Handbook of Research on Disaster Management and Contingency Planning in Modern Libraries

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DISASTER IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores preservation and disaster issues in Singapore and Uganda from the point of view of the author’s volunteer experiences in the summer of 2012. This is a snapshot of how two very different institutions, on different sides of the world, preserve materials and prepare for disaster, the many obstacles they encounter, and how they work with and through those obstacles. Preservation and disaster concepts are briefly discussed with the main focus on the historical context of the cultural institutions of education and the access to and preservation of their materials.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2012, I worked on two volunteer projects, one doing information literacy work at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the other leading a cataloging team at the Uganda National Archive (UNA) to catalog the Secretariat Topical File Collection, a collection of documents that related to the administration of the Uganda Protectorate under British Colonial rule. At first glance, these two projects seemed completely unrelated, other than through a library science connection. A common thread that tied them together however, was the preservation of materials and the potential for disaster.

Preservation: the image that most often comes to mind might be items stored in a dark and dusty archive or the British Library or perhaps a library at a very old and established university. While the goals of archives and libraries are somewhat different, Helen Tibbo sums up archives concisely when she writes:

Archiving always has the goals of preserving and making accessible documents, records, and other data of enduring value. Enduring value stems from a document or record’s intrinsic attributes, the contextual documentation that surrounds it, its relationship to other records and entities, and assurance of its authenticity and reliability. (2003)

These concepts could just as easily refer to libraries. Tibbo is essentially discussing the view of archives and libraries that materials must retain
their contextuality and provenance to remain useful and relevant. While Tibbo is broadly defining what archives do, there is an assumption that archives will be able to fulfill all of the tenets that she puts forth. The reality is far different, due to everything from backlogs of cataloging, to poorly created records, to active destruction of materials for environmental, ethical, historical, political, or cultural reasons. Because preservation literature deals overwhelmingly with the European context, we often don’t think about the applications of preservation principles in extreme environments or how non-European countries and cultures might preserve their written heritage. A subset of preservation is disaster management, which encompasses two ideas: planning/preparedness in anticipation of a disaster and management during the disaster. Wong and Green rightfully point out that “…disaster preparedness is an on-going process and exercise. It is appropriate to say that disaster planning is the groundwork preparation for disaster preparedness” (2006). Disaster management and disaster planning are often used synonymously, with the concepts being nested within the larger idea of preservation.

In the following pages, two case studies will be presented that revolve around volunteer experiences in Singapore and Uganda. Principles of European preservation will be discussed solely for the sake of comparison. Cloonan states, “Preservationists seek to bridge the gap between preserving objects and preserving cultural traditions. Deciding what and how to preserve can be a cultural, social, and political act. Thus, approaches to preservation vary over time and across cultures” (2010). In terms of preservation then, being aware of the complex contextuality of what is in the archive or library is just as important as keeping in mind potential future uses and current threats to the materials. Similarly, it is equally important to keep in mind the contextual background of the institution when focusing on disaster management.

BACKGROUND

Libraries have been around for centuries and with them the concept of benign neglect—“the idea that most artifacts do not deteriorate rapidly if ignored, thus buying time before preservation attention is needed” (Harvey & Mahard, 2014). Benign neglect is very common in libraries and archives and can be extremely costly, in part because preservation of materials includes working with building issues, collections, furniture, and/or individual items. For a popular culture image, think of Gandalf in the film The Lord of the Rings, when he races off to do research about the one ring. He sits in a dimly lit room, which is overly cluttered with parchments, and digs through documents until he finds what he is looking for (Jackson, 2001). This image of an overstuffed archive in the dark is, from a preservation standpoint, certainly one of benign neglect. The intention is good as the archive is darkened and the materials are all in one place, but the actual utilization of preservation concepts is poor, especially when disaster management is taken into account. In the Lord of the Rings example, with parchments everywhere,
Gandalf sits reading by candlelight and smoking a pipe, both of which represent fire hazards in what is undoubtedly a fuel rich environment.

