

To Be or Not To Be Remembered ? : The greatest challenges for the Memory of the World

Libraries are the Memory of Mankind [Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe]

INTRODUCTION

Pierre Ryckman in 1996 advocated that a National Library *'is a place where a nation nourishes its memory, and exerts its imagination - where it connects with its past and invents its future'*. Ryckman also suggested that the saying *'to see is to believe'* should in fact be reversed; He felt rather that *"to believe [to assume, to hypothesize, to predict] is to see."* (1996, p.13) These provocative statements provide the catalyst for re-examining the role of UNESCO's Memory of the World programme in the marking and in some sense, 'making', of memory within communities. To date, 158 collections from 67 countries comprise the International Register, but to what extent can this be said to represent the breadth and scope of the Memory of the World?

Lowenthal in his path making book *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* notes that: *heritage today stresses intangible folkways[where]... during the 19th and early 20th centuries national patrimony came to inhere more and more in tangible monuments and memorials, with material preservation an overriding concern. ...But legacy concerns now refocus on ideas and images. This shift reflects improved techniques of enhancing the quality and value of images. It also reflects the influence of cultures that do not share the Western mania for material objects as heritage."*

"And people who build or make little meant to long endure find Western conservation zeal bizarre. Emphasis on original materials in UNESCO's canonical Venice Charter of 1966 is said to "leave other cultures and traditions ill at ease, [for] they place more emphasis on spiritual values on authenticity of thought than on material symbols".¹

Oscar Handlin considered that *"History is the distillation of evidence surviving the past."* (*Truth in History*, 1979) If we consider this then we know already that there is a process of selectivity being put into practice which is always problematic. This is something that I, as a curator, have become increasingly aware of and sensitive to as it invites conflict in any consideration of who is and who is not *"authorized"* to historicize our past.

The *'re/construction'* of national and regional consciousnesses, voices, values and identities questions traditional views where particular forms are valued as having primacy as sources for historical information, relegating others to a lower status on the scale of evidentiary importance. In the context of negotiating these tensions, to what extent has MoW succeeded in mediating/nuancing the biases which often inform the discourse of selection, and opening our minds to the need to restore the dignity of *'worth'* to the disenfranchised? Has the Memory of the World really reflected/responded to the

aspirations of the World's community(ies) to be recognized and enriched by association within the family of nations of which they now form part?

Given that several of our colleagues are dealing with the media aspects of MOW, I have decided to concentrate on other issues which influence the environment in which Memory of the World exists. This paper will examine the underlying issues; expectations; resources; processes and challenges. It will conclude with a consideration of issues that speak to strategies that will achieve resonance and respect to assure MOW's sustainability in the future.

UNDERLYING ISSUES

Some of issues which relate to the way in which we perceive and conceive of the documentary heritage, and which I think need to be kept enshrined in our thinking, are the notions elucidated earlier that these archives/resources :

- *are where [a nation/community] connects with its past and invents its future' .*
- *whatever their origin, famous or obscure "they deserve and demand that we" believe [to assume, to hypothesize, to predict] [in order] to see".*
- *refocus on ideas and images rather than the relative rarity/authenticity of the media or carrier or format of the heritage.*
- *place more emphasis on spiritual values and on authenticity of thought than on material symbols*

We need to conduct a rigorous review of the Register so far. A review that would consider several questions and examine various issues: What are the underlying values and concepts applied in selecting Memory of the World? Have we taken account of the experience of not just the master, but the subaltern histories? Have we considered not just the structure, but the experience of other agencies or programmes of UNESCO in "conserving heritage"? [i.e. World Heritage and its 4 "C"s.] Have we assessed how relevant the programme objectives are today some 15 years later? Have we assessed the results of the programme? How accessible has it been? How many and what types of works have been registered? Has knowledge about the importance of this heritage grown? Has ethics been a tool in the consideration/evaluation of the nominations?

Here are some of my thoughts and considerations about the Register as a core element of the Programme, which I think must be regularly reviewed and monitored.

EXPECTATIONS

Has the world community truly embraced the MOW programme/practice? To what extent has the Programme as a result, been able to attract new funding to support activities?

