

MOWLAC: Privileging Memory in Latin American and the Caribbean

presented by

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The Region

Latin America and the Caribbean, like Asia and the Pacific, covers a large area which is dominated by the sea. UNESCO member states in the region range from large countries such as Brazil (8,511,965 sq. km.) which are well-endowed with natural resources and a well diversified economy to the island state of St. Kitts/Nevis (261 sq. km.) which until recently was a monoculture agricultural state with limited natural resources. In addition to large well populated continental nations and island states there are a number of uninhabited cays, bracs and islets across the length and breadth of the region. In addition to size, there is considerable diversity in other geographic respects – active terrestrial and submarine geomorphological features; continental, isthmus and island states; massive mountains to below sea level sites; and, multiple climatic ranges are evident throughout the region.

A history of colonialism is the major contributing factor to the region's rich culture and linguistic variety as well as its social, political and economic practices. During colonialism, every major European colonial power and even lesser ones such as Latvia has had a presence, at some time, in the region. A dominating feature of the region is the tyranny of distance and its associated challenges – to get to Brazil from the Caribbean requires two flights, one of which is done overnight and transits through Miami which, in a post 9/11 world, has attached to it a number of inconveniences not the least of which is the challenge of obtaining a visa! National development runs the gamut of possibilities and so do the possession of natural resources, technological advancement, economic pursuits and political realities. Thus, like Asia and Pacific, while the region is often viewed as a single entity, Latin America and the Caribbean is a place of contrasts, differences and diversities.



MOWLAC - Regional level

The Memory of the World programme became operational in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2000 when, at a meeting of experts in Pachuca, Mexico, a regional committee was established. In 2007, the acronym for the committee was changed to MOWLAC. Previously it had used CRLAC as its acronym.

The UNESCO member states in Latin America and the Caribbean are: Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, St. Kitts/Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay and Venezuela. States in the region having associated membership status with UNESCO are: Aruba, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands and the Netherlands Antilles. Four of UNESCO's six associate members are in Latin America and the Caribbean. Under the rules of UNESCO any member state can participate in MOW activities. However, while there are no bars to eligibility, not all member states are active in MOW and of those that are their level of activity and involvement varies.

MOWLAC has met regularly since its establishment. Recent annual meetings were held in Brazil, Barbados and Colombia. Every effort is made to rotate meetings around the

region. The committee is currently serviced by a UNESCO officer based in the cluster office in Kingston, Jamaica.

The principal responsibilities of MOWLAC are to further the programme in the region, to encourage the development of national committees, to develop regional projects, to encourage the development of a regional and national registers, and to encourage member states to submit collections for inscription to the international register. The committee is also charged with managing any funds that are allocated to the programme in the region. While not implicitly stated, the organisation of appropriate training programmes, where feasible, is also a responsibility.

Appointment to the committee of nine is based on recommendations received from the member states and members of the committee. Each member sits for a non-renewable four year term. Appointment to the committee is done on a cyclical basis so that there is continuity and the corporate memory of the committee protected.

MOWLAC – National Level

To date, 18 national committees have been established in the region. Countries having national committees are: Argentina; Barbados; Bolivia; Brazil; Chile; Colombia; Costa Rica; Cuba; Ecuador; El Salvador; Guatemala; Honduras; Mexico; Nicaragua; Paraguay; St. Lucia; Uruguay and Venezuela. While many countries have national committees, many of them need to be reenergized so that they become effective organs for the MoW programme. From this list it is also clear that not all member states in Latin America and the Caribbean have established National Committees.

MOWLAC on the International Register

Thirteen Latin America and the Caribbean countries are represented on the international register by 24 nominations of which 1 is a joint nomination shared by 4 countries. The inscriptions from this region are representative of the range of documentary heritage that is the concern of this programme. The scope of successful LAC nominations to the register covers archives, a film, a library, manuscripts, musical recordings, personal papers and photographs. Most of the LAC inscriptions are from continental Latin America (11 countries). Two Anglophonic island states have nominations on the register. Of the 24 regional entries on the register, 4 were inscribed in 2007. The new inscriptions are: Human Rights Documentary Heritage 1976–1983 (Argentina); American Colonial Music (Bolivia, Colombia, Mexico and Peru); Archives of the National Literacy Campaign (Nicaragua) and Colombia: Generalissimo Francisco de Miranda's Archives (Venezuela). The American Colonial Music inscription is the first of a regional nature on the register.