The idea of active preservation and disaster planning did not really get its start until the Arno River in Florence, Italy, flooded in 1966. When the Arno River flooded, it took the lives of 33 people in Florence. It also catastrophically damaged millions of books, documents, paintings, and other items that had been stored in cultural institutions. Librarians, and those with a passion for books, art, and architecture, descended upon Florence to help save and repair the damaged objects. These people were called “Mud Angels” as they were often coated in mud as they picked through the sludge to unearth priceless materials (Clark, 2008). The “Mud Angels” shared a desire with librarians and archivists to preserve, conserve, restore, and provide access to materials that had been damaged. While World War II had ended roughly 20 years previously, the wounds of that war were still very much with people and places. A fierce determination existed to save what could be saved, knowing that, in the not so distant past, so much had been destroyed. Out of this extensive practical experience arose ideas about disaster planning and preservation, ideas that have been debated, explored, refined, and implemented to varying degrees the world over. That doesn’t mean, however, that participation is always effective. While most libraries inherently practice some degree of preservation, the majority of libraries are not actively ready for a disaster.

Considering the 80% statistic mentioned earlier in the Heritage Health Index report, it is therefore not surprising then that when events like the 2008 flood in Iowa, where numerous libraries including those at the University of Iowa were seriously flooded, or the Forbes Library arson in Massachusetts in 2014 occur, that it might take quite some time for recovery to happen. In the case of the flooding in Iowa in 2008, the damage was very extensive, in part because so many libraries sustained damage (“Mitigation assessment team report,” 2009). In the case of the Forbes Library, besides the actual fire, chemicals from the fire extinguishers damaged the building and collections (Dunn, 2014). In short, disasters happen and the damage caused can be mitigated through preparation and planning.

While disaster planning applies to when catastrophic events impact collections, preservation is about keeping what we have stable over a long period of time. Cloonan states that, “In archives and librarianship, preservation is an umbrella term that includes conservation – the physical treatment of items based on scientific principles and professional practices – as well as other activities that aim to care for collections at a global level” (2010). For the purposes of this chapter, when we talk about preservation, we are talking about a focus that is global in nature rather than focused on the item or even collection level. Preservation, as we have seen in Italy, Iowa, and Massachusetts, also includes disaster planning and management. A preservation plan is often seen as incomplete if no disaster plan is present. Preservation is also typically discussed from a European standpoint, which can be very different from the point of view of non-European preservation principles.

Alexander Stille, in his discussion of European versus non-European preservation ideas, examined the three main tenets of conservation: “‘recognizable,’ ‘reversible,’ and ‘compatible’” (2002). He gives the example as follows:

…a Western conservator would piece together the fragments of a bronze vase with a removable glue that would leave faintly visible cracks so that the viewer could distinguish the workmanship of the original craftsman from that of the conservator. Any material used to reconstruct missing parts must be compatible with the original, neither damaging it nor creating a strident contrast aesthetically (Stille, 2002).

In the European ideal, whether one is conserving or preserving, there is an acknowledgement of
when the original is altered or added to in some way. Just as with crime scene evidence, where anytime a piece of evidence is removed from its bag or changes hands that transaction is noted on the evidence container, materials in archives and libraries have similar metadata attached to them, either physically to the object or in the form of catalog records. In short, we track the changes that happen to artifacts and collections.

Stille points out that while the European tradition views preservation as literally the preserving of the original, many non-European societies have very different views. For instance, in Asian methodology, the idea is to rebuild the original over and over as well as to make copies. He states that:

*Conserving by rebuilding made considerable sense in China, where, until recently, virtually everything — palaces, temples, and houses — was built of wood. Paradoxically, in architecture, working in perishable materials could potentially offer a superior conservation strategy: rotting wooden parts could simple be replaced as needed so that, just as our bodies replace their old cells with new ones while we remain 'ourselves,' the buildings would be constantly regenerated, remaining forever new and forever ancient. The epitome of this seemingly Zen approach to conservation is the Ise Shrine in Japan, a Shinto temple originally built in the seventh century A.D. that is ritually destroyed and rebuilt every twenty years. The Japanese think of it as being thirteen hundred years old yet no single piece of it is more than two decades old.* *(Stille, 2002)*

In the Asian tradition, “Copying has traditionally been a major part of artistic training in China – seen as a sign of reverence rather than a lack of originality… The West, by contrast, has always strived for permanence in fresco technique, oil painting, and, above all, building in stone” *(Stille, 2002).* Stille illustrates two very different cultural interpretations of what preservation means. These differing interpretations are reflected in institutional priorities, especially in terms of disaster planning. For instance, in the case of the National University of Singapore, the focus is on access to electronic materials and not necessarily on the physical collections. On the other hand, in a resource poor country like Uganda, a disaster plan that focuses on the preservation of physical materials is paramount. Technologies for disaster detection and measuring of the environment are important for not just sounding the alarm when a disaster happens, but also making the case for disaster planning in the first place.

