

Communities and Memories : A Global Perspective
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“Memory of the World – The Pacific Perspective”

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Introduction

The importance and relevance of the Memory of the World (MoW) initiative cannot be disputed. The intentions of the programme to preserve, protect, and guarantee the accessibility of the world’s documentary heritage is a noble and worthwhile pursuit.¹

The programme is particularly critical as archival and libraries collections worldwide are besieged by a variety of threats. War and social unrest, coupled with the severe lack of resources have affected preservation efforts. For regions such as the Pacific that are prone to cyclones, flooding and tsunamis, and of course high temperature and humidity levels, the issue of preservation is a very challenging one. Much has also vanished resulting from theft and destruction among other things.²

Background

This paper discusses the common questions of Pacific islanders on what constitutes memory. It discusses issues and challenges relating to their preservation and the long term sustainability of the MoW programme, and possible ways forward to support the programme.

From the outset I would like to state that issues raised in this paper, relating to the challenges encountered by information custodians, are drawn from the results of a number of UNESCO reports of the late 1990’s on the Information Needs in the Pacific Islands³ and which continued to surface in the statistical surveys carried out by PARBICA over the years. The most recent of these surveys was in October last year during the occasion of its 12th biennial

¹ <http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php>

² *ibid*

³ The primary reference is the 1998 Esther Williams Report for UNESCO on the Information Needs in the Pacific Islands.

conference which was held in Noumea, New Caledonia, at which meeting PARBICA recognized the significance and value of UNESCO's MoW initiative. In support of the MoW programme members resolved to "... continue to work with UNESCO Pacific Office to support the Memory of the World programme in the Pacific region."⁴

PARBICA, by the way, is the Pacific Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives. Formed in 1981, it is a volunteer organization representing government agencies, non-governmental organizations and individuals working in the field of archives and records management in the Pacific region. It is one of the branches of the International Council on Archives (ICA), which promotes and supports the mission of the ICA in the Pacific for the protection and enhancement of the memory of the world and to improve communication while respecting cultural diversity.

PARBICA's objectives are:

- to establish, maintain and strengthen relations between archivists in the region and between institutions and professional organisations concerned with the custody and administration of archives;
- to promote the preservation and protection of the archival heritage of the region;
- to facilitate the use of archives through public education and improved access;
- to stimulate and organise archival activities;
- to provide and assist with the formal and informal professional training; and
- to cooperate with other agencies concerned with the documentation of human and natural history in order to benefit all people.⁵

Documented vs. Oral Memories

Memory may have different shades of meaning to different parts of the world. In some civilizations memory could strictly mean information contained in formal recording systems which document events and transactions.

In others however, memories are never complete without oral traditions, cultures and histories which have been passed down through generations and which continues to be alive and cherished today.

The journey of official recordkeeping in most Pacific Islands began in the mid 1800's with the arrival of Christian missionaries. In Fiji, William Cross and David Cargill arrived in Lakeba on 12 October, 1835⁶ and started work on their mission. These were

⁴ PARBICA 12 Resolution No. 2.8

⁵ www.parbica.org

⁶ Wood, Harold. A., Overseas Missions of the Australian Methodist Church Vol. II, The Aldergate Press, Melbourne, 1978. p 23.

not the pioneering missionaries but their arrival impacted the course of recordkeeping in Fiji.

Archaeological research so far, suggests that the Pacific islands were settled over three and half thousand years ago. There are theories about how most Pacific Islands were settled, and despite numerous studies there are no conclusive findings nor are there documentations to verify these theories. There does however appear to be some degree of truth in each theory.

Fiji, for example, oral history has it that the first settlers originated from Africa. In their search for a new home, this group of people left Africa passing through South Asia thence to the Pacific Islands leaving members along the way.⁷ To argue that this is pure mythology may not be very wise. While there is no documentation to support it, similarities in language and culture, among other things, suggests that indeed there is some truth in the story.

To the Fijian, this theory can be compared to the “13th Century Radzivill Chronicle, tracing of the peoples of Europe, one of the pilot projects of the Memory of the World Programme.”⁸

Perhaps what constitutes memory in the Pacific is best described by Chief Reklai Raphael Ngirmang while addressing the Pacific Archivists at the 9th biennial conference of PARBICA in Palau in 2001:

“Our archives does not have written documents and books. Our culture and historical records are contained in oral histories and legends, which are stored in the collective memories of the people of Melekeok and which have been passed from generations to generations over the centuries.”⁹

Oral tradition underpins the Pacific way of life, and continues to play an important part in the existence in the islands. These are the fabrics that bind our societies and allow them to own their identities.

For Pacific Islands, and most oral history societies, a picture of an event is not complete without oral history.

These histories and legends have tended to be trivialised by modernists as fanciful and random, as romanticised self-conceptualisations. In reality, our legends hold scientific and technological methods relating to seafaring and navigational practices, medicinal preparations, fisheries, agriculture and so on.

The issue at hand for the owners of such memories, with increasing modernisation, will be to ensure their preservation. A point to ponder is whether such memories could be recognised as components of the Memory of the World. Much the same way that Bob Dylan was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for Literature on the strength of his music.¹⁰

⁷ Vatu, Saimoni, Na I Tuktuku Ni Tawa Vanua, Talking About Oral Traditions, Fiji Museum, 1976. p71.