Challenges Facing the Programme in the Region

The continuity of the programme in its present structure is likely to be affected by a reorganization of its offices in the region by UNESCO. Whereas the programme was administered previously from Quito, Ecuador it is now located in the Kingston, Jamaica office. Until this matter becomes fully settled, there is some uncertainty regarding the funding of future regional activities of the programme. The reorganisation also has a

direct impact on the quality of the region's web page as there does not seem to be sufficient funds to keep the page updated and also to have all of its content translated into English. In addition, there is no French language version of the page. This is a deterrent to French-speaking nationals in the region becoming involved in the programme. The other major languages in the region are Portuguese and Dutch but most Brazilians are fluent in Spanish and nationals of the former Dutch colonies in the region are multi-lingual in a number of European languages and some indigenous ones as well.

The Guidelines for the programme are very clear that a rich heritage has nothing to do with economic or other attributes when they state: "There is no necessary relationship between cultural riches and economic riches, but communities and nations vary in their individual capacity to protect their documentary heritage. Cultural preservation is neither an optional extra for the rich or an unnecessary luxury for the poor; it is universal and fundamental to the survival and growth of the human spirit." (2.7.4) Unfortunately for countries that are not well endowed economically issues pertaining to culture, especially its preservation, are not high on national agendas. When a choice has to be made between building a road or erecting a purpose-built archive, there is no choice because the road addresses a tangible need and will have an immediate qualitative impact on many lives and national well-being. An archive is more aesthetic in its impact. In addition, several nations in the region are unable to effectively and efficiently protect their documentary heritage. Further, the availability of range of skills needed to protect, conserve and preserve the documentary heritage is absent from all countries except the very large ones. These are real and major challenges.

The development of vibrant National MoW Committees is a pressing need. A particular challenge is to identify persons who have a passion for the intangible/documentary heritage, who understand that the value of their work is a long term investment and of which they will not necessarily be the principal beneficiaries. The work of Memory of the World activists is as an investment for and commitment to the patrimony of their heirs and successors.

Many of the National Commissions are not in a position to actively support the programme. Indeed, for many of them knowledge about the programme is negligible. This is often a factor of a small staff and too many calls on limited resources.

The establishment of national registers has to be encouraged. But, this is not likely to be successful until a national MoW committee is in place. The regional register needs to be strengthened and more institutions encouraged to make nominations to this register.

The multi-language nature of the region is particularly worrisome with respect to furthering the work of MoW. Spanish is spoken by most of the region's residents and because many non-Hispanic nationals are not fluent in this language, it creates a barrier to communication and also increases the administrative and other costs associated with running the programme in the region.

While the region is made of many large and medium sized countries, there are many island states. These have particular challenges and these will be discussed in the next section.

Issues Peculiar to Small States

Like Asia and the Pacific, the Latin America and Caribbean region of the MoW programme is comprised of many small states. Size has its own particular and peculiar effects, even for noble programmes such as the MoW. While there are many, this section will examine the main ones.

FIRST: The colonial experience of these states often results in their heritage being resident elsewhere. It may also be scattered, as many of these territories were colonised by more than one metropolitan country. The dispersed nature of the documentary heritage is also affected by the political arrangements that existed during colonial times. Territories linked with each other are no longer connected but the records remain in their original sites.

SECOND: There is an absence of professional expertise. This impacts on a variety of processes ranging from identifying what is relevant to the MoW programme, building up the required in-depth knowledge of the heritage of the community as well as being able to execute all of the professional tasks associated with memory-based work.