The technologies that contribute to preservation and disaster management are developing continuously as equipment gets more accurate and sensitive. For example, while libraries and archives have used analog humidity and temperature sensors for decades to monitor the conditions within their buildings, data loggers can now do the job more accurately and use wireless internet to report the results. Mark Roosa points out that “Data loggers that track variations in relative temperature and humidity to the minute are ubiquitous in libraries today as are the programs for processing the data they collect” *(2002).* A data logger passively collects the data and then transmits it, usually wirelessly, to a central collection point, typically online, where it can then be accessed as data tables, charts, graphs, and so on. Such information can be incredibly valuable in terms of making arguments for more funding (for example: the temperature swings throughout the year are too great and more funding is needed for a better HVAC), finding problems in the building (why is the humidity higher on the 2nd floor than anywhere else?), or even moving collections around (the humidity is lower in this area so let’s move our fragile photographic collections to it). This kind of thinking then encompasses not just one or two preservation experts on staff, but the entire team that works in the library or archive. This, in effect, makes preservation a community effort, an idea that, while not new, has increased...
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in value in large part due to greater transparency in society.

Smith states quite aptly that “In recent years preservation professionals have taken to characterizing their work as provision of ‘persistent access,’ ‘life-cycle management of information assets,’ ‘sustainability,’ or ‘stewardship’ in the hope of underscoring the societal value of preservation” (2007). It is this societal value of not just preservation, but of the materials being preserved, that sparks so much debate within the library world. Smith continues,

Perception of value is subjective and is conditioned by time and place. Some things that are currently prized by researchers and collectors will be neglected inside of a decade or two. The instances of collections languishing in the book stacks untouched for decades and then coming into demand are legion. The increased use of cookbook collections, runs of Penny Dreadfuls, and other collections perceived to be expressions of popular culture provide contemporary instances. (2007)

It’s hard to predict what collections will be important since predictions and trends change over time, particularly when the popular media becomes involved. One only has to look at the public uproar surrounding newspaper weeding as illustrated by the popular exposé piece Double Fold by Nicholson Baker. Within libraries and archives there is a great deal of debate over where collection priorities are in part because,

The thought of a catastrophic disaster descending upon a collection that librarians have spent decades constructing and managing is almost too painful to contemplate. The possibility that one part of the collection – representing many lives’ work made tangible in bound form – could be ranked a higher priority than others is unbearable. (Green & Teper, 2006)

While libraries and archives being faced with the kind of pressure of making decisions about materials that might have been accumulated over the lifetimes of multiple specialist librarians is indeed a stressful, and even heartbreaking, scenario, these decisions need to be made, and they need to be made before disaster happens.

Priorities then become a major issue in disaster planning and management. In the case of Singapore, space is at a premium, so digital collections are highly prized because a computer server room takes up less space allowing for greater access to materials through digital means. While Uganda faces similar space constraints, the greater issue is access to materials, which is tightly controlled for socio-political reasons as well as cultural and economic ones. The rest of this chapter focuses on both of these countries through the lens of personal observation, especially in terms of preservation and disaster planning which are universally accepted as important, though their implementation is culturally and situationally specific.

Case Study 1: Singapore

Singaporean History

Tucked onto the tip of the Malay Peninsula, Singapore is an island nation developed after the purchase of the land by Sir Stamford Raffles for the purposes of establishing a trading post for the East India Company (Ryan, 1963). Singapore is centrally located in Asia as a port city-state, which makes it a perfect place for shipping. The British ruled Singapore, from the time that Sir Raffles took over the island in 1819 to Independence in 1963. Prior to that, the land went back and forth between various tribes and sultanates. British rule was largely that of studied indifference. They only interfered in the local population if a situation got out of hand. N.J. Ryan states quite accurately that “…the great majority of the population of Singapore was composed of immigrants…[who] all had come to Singapore to make money, preferably in
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the fastest way possible so that they could return to their own countries….” (1963). Owing to high numbers of immigrants, Colonialism, religious difference, and disease, the average Singaporean during British Colonial rule was relatively uneducated, according to British standards. Any libraries or documents that were created, were more often for the benefit of the English speaking British population than for the local people who spoke primarily Chinese and Malay.