While there has been greater effort to develop wider awareness of the programme at the national/regional levels as well as internationally, and some success has been achieved, yet it has been a slow growth, particularly in some regions where access to resources associated with the conservation or promotion of the archival heritage have not been widely available. To what extent can the face/profile of the programme be expanded more broadly?

Issues of language and values need to be examined. Is it sufficient to encourage registration through national/regional mechanisms? To what extent have new policies been developed and defined at the national/institutional level to address such issues.

RESOURCES

Funding needs to be associated with the programme. We all know the saying you have to put your money where your mouth is – and if UNESCO is to expand the reach of the MOW it needs to be able to attract support for the future by demonstrating the resonance and resilience of its project for generations yet come. Have new markets or new sources for heritage support or promotion been tapped; new communities enlightened?

In other words it needs to have resources capable of responding to the needs of the community. There is no real point in simply saying to people you must conserve without being able to demonstrate good faith and commitment to the value of the programme, through its projects.

PROCESSES

Has the process of developing MOW grown at the national/regional levels? Only very recently have we seen steps being taken to create the Regional Committee for Africa and recent experiences have shown the critical need for the development of similar regional approaches elsewhere including Eastern Europe and Arabic countries.

Indeed guidance needs to be given at the outset with the development of these groups – Should it be aimed at grouping institutional leaders in increasingly hierarchical positions where not much in the way of positive energy is expended, except where the priorities of national interests take control; Should we not make clear recommendations to assist in the development of flexible and innovative processes, gathering together those who will commit themselves to ensuring the programme goals will be met.

THE CHALLENGES

The diverging perspectives of what constitutes MOW – is it the totality of National Archives? Is it selected Treasures of a prestigious institution? Is it the careful construct of a collective/community memory? Whose memory should be privileged? Can selection criteria be universally applied?

The knowledge of other related UNESCO programmes and the continual desire for change – would seem to make a case for the conversion from a programme to a convention. However practical experience with the application of such a convention has not really been critically examined and it is not really understood that, while Member States may pay more attention and give more critical support for the World Heritage convention, what you make up for in prominence and resources made available to address their conservation goals, you may lose in terms of national rather than technical priorities. And the structure and selection process which we now consider to be somewhat imperfect, may develop into something rather more unwieldy, inflexible and imbalanced, led by diplomats rather than by specialists or communities.

Overlaps, duplications and redundancies associated with other world heritages (MOW's identity is often obscured/confused with that of other UNESCO programmes most notably the World Heritage/IPDC/Intangible heritage – conventions and programmes whose differing roles are often conflated and misunderstood) need to be strategically addressed. There is no denying that there is considerably more glamour attached to the tangible heritage work of UNESCO. Can MOW develop connections/relationships/synergies with such programmes to its benefit? I believe it can and it must in order to generate greater involvement of/support by the general public. MOW needs to capture their imagination, embedding the inherent importance of conserving the documentary heritage for future generations.

Clearly there are lessons to be learnt here and one might look at the issues of a fellow programme under UNESCO – the World Heritage programme for some notions as to move forward, enjoying as it does almost universal support amongst UNESCO Member states and a huge profile world wide. How did it reach those levels? How has it managed to sustain it?

The List established under the auspices of UNESCO's World Heritage Convention has become a Universal reference point in this regard. It is particularly notable therefore, that under the terms of this convention, the concept of World heritage is crafted in such a way as to play up the cultural significance of particular natural or social products. (UNESCO, 1999)

Again this is in contrast to a non-modernist view of heritage as continuing cultural practices, which relies upon a very different understanding of the past as integral to a living present and future. It is a key characteristic of Asian culture for example to use abstract cultural practices, like rituals and ceremonies, to preserve valued communal ceremonies. For example the Japanese concept of heritage is complex and nuanced. In Japanese cultural terms both things and processes affirm the nation's identity. Taken together they represent a distinctive way of living and constitute the country's heritage. Ryckman's argument that the Chinese sense of the past seems to be enshrined more in the people and the language than in things, may be of particular relevance to the Memory of the World.

Nevertheless, perhaps the biggest challenge for the Memory of the World is Relevance – If the MOW is not the memory of the people how can it be of truly international relevance, significance and importance? How can it represent their needs, aspirations, ideals and ideas? How can we truly share in a Dialogue of cultures and civilizations to which UNESCO subscribes and is deeply committed?