THIRD: The institution of preventative/preservative measures/facilities against natural and man-made disasters as well as climatic factors that have a debilitating effect on the intangible heritage are far down on the list of national priorities. I recall reading once that while stand pipes get votes, libraries do not! This captures succinctly the nature of the challenges that we are up against.

FOURTH: Much of the heritage of small states is preserved in non-Western/non-traditional containers. The dominance of oral traditions makes it more difficult to develop nominations for the register, given the prevailing hegemony of the Western canon in heritage work.

FIFTH: Historically socio-politico-cultural knowledge has been governed by north-south and west-east binaries. These create a northern/western hegemony in the culture/heritage sectors. Both the north and the west are considerably less informed and aware of the cultural richness and value of either the south or the east and little attempt is made to privilege such knowledge where it exists in the same manner as accorded to western practices. Indeed, in some instances e.g. during enslavement, deliberate attempts were made to obliterate the culture of the enslaved. Thus, for some societies and cultures deliberate efforts have to be made to re/capture the lost heritage/s.

SIXTH: Because of size, many of the UNESCO National Commissions across the region are hard-pressed and understaffed. Therefore, they are unable to effectively and efficiently cope with the multiplicity of UNESCO programmes and activities in an even handed manner. So this programme gets lost in the myriad of UNESCO documentation received at the local level. Adding to this challenge is that the language of UNESCO and

MOW programme (especially the nomination form) can be intimidating to the uninitiated and underexposed.

While there are many challenges - the programme in the region has not been without its successes.

Successes of MOW in the Region

Undoubtedly the coup of the region has been the appointment of a national from the region to head the IAC. To be invited by the Director General to head this prestigious body of international experts acknowledges that expertise is not a function of size, economic prosperity, resource endowment or development. In addition, another representative from the region served a term as a regular member of the IAC and another as a member of the Register Sub-Committee.

Despite the many challenges that the region experiences with regard to the programme, it has been able to have 24 inscriptions on the register. The inscriptions reflect the diversity of the documentary heritage of the region, its richness and value that it adds to the culture of the world.

The ability to meet annually has helped to foster a community of supporters for the programme. This would not otherwise have been possible given the constraints of distance, language and communication. This community has served as the basis of networking in other areas, all of which have redounded to the benefit of the programme.

Barbados and Mexico's experiences will be presented as case studies of how two MoW National Committees work in the region.

Barbados - A Case Study

A MoW committee was established in Barbados in 2001. At first the committee had as its membership heads of institutions that would have an interest in/connection to preserving the documentary heritage of the island. After sometime it was recognised that heads of institutions were unable to devote the level of attention the programme needed in order for it to thrive. A new committee was constituted consisting of persons known to have an interest in the field. Where possible, the new members were drawn from professions known to have a natural affinity with the goals of the programme. This composition has worked much better and perhaps may be a model that could be adopted by other small states.

Barbados has seen training as a critical activity if it wishes to preserve its documentary heritage. Accordingly, it has organised a number of training and public education activities. While most of the training has taken place in Barbados, it has always invited persons from neighbouring countries to participate in these activities. The most recent event (2007) took place in St. Lucia where representatives from five countries participated in a workshop to develop national nominations for consideration at the next round of inscriptions to the international register. At the end of the two day workshop three nominations were very advanced and three others were in varying stages of development. Barbados sees sub-regional activity within a single linguistic community

as one way of ensuring that the programme is furthered among this group of member states. This approach is cost effective and cost efficient however it is seen as being additional to regional activities and not in lieu of such events.

One of the benefits stemming from having the St. Lucia workshop was that as a number of persons of like mind from across the sub-region were in the same location there was an opportunity to brainstorm and think collaboratively about the programme. This workshop provided an opportunity to networking on a sub-regional level, something that previously had been lacking. Out of the St. Lucia event, a list of Anglophone collections that have the potential to be listed on the international register was created and a number of strategies that the sub-region could use to promote and develop the programme were identified.