The lack of education among the inhabitants of Singapore was not because the British Colonial Government did not want to educate the local population:

*British policy generally in the years before World War II was motivated by two imperatives: first, to maintain the traditional structures of indirect rule, and, second to impart a degree of education to the majority of Malays (excluding the privileged elite) that would keep them happy – almost a symbolic gesture – in their rural retreats, while producing a flow of native subordinate officers to man the lower levels of government service.* (Bedlington, 1978)

The British motives for providing education in general were to keep the local population smart enough to do work without the constant need for being overseen, but pacified so that they did not rebel either. On the other hand, many Singaporeans, and especially the Malays themselves, did not take “advantage” of this educational opportunity, in part because “Most Malays were reluctant to send their children to English schools for fear of religious conversion; many (but not all) held the traditional Islamic belief that the world of materialism should hold no attraction for the true believer…” (Bedlington, 1978). While the British were exploiting what are now the nations of Malaysia, Singapore, Borneo, Sarawak, and others in the area, for their tin, rubber, and manual labor, the local population of Malays took the view that such materialism was impractical and not conducive to spiritual health. The official library in Singapore during Colonial rule was meant for the English speaking British, and the materials collected reflected that population’s usage.

Upon Independence, the library languished for a time, understaffed and rarely used by the local population. Even before Independence, the local Chinese population had developed a series of schools so that Chinese children (whether from China or born in Singapore) could be educated in the ways that Chinese parents were most familiar with (Luyt, 2009). At the same time, the Chinese population also opened a series of reading rooms across the island to provide literature in Chinese, as the official library failed to do so (Luyt, 2009). With the conclusion of World War II and the beginning of Communism and the Cold War, “…much of the Singapore government’s interest in the National Library at that time was a result of the perceived need to challenge the readings rooms by providing multilingual library services” (Luyt, 2009). There was a rapid increase in the acquisition of non-English language materials, especially Chinese, shortly thereafter. The issues of the National Library after Independence were reflected in not just the growth of Singapore as a nation, but also in the universities that developed over time.

While the various libraries in Singapore have all dealt with acquisitions of materials in multiple languages, social change, and from an American standpoint, severe space constraints, a major issue that they still battle in every way is the preservation of their materials, especially in terms of disaster management. Located close to the equator in southeast Asia, Singapore experiences high humidity, monsoons, typhoons, earthquakes, and cyclones, in addition to the everyday potential disasters in the form of burst water pipes, arson, mold outbreaks, and insect infestations.
Personal Context

My volunteer project at the National University of Singapore revolved around the assessment of an information literacy program for advanced high school students that specialized in the sciences. Besides the assessment, making reusable information literacy objects was a primary goal. Having expressed an interest in preservation, I was invited by my colleagues to participate in a disaster tabletop exercise. This is an exercise in which, like a role playing game, the leader of the group starts with a scenario and then updates the issues in the scenario periodically. The scenario presented was how the library and its staff react to the simulated disaster and what issues might need to be addressed so that access to materials continues.

The scenario of the practice round of the disaster tabletop exercise involved a landslide destroying the power transformer for the main library building. Mostly, the response revolved around continuing access to digital collections, relocating library employees to other buildings in order to continue services, and the conditions under which employees would be allowed into the damaged building in order to retrieve personal items, as well as items that were requested by patrons. I was impressed that this concession for the employees had been made, as most disaster plans overlook the personal needs of the employees as evidenced by the statement by Craig, Selzer, and Seymour, when discussing the impact of Hurricane Ivan on the Cayman Islands National Archive: “…the action plan did not sufficiently take into account the personal issues affecting the staff” (2006). While the Cayman Islands National Archive disaster was centered on the catastrophic damage caused by a hurricane, the fact that at least some employee personal concerns were taken into account in the NUS plan is significant. At the conclusion of the exercise, there was a question and answer period.