Here again there is a need to reflect on the experiences of World Heritage where the issue of balance of power is swayed towards the prestige of the List, and the World Heritage must continue to fight to ensure that attention is paid to the fundamental conservation motives. Similarly, the MOW programme must continually assert the prime importance of conservation and accessibility. UNESCO must be careful that the prominence of the Register does not overshadow the core goals to which the MOW is dedicated.

The IAC therefore needs to better comprehend the real problems which have arisen within the World Heritage as it struggles to deal with its own success and to ensure greater balance (both geographic and thematic) both within the List itself and the decision-making structure which creates it. For example the WHC eventually established 4 key specific strategic objectives to help address these imbalances – Credibility, Conservation, Capacity Building and Communications and has recently accepted a fifth, Community in ensuring relevance to the peoples and nations it serves.

In addition, the reinforcement given to the World Heritage Committee's strategic objectives being through the development of specific regional strategies, and other priority areas currently underrepresented in the WH List, for example Small Island Developing States is in my view very relevant. Could these find resonance within the Memory of the World, giving priority to groupings such as these which I think are demonstrably under-represented within the MOW List.

Other WH priorities are similarly useful to consider. In particular “building capacities to prevent and mitigate the threats and impacts” inherent in climate change and natural disasters to which these states are so vulnerable, and at the same time improving the skills necessary at the community level and for “managing sustainable tourism initiatives in natural and cultural sites”. This type of constructive experience may be useful in helping MOW to develop innovative and supportive strategies to increase the value and relevance of heritage protection on a both a national and global level.

SUSTAINABILITY OF MEMORY OF THE WORLD

So what can keep the MOW going/growing? Do we consider that it has a finite utility and value as a public education/capacity building programme? In fact one of the major questions occupying the World Heritage Committee at this time, should also be examined here. Member States have asked the question – is the World Heritage List (or should it be) finite? Should there not be limits on what is included in the List? Will the importance/value/significance (for this I think we can read prestige) be affected as it grows larger and larger? One of the enduring strengths of the Memory of the World in

my view, is that it captivates the imagination, and as it is concerned with the preservation of ideas, it is apparently limitless in scope.

UNESCO has determined that it must as an international organization adopt policies ensuring interdisciplinary of approach across all sectors at all levels, yet in reality it has not fully initiated the relevant linkages across the programmes. MOW has had some limited success with for example, its Slave Archives campaign, but no attempt was made to link it to the related Sites of Memory/ Slave Route project, within the World Heritage programme. Similarly, obvious synergies with the Intangible Cultural Heritage and the International Programme for the Development of Communications have not been addressed and remain untapped. These all have the potential to be mutually supportive, complementary and not competitive.

One way we can do this is to link (at least virtually) the intangible heritage documented in these resources, with images of the sites that people may visit, or with the collections which museums may choose to exhibit. In other words, the world of heritage should not be viewed from an isolationist perspective or as conflicting expressions, but rather that heritage consists of things and ideas are which mutually supportive. And two sides of the same coin. In other words, it is ideas that have led to the creation of things.

MOW also needs to reach out to the World Heritage Committee, for while the organization as a whole stresses the need and value for interdisciplinarity amongst its programmes, it does not address this in any real way in its actual programme (only recently has the WH Committee insisted that the intangible heritage of different sites should be articulated within the nominations to the world heritage list and that these values be seen to 'add value' to the Outstanding Universal Value of these sites).

There is a need to stimulate the National Commissions to better understand why the Memory of the World should be regarded as an important activity under the UNESCO umbrella. All UNESCO officers in the division should be required to involve MOW in their work wherever applicable. Partnership in effect should begin at home, within the UNESCO secretariat itself, to the benefit all concerned.

Why have we not made more use of the opportunities to invite the community involvement and authorization as an imperative indicator? Anyone can nominate – not just technical experts or national representatives, but communities and individuals who believe passionately in the global significance of their archives/documents/memories. It would be well to understand and utilize this as an opportunity to involve many different sectors of society. This is what can give the MOW sustainability with the constant renewal of ideas, concepts that flow through these potential participants.

