to preserve knowledge - mostly in paper form - and render it accessible to different actors for important and often quite practical ends. For example, archives provide access to usable information such as scientific data for governing authorities, international aid agencies or businesses. However, in an age of rapid technological change, the nature of, and methodologies for, archiving are changing. Digital archiving methods offer new ways of engaging historical and contemporary knowledge and cultural heritage. That is, they provide new methods to preserve, collect, organise, and provide access to collections. These complement as opposed to replace traditional paper archives. They also enable different types of intangible heritage to be preserved, organised and made more widely available. Digital methods mean that languages and different expressions of culture can be preserved and made easily accessible.

The Sudan Open Archive

The Sudan Open Archive was initiated in 2004 by the Rift Valley Institute as a response to the recognition that different branches of historical, anthropological, socio-economic and political knowledge would be important in recovery and development operations in Sudan after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. The information deficit concerning Sudan, especially the South and Transitional Zone, caused concern that post-war recovery and future development operations would be hampered by a lack of basic knowledge about such areas as governance, political change, and socio-economic circumstances. At the same time, international aid agencies operating in Sudan on and off since 1972 had built up archives of grey literature that were potential sources of usable information - such as technical data, photographs, anthropological records. This is of interest and value not merely to historians but also to agencies operating in Sudan, governing authorities and Sudanese more generally. It forms part of the surviving written history of Sudan.

A survey of aid agency archives in Sudan and Kenya was conducted in late 2004. Supported by UNICEF, it concentrated on the archives produced by Operation Lifeline Sudan since 1989. It found quite an extensive range of archives in varying conditions, much hard to access and some vulnerable states. The survey was the first step in quantifying the volume, nature and condition of archived information and began the process of establishing inventories of aid archives, which continues. The report of the survey recommended that the best way to preserve, organise and present the scattered documentation was by building a digital library and digitising the different generations of documents.

The choice of digital means to preserve and present the archives reflected fundamental changes in ways of organising and engaging knowledge. It also affirmed the value of making different branches of knowledge and intangible heritage openly and more widely accessible. The name 'Sudan Open Archive' refers to this philosophy of open information but also to the Archive's openness to including material from numerous institutional and individual sources. Although perhaps an abstract concept to generations familiar with paper archives, digital archives represent an emerging standard of historical preservation. Any digital archive venture, however, is invariably haunted by the spectre of obsolescence. Technology and standards change rapidly, so the Sudan Open Archive has been developed with 'future-proofing' in mind.

The Rift Valley Institute used a specialist digital archive software called Greenstone to build the digital archive. This is the emerging open-source standard for constructing and maintaining digital libraries. It was developed with UNESCO support. We chose Greenstone for five main reasons. It is, firstly, a multiplatform suite. The Archive can be used via its website but can also be installed or used on any computer without internet access in Sudan. Second, the software is multilingual. Future development of SOA will see it customised to be accessible in and include original language source documents in Arabic and languages of Sudan. Third, Greenstone's multimedia capability means that the Sudan Open Archive can include music and audio files, photographs and film as well as text documents. Fourth, the Archive is extensible. Its collections can grow significantly. Finally, Greenstone is non-proprietary open-source software and thus will not incur prohibitively expensive licensing and maintenance costs.

The first version of the Archive contains a comparatively modest amount of material. This was produced by trial field scanning in different locations in Kenya and Sudan. The result is a digital archive available at [HYPERLINK "http://www.sudanarchive.net"](http://www.sudanarchive.net) www.sudanarchive.net and on DVD. Users of the archive can, amongst other things:

- Conduct searches of the entire collection or more specific advanced searches
- Access scanned copies of documents, providing virtual contact with original documents
- Search the texts of given documents, with or without search term highlighting;
- Read a document page by page, or load and scroll through documents at 5 or 25 pages at any one time,
- Save documents in PDF form.

The current version of the Archive is the foundation of a broader project. It currently contains documents mostly about the history of aid and development in Sudan. However, it's collections will expand. In particular, the Archive will include a wide variety of multi-media sources - languages and oral history, songs, music, film footage and photographs. The aim is to produce a rich archive that preserves and enables a wide range of people to benefit from diverse sources. As such, it welcomes suggestions about and the submission of content, part of the Archive's desire to become a public resource providing wide access to a comprehensive amount of material. On the technical side, it will be customised into Arabic and other languages of Sudan so that sources in original languages can be included

This short case-study has attempted to highlight the potential for appropriate digital technology to assist with the preservation of intangible heritage in Sudan. It also wanted to draw attention to the application of digital methodologies for preserving, organising and accessing aspects of Sudan's intangible heritage as a related aspect of inventory making.

[While unfortunately unable to go in to more depth, I would be delighted to answer any further questions or queries and look forward to learning the outcomes of the conference.]