An inquiry was made, “Is the building off for the three months it takes to repair the power transformer?” After agreeing that it was, it was pointed out that no one would be able to enter the building once it was turned back on because there would be a very active and very serious mold outbreak, as well as perhaps a significant insect infestation. The room was silent. I prodded gently with a follow up comment that the weather conditions in Singapore were extremely humid and that I could smell rising damp in the basement level where the kitchen was. In short, the building wasn’t properly sealed against damp, so moisture was continuously seeping into it. This was exacerbated by the weather in Singapore, which is hot and humid, even in the winter months.

During the hottest months of the year, temperatures are consistently in the 90s°F with humidity as high as 95% (Average weather for Singapore, 2014). Considering these weather conditions, a building that has no climate control for several months, even in the “cool” season when the temperature is in the low 70s°F with a humidity of 61%, would still suffer considerable damage to the paper collections as well as to electronics (Average weather for Singapore, 2014). This also does not take into account the rainy season nor the cyclones that come through the area every year. Weather conditions play a part in the lifecycle of any collection and any library, but some environments are harder on libraries than others. Tropical climates, in particular, create many opportunities for damage, in many different forms, such as mold and insect infestation.

John Dean, in his conference paper, “Environment and passive climate control chiefly in tropical climates,” discusses a variety of climate issues. He states, *In tropical climates, HVAC can have indirect but serious detrimental effects, especially if it cannot be operated on a continuous basis. Generally, HVAC can be very effective in cooling spaces, but in climates with extremely high levels of humidity it does not function well enough as a dehumidifier to ensure effective climate control, and must...*
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often be used in combination with dehumidifiers. This is because the cooler temperature obtained by HVAC can actually increase relative humidity. When HVAC cannot be used on a regular basis --- as when it is shut down at night or weekends for example --- it has the effect of cooling the collection but as the air heats up, condensation is formed on the colder surfaces of books, shelves, and walls resulting in mold growth. (2002)

My personal experience reflected Dean’s statement. The library I worked in had large glass windows in the entryway, and every morning when I came to work, condensation dripped down the glass because the building’s HVAC was turned off every night in order to conserve money. I was also aware that the library had faced a mold outbreak a year or two prior to my arrival, as well as an insect infestation. While both of these things happen in libraries more frequently than anyone wants to admit, the fact they seemed to occur one after another at the NUS Main Library is reason for concern in terms of environmental control. Insofar as access to collections was concerned, the NUS Library, was ready for anything and everything.

This was strongly evidenced by the tabletop exercise where everything was geared towards access to materials, even in the face of disaster. However, NUS and many other university libraries, in the face of skyrocketing costs for land in such a small country, are weeding out paper collections and increasingly going to wholly digital resources. This, in itself, is not a major issue, if the focus of the institution is on current issues and materials. For a country the size of Singapore, it is easier for a student to go to another institution to get materials, and in general, it is easier for national organizations to come together and digitize resources that all institutions are in need of. For example, the main newspaper, The Straits Times, started in 1845 and still being published today, was digitized by the National Library of Singapore with the blessing of Singapore Press Holdings, the parent company of the newspaper (Chellapandi, 2010). With the National Library of Singapore digitizing the newspapers, there is very little reason for an organization like NUS to retain paper copies. Therefore, weeding the materials to create more needed space becomes a priority. The National Library of Singapore is also digitizing many books that, because of age and condition, are not readily accessible to anyone (Chellapandi, 2010). In the tropical environment of Singapore, many of the paper collections are rapidly deteriorating, even with HVAC and other preservation methods in place. By digitizing these collections, access increases dramatically. Should the original completely decay, its digitized image, and the information it contains still exist. Digitization allows for the compression of information and increases accessibility at the same time. In a small country like Singapore, both compression and accessibility are highly valued.