The composition of the International Advisory Committee is critical as well, often heavily weighted in relation to archivists or technical aspects – for many there is a need to ensure the Committee's professional and geographical balance (and indeed to ensure complementary with the make up of the Register sub committee) in order to provide broader scope of knowledgeable sources to interpret both the context and the contents of

the documentary heritage which we consider for the international Register . This would, in a very direct way, begin to address the inherent biases and the imbalances we have just seem demonstrated in a rough analysis of the programme's Register.

UNESCO, if it is serious about the programme, should provide more resources – e.g. simply support for more regular communication amongst the members and the general public, better provision for the implementation of regional programming, the webpage content must be updated more regularly– Website design needs to be used more accessible – more user friendly, and it suffers through both a lack of regular updates, and poor website architecture making it difficult to locate or unearth the true resources that this list brings. You need to be an archaeologist to find it! All of these problems have been ascribed to lack of resources.

There is a need to address the biases inherent in emphasizing the European hegemonic view, in an effort to overcome the cultural amnesia referred to earlier, through positive reinforcement of multiculturalism and cultural diversity. This can be achieved through flexibility of approaches – geographical, aesthetic, thematic, historical, etc. Whatever the mechanism, the MOW must address the difficulty of making people see what is/has been invisible. Like the magnificence of the pyramids or the power and strength of Gibraltar, how do we convey the extraordinary wealth or power or the ideas contained in this heritage. We need to find ways to make visible these treasures.

The dynamics and dichotomies of good and evil should be confronted. While there have been some determined efforts to bring to attention deeply horrifying episodes in world history, MOW's register does not go far enough in addressing these elements (the Holocaust, Apartheid, Slavery, and of course the Stolen Generations) which are sometimes treated only peripherally in respect of the Register. MOW sometimes seems capable of a kind of moral amnesia itself, but cannot for ever shy away from dealing with controversial issues and it is not for us to judge whether the ideas embodied in the documentary heritage are good or evil, but rather to what extent these notions or actions permeated and influenced major portions of the earth's population.

MOW should reinforce the importance of joint nominations which are not merely national or regional in scope, but intra-regional as well e.g Archives of the Dutch East India Company should trigger a critical response amongst other countries that there was need for more of the same. Surely joint nominations actively demonstrate ideals to which UNESCO subscribes – the objectives of sharing and disseminating of knowledge, the importance of building partnerships amongst communities and countries.

MOW should develop a list of international scholars who could serve as international ambassadors for the Programme, tied to the need to be a more proactive approach to “educating” not merely informing the public, through informed interpretation of the archival heritage.

CONCLUSIONS

Non-western approaches to heritage/preservation which can be seen as exemplifying a Politico-cultural challenge to globalization need to be broadly disseminated and supported. Such approaches contest the reification of the rationalist mind-gaze by supplementing the modernist concept of heritage as a product, with the non-modernist concept of heritage as a practice.

The political-cultural dimension of the modernist project not only objectifies but also reifies. It tends to lead to an emphasis upon “products” rather than “practices”, as can be seen in the concept of heritage. Hence the contemporary penchant for choosing particular items from the ‘past’, like historic monuments or tangible heritage, unspoiled parts of the countryside, and the many efforts to bequeath these items to the “future” as representative of the past.

My preference is to consider MOW, not so much as a programme but as a practice, a practice geared toward shared responsibility for the documentation and preservation not merely of documents but of memory. Not so much an archive of “important” documents but rather an accessible assemblage of ideas and values, which do not threaten cultures or pitch them against each other, rather they enrich mankind’s understanding of each other. I am interested in understanding why if it is truly Memory of the World, that it requires a national or even a regional designation. Why not simply be registered as an exemplar of the human condition experienced across culture, space and time.

Recognition that it is the idea, not merely the physical carrier/medium, which is the critical thing to be preserved, and that in conserving the documentary heritage we may have some chance to save the idea for future generations. MOW reflects the diversity of languages, peoples and cultures. It is the mirror of the world and its memory. But this memory is fragile. It is the sharing of ideas and the appreciation of those of others which are irreplaceable parts of this memory that should be conserved before it disappears forever. Sustainability for the programme lies in the value which communities and peoples agree should be ascribed to it, and it is surely this kind of community of spirit which UNESCO has tried so hard to achieve and sustain in “building peace in the minds of men”.

ⁱ David Lowenthal “The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History” pg.20