⁸ <http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php>

⁹ Wareham, Evelyn, From Explorers to Evangelists, Recordkeeping and Remembering in the Pacific Islands, Archival Science : International Journal on Recorded Information, Vol. 2 Nos. 3-4, 2002. p 194.

¹⁰ <http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/22i>

Challenges and Impacts on the MoW

The preservation of the documented memories such as archives and libraries continue to be challenged by a number of factors, which will subsequently affect the sustainability of the MoW . These include as follows:

Human Resources

For archival institutions in Pacific, one of the major constraints is that of staffing. Staffing range from 1 to 20 in larger institutions in the Pacific. The result therefore is that with their work load they could hardly spare time to complete proposal for the MoW Register. Their skill levels as well may not put them in a good stead to complete high level documentation as is required in the MoW proposals. And if they are able to complete proposals, rejection of such proposals for not having met the prescribed criteria can be very discouraging and demoralising.

Funding

Archival institutions are not the best funded organisations in developing countries. This is due to the reason that many authorities are oblivious to the importance of archives whereas on the other hand whatever resources available are prioritized to development sectors such as education and health. The effect therefore on the MoW is that most developing states will not be in a position to satisfy the requirements of the MoW for proper Management Plans¹¹ to be put in place before proposals are accepted and inscribed in the Register.

Storage and Housing

Storage and housing is an issue which needs attention for most developing countries. With constraints in resources, archives storage is in most cases allocated spaces that cannot be used for other purposes. Therefore it is not uncommon for archives to be housed in attics, basements and other such areas. This is detrimental to the preservation of documents, and is compounded by harm environmental conditions.

Internet Connectivity

The question of Internet Connectivity in the Pacific continues to be problematic. While there are some who have full internet access there are others who have very limited capabilities, and those that have no connectivity at all. This poses a serious problem as initiatives such as the MoW are carried over the internet and only those with internet facilities are able to access such them.

Management Support

While this area has seen improvements in recent years there is a need to continue with the momentum to foster wider support for archival and library

¹¹ Asia Pacific Memory of the World Selection Criteria 1.2.6

preservation initiatives. Support of management at the highest level is critical to ensure that resources are made available to sustain programmes and development initiatives

The Way Forward

Awareness

There can never be enough promotional activities. People come and go hence the need to put in place awareness and promotional programmes that are strategically targeted and which are focused to specific audiences. For the MoW to fully blossom, there should be more awareness activities delivered using all modes of transmission, including traditional forms.

Partnerships

The value of partnership cannot be underestimated. This is evident with multinational companies seeking new allies to build new business initiatives and reduce costs. In recent weeks Air New Zealand had announced that it will be operating more code share flight with Air Pacific in an obvious attempt to maximize profit while reducing costs. This is an example of efforts to promote business and products. The MoW should benefit immensely through building partnerships, at all level. At the international level, it is noted that IFLA¹² and the ICA¹³ are already on board. Would there be an opening to bring the World Bank and other high profile organisations to the fold?

At the regional level it would be a good starting point to establish contacts with Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. It would be beneficial as well if the MoW is included in the agendas of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings and the Pacific Islands Leaders Forum. The fact that PARBICA is already on board is positive development. Other NGO's such as PIALA¹⁴ and PIMA¹⁵ needs to become involved.

On the domestic front, while efforts to establish National MoW Committees is commendable it would be good to first go through a consultation process to seek the views of all stakeholders on how such committees would function and be sustainable.

Champions

The United National had been very successful in employing goodwill ambassadors to champion its cause, using household names such as Nicole Kidman and Pierre Cardin.¹⁶

¹² International Federation of Library Associations

¹³ International Council on Archives

¹⁴ Pacific Islands Archives and Library Association

¹⁵ Pacific Islands Museum Association

¹⁶ <http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php>

This perhaps could be used to support the MoW. The Pacific may not need such celebrities, what we need are professional people with good standing in the region who can convince our leaders of the importance of preserving our memories.

As an example, the Director General of the National Archives of Australia took the initiative to attend and made a presentation at the Pacific Public Service Commissioners meeting held in Samoa last year on the importance of sound Recordkeeping Practices to support good governance. The result was that a number of Public Service Commissioners and representatives¹⁷ attended the PARBICA meeting in Noumea, New Caledonia which was an obvious sign that they now appreciated the importance of recordkeeping.

Capacity Building

There is an apparent need to improve the capacity of custodians of archives and other documentary heritage in the Pacific. There is a need to build strong human resource foundations in order to enhance the preservation of our documentary heritage. Without the necessary skills training for personnel and advanced knowledge in preservation and restoration, documents will always be at risk of being lost. Infrastructure, such as housing and internet connectivity, will need to be improved as well.

Conclusion

There is no doubt there are materials within the Pacific Islands which could possibly qualify for inscription in at least the Regional MoW Register.

In this connection, the effort of the UNESCO Pacific Office which have identified to possible projects for the MoW Register is appreciated.¹⁸ A couple of archival institutions in the Pacific have already indicated their support of the project.

While the Pacific Islands states continue to consider “Oral Memories” as equally important as “Documented Memories”, they recognise the potential for their collections to gain recognition, and their preservation enhanced, through such initiatives as the MoW hence will offer their support for the programme, as has been pledged by members of the Pacific Archives community.

¹⁷ Public Service Commissioners and Representatives of Papuan New Guinea, Vanuatu and Tonga attended the meeting.

¹⁸ The two possible projects are the Pacific Slave Route and the Indian Indentured Labourers.