In sum, practical disaster planning and management considerations for NUS Main Library include:

- Having a disaster plan and practicing it, which NUS Main Library does.
- Training staff to spot mold and insect activity.
- Evaluating temperature and humidity swings throughout the building in order to ascertain where more dehumidification is needed.
- Creating a “power saver” type of mode for the building HVAC so that the building is not completely turned off when not in use. While more expensive in terms of energy bills, the long term costs with preservation recovery will more than likely offset it.
- Transferring cultural heritage items to a single library that has better environmental control in order to preserve the materials more rigorously.
- Digitizing at risk materials to preserve access to them.
Singapore is a mixture of cultures and that multiculturalism is highly valued and respected. In a country where nearly everything must be imported, space is at a premium, and the price of goods and services is very high. Turning off buildings at night and digitizing materials is an understandable reaction to high prices and space constraints. In terms of preservation and disaster planning, understanding the entire array of issues that an institution faces is key to creating a preservation and disaster plan that allows for the greatest degree of preservation and accessibility; a balance that is not often easy to attain. Therefore, in Singapore, the preservation and disaster management emphasis revolves mainly around accessibility to materials rather than long-term preservation.

Case Study 2: Uganda

Ugandan History

Like many places in Africa, Uganda was colonized by the British and went through many changes politically, socially, and culturally. Before the coming of the British, the country, now known as Uganda, was largely under control of the Buganda Kingdom, with other tribes occupying the surrounding lands. The British arrived in the 1870s, with missionaries coming to Uganda in the previous decade. The missionaries, while spreading religious views, also worked to bring modern ideas of education, among other things. From the Eurocentric worldview, the people of Uganda were completely uneducated because of their oral traditions and the lack of a written language. However, an educational methodology already existed in that oral tradition, largely in the form of apprenticeship and observation. Unfortunately, the missionaries felt that this was not good enough in terms of creating a broader worldview that would allow Ugandans to have a say in the Eurocentric world around them.

A form of education was needed, designed to mould the character of the students and cultivate their minds in preparation for the wider world in which they were to play their part. To achieve this it was generally felt that a boarding school education was desirable and that while the vernaculars [local language] were the most suitable medium for primary education more advanced studies would require a knowledge of English which was a more mature and stimulating language. (Ingham, 1958)

While it is clear that the missionaries had a very Eurocentric worldview, the Ugandans themselves had a “…main educational objective … to gain a knowledge of English and thereby escape the call of manual labour by obtaining employment as clerks” (Ingham, 1958). Considering that the British were building a railroad line to move raw materials from one place to another through eastern Africa, manual labor was a very real possibility in the lives of many Ugandans. To be educated and a clerk was to have a higher position in society and one with considerably less potential for physical harm. The British formed the Uganda Protectorate in 1894, in part to consolidate their power and interests in East Africa. Uganda never became a formal colony but remained a protectorate; a status that was similar to a colony with only very slight differences, mostly in terms of ownership. In a protectorate, the people retain autonomous rule, whereas in a colony, the people and land are owned by the outside country, in this case, Great Britain. As in Singapore, the British were interested in educating the local population only to a point.

In 1937, Makerere University, an institution of higher education and not just a technical school, was formed in Kampala, the largest city in Uganda. The governor of the time felt that,

The answer that I saw was that my duty lay in promoting to the utmost the development of University education, including of course advanced teacher-training, of technical education and of
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secondary schools, to supply both with teachable pupils in sufficient numbers and of teachable quality. (Mitchell qtd in Ingrams, 1960)

Makerere University would eventually become one of the best universities in East Africa and it started largely because of Governor Mitchell’s drive to create enough teachers to educate the public. His drive was not typically accepted by other officials in his government. The educational backbone of Uganda would continue to grow through the years of the Protectorate until Independence in 1962. The 1960s were a time of political strife within the country and in 1971, there was a military coup led by General Idi Amin. Amin ruled the country until 1979, when war broke out to depose him. The Amin years were marked by extreme violence with a little over a quarter million Ugandans massacred by Amin for their support of opposing forces. During this time, all aspects of Ugandan culture suffered, including education.

The current literacy rate in Uganda is 73.2% which bodes well for the educational system, though there is not much infrastructure beyond that in the form of literacy support (Uganda, 2014). While there is a National Library of Uganda, and several community libraries, development and usage of libraries is limited. There are many small archives throughout Uganda, most of them belonging to churches, but again, these are largely cared for by a single person at each location. In light of this, Kathryn Barrett-Gaines and Lynn Khadiagala’s essay, “What You Need in Uganda’s Archives” (2000), is an enlightening work about the need for human relationships in order to garner access to archival materials, borne out by Derek Peterson’s statement, “Uganda is not a place of faceless institutions and impersonal procedures. There is an intimately human set of connections that need to be developed and nurtured in order for research to take place” (2013).