In order to maximize their benefits, our training events have drawn on the expertise and skills of international experts. The St. Lucia training event was facilitated by Mrs. Roslyn Russell (Australia) and Miss Alissandra Cummins (Barbados). However, in order for countries/institutions to participate in the workshop, prior to journeying to St. Lucia, nominators had to send in draft nominations for review. The comments were returned to the nominators for further work and additional information. At the workshop, the intricacies of MoW forms were examined and explained in detail and participants did further work on their nominations. There was also an element of peer-to-peer tutoring as those who were further advanced in their nominations shared their experiences among the group. Participants found this particularly useful. Also assisting at this workshop was Dr. Aviston Downes, a historian from the Cave Hill Campus of The University of the West Indies in Barbados. Dr. Downes' presence helped to shape the historical framework for the various nominations. Overall, the participants and resource persons found the St. Lucia activity to be very useful and felt that it was a very valuable way to further the work of the programme.

This approach to assist small countries develop their nominations for the international register is, from the perspective of the international experts, impressive. While it does require considerable planning and some good lead time, it is mutually supportive and collaborative. The approach also helped to develop the level of sustained commitment that the nomination process demands. It is anticipated that when the nominations close for the 2009 inscriptions to the international register that the Anglophone Caribbean will have submitted no less than 6 strong nominations for consideration. If any of these nominations are accepted, the representation of the region on the register will be broadened in terms of its geography and also its historical and cultural experiences.

Associated with the SLU workshop was a half day seminar in Barbados to which persons interested in knowing more about the programme were invited. Because of the system used to issue invitations (direct and general public announcements) among the participants was a Professor from Washington D.C. who had never heard about the programme prior to the seminar. She indicated that on her return she would be informing a number of people about the programme as she was of the view that there were a number

of collections in the USA, especially from among its Black community, that could meet the criteria of the international register.

Because of MoW Barbados' reaching out to other countries in the region, we can report, with pride, that St. Lucia has established a Memory of the World Committee. Barbados is also aware that due to its encouragement other countries in the sub-region are planning to establish National Committees.

Barbados had considerable success in its applications to UNESCO's Participation Programme for assistance to fund MoW activities. This has helped to bridge the challenges that exist in most small developing countries where funds for cultural/heritage activities are difficult to get. The funds allocated by the Participation Programme do not always match the original request, but MoW Barbados has been able to make some progress with what it has received. Currently, in train is the use of a Participation Programme allocation to assist us with the preliminary work necessary to nominate some collections to the international register. This preliminary work will be done experts in the areas of African history, culture, gender, historical/plantation geography, and linguistics.

Working to the advantage of MoW in Barbados is the excellent support this committee receives from the local National Commission. It is impossible to overstate how valuable the support of the local National Commission has been to further the work of MoW in Barbados and the region. Undoubtedly, having a Chair of the National Commission who recognizes the value of the programme and the importance of heritage to identity and nation-formation makes the case always easier to make.

Mexico – a Case Study

The MoW programme in Mexico is one of the most active in the region. This country has many organisations, institutions and professionals who are able to make the contributions necessary to make the MoW programme in their country successful. Mexico's high interest in the programme is demonstrated by the fact that it was the host for the 2nd International Memory of the World Conference which was held in Colima in 2000.

Mexico leads the region in terms of inscriptions on the international register. It has 6 national inscriptions and is one of the contributing territories for the regional nomination on American Colonial Music which it shares with Bolivia, Columbia and Peru. Mexico maintains a national register and expands this on a regular basis.

In addition, Mexico has assisted other Latin American countries by spearheading training activities in a number of areas linked to the programme. In particular, Sra. Rosa Maria Fernandez de Zamora who sat on the IAC has been instrumental in furthering the work of MoW in Mexico. She has served as a resource person for MOWLAC.

MOWLAC's Future

While the development of the MoW programme in the region has had an uneven pattern, one can unequivocally state that it has achieved some success. MOWLAC intends to

further the work of this programme as much as it can within available resources and despite known challenges. The work of MOWLAC gives voice to history/ies often not heard and privileges memories in need of recall. These are responsibilities, obligations and duties which MOWLAC cannot relinquish.

Reference

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