History of the Uganda National Archive

While the British brought ideas of education with them, they also brought new technologies, foods, cultures, and administrative principles. The British colonial system excelled in administration and the preservation of records. In the Uganda Protectorate, records were initially cared for by clerks. In the early 1950s, there was a decision made that the files, haphazardly stacked in the basement, should be put into some type of order. The mammoth task of ordering the archive fell to Patrick English, who had taken a short course in libraries and archives in Great Britain and then shipped out to Uganda for a two year stint as the archivist in charge (1955). He largely spent his time forming a cataloging system for the materials as well as creating catalogs so that the materials he had just organized could be found more easily. It is a measure of how much material he was working with that he ends his report in The American Archivist by saying, “Perhaps my successors will find that they have more elbow-room to work in because I made a clearing for them” (1955). 1962 brought Independence and a time of upheaval shortly thereafter. It is unclear what happened to the archives in that time. It wasn’t until the 1990s that the archives gained attention once more.

In 1998, Jonathan Rhys-Lewis made the first of three trips to the Uganda National Archive in order to assess the archives and build a conservation lab as well as help overhaul the archives as they currently existed at that time. The project was funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, known as Danida. In his words, “It was in trouble, with piles of rotting papers, dusty and disorganised storage, significant termite damage, wooden shelving and no conservation facilities or equipment” (2000). He defines specifically the changes that were wrought in the archives:

All of the original wooden shelves had been replaced with metal Euro-shelving. As this required the removal of the archives, the whole area was
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redecorated, weak areas consolidated (insect access etc.) and electrics/lighting and water supply upgraded. The termite threat was dealt with, by digging up and destroying the mounds whilst excavating and consolidating the foundations. (2000)

The picture he paints of the archives is a very bleak one indeed before the renovations. He goes on to discuss what was actually installed in terms of preservation materials: “It has a fully equipped preservation workshop, the archives are boxed and numbered on steel shelving, and work has already started on computerized cataloguing” (2000). The Danida project did a lot of good work. Rhys-Lewis ends on a hopeful note: “Every effort was made to ensure that the momentum could be upheld for 3-4 years, based on one full-time conservator” (2000). The reality however was far different.

By 2012, it was clear from the state of the conservation lab, that it had not been in use in many years. While there were still materials available to create encapsulated documents, tools had disappeared, and the maintenance staff used the room as a cool room in which to take a break from the midday sun where they could read the paper in peace. While the files had been rehoused in sturdy boxes, they seemed to have not been dusted and were rarely accessed. In discussion with the assistant archivist, it became clear that she was the last remaining trainee from Rhys-Lewis’ visit. Her position had changed, and she was now more a part of administration rather than working directly with the collections. In the intervening years, between Rhys-Lewis’ visit and my own, there was little outside contact with the archives, other than researchers, both foreign and domestic. A cataloging team from the University of Michigan visited in 2011 and another visited in 2013, though the 2013 team spent the bulk of their time in another archive in Kabale.

Personal Context

In July 2012, I flew from Singapore to Uganda for a six-week cataloging project at the Uganda National Archive in Entebbe, Uganda. I led an international team in cataloging the Secretariat Topical File Collection. The collection was comprised of about 6,900 files in 169 boxes. The initial cataloging took four weeks with a fifth week spent checking our work. I spent the sixth week writing several reports, running technical support on the equipment in the UNA such as running updates and virus scans on computers, developing user policies, and creating an environmental monitoring program. While my primary goal was to catalog the Secretariat Topical File Collection, preservation and disaster management quickly became a major underlying goal as I realized the condition the archives were in. The issues that the UNA face are not insignificant in terms of the environment, economics, and politics.

The archive has been plagued by termites, snakes, and lack of environmental control over the entire time that it has been in operation. As Uganda sits on the equator, the temperature variances range between 65°F to 81°F throughout the year (Average weather for Entebbe, Uganda, 2014). The humidity ranges from 47% to 100%, meaning that the average humidity is relatively high (Average weather for Entebbe, Uganda, 2014). Bankole, paraphrasing Mwieriwa, states, “…all the factors that cause paper deterioration: physical (acid, heat, humidity, light), biological (moulds, insects, rodents), and careless handling methods are more pronounced in Africa than elsewhere in the world” (2010). All of these factors are certainly present in the UNA. What has assisted the archive significantly is the fact that it is located in the basement of the National Agricultural Research Organization. The basement location has helped to even out the temperature and humidity swings in ways that being above ground would not. On the other hand, because the archive is located underground, relatively undisturbed, and cool, it
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is a perfect place for termites and snakes. Termites will destroy a collection for nesting material. The snakes are not nearly as much of a threat to the collections as the termites are, however the snakes are often venomous, with varieties such as asps, cobras, and mambas living in the immediate area.

The termite damage was not extensive in 2012. However, there was evidence of past infestations. Bankole accurately describes the danger of termites; they “. . . are capable of devouring a whole library, and could do so [more] rapidly and so completely than the librarian becomes aware” (2010). The archive is irregularly treated with insecticides, typically when there is an infestation. Bankole goes on to elucidate, “Insecticide formulations can be used to kill insects but the drawbacks are that it could be harmful to man if regulations are not properly followed and it can cause damaging reactions with paper artefacts” (2010). Again, although this was actively observed as the materials were worked with in the archives. Before departing for Uganda, I met with the leader of the 2011 University of Michigan team, who mentioned that using a facemask and gloves while working in the archive might be a good idea. It was easy to feel dirt, mold, and more than likely insecticide, on boxes and documents. Everyone was admonished not to touch their faces while working with the materials, to always wash their hands before lunch, and at the end of the day. Although insecticide is used with the best of intentions, because of limited budgets and personnel, the archive has not been cleaned thoroughly after insecticide use. Insects, and snakes are only two of the worries that the UNA faces. With a higher humidity, staples and pins within files have rusted and are slowly eating away the paper. Again, the process is slowed down because the collections are in the basement, but removing the staples and pins would help stabilize the materials. Generally speaking, however, the archives are in fairly decent shape, considering their location. The files are in boxes and are numbered. A staff, dedicated to upkeep and maintenance, do a good job with the few resources that they have.

While there could be a great many changes made to the archive to extend its longevity, such as covering the windows to prevent light from entering, a thorough dusting, and cleaning the storage room in the back, there are greater concerns in terms of archival access and preservation. As there are no working photocopiers, researchers will often take materials from the archives and not return them. A major issue for preservation, other than the obvious lack of environmental control, is the complete absence of established policies in terms of retention and disposition. Even user policies have not been written down.

Policies help track what is permissible and what is not. At the moment, the UNA staff act as gatekeepers to the information. For example, there is a sealed vault in the archives. The assistant archivist stated it was materials from the regime of Idi Amin, but there was no catalog for those materials. There is an indefinite embargo on the materials. Embargoing materials is not uncommon, and some embargoes can last for decades depending on the nature of the material. However, to say that there is an indefinite embargo on something seems extreme, especially in the face of no written policy about the collections in the vault, and because there is no catalog of what those collections contain.

While there are no local policies in place that govern what goes on at the UNA, there are active federal policies. The National Records and Archives Act of 2001 gives the UNA authority over all government records, including electronic ones. In light of the almost 150 years of written records, there is no way that the current archive, which can only accommodate 5,700 linear feet, can hold all of that material (Pionke, 2012). Most of the paper records are housed in the individual departments that created them, but even there, space is starting to run short. In terms of electronic records, Dr. David Luyombya points out that there is “… no evidence to suggest that the Uganda National
Archives is monitoring this aspect” (2011). It is not that the UNA does not wish to do a thorough job. Instead, unlike archives in other African countries, the UNA is still a part of the government and exists at the government’s whim. Based on the political turmoil that still plagues the country, as well as the high level of corruption present, in order for the UNA to survive at all, it must walk a fine line between doing the job and survival, hence the indefinite embargo on the materials from Amin’s regime, for instance. The UNA continues to fight for its existence by accepting volunteer help, like the summer volunteer project. There is also an awareness that the UNA really needs its own purpose-built structure, and the UNA staff continue to talk about it to those in power as the opportunity arises.

Since at least the 1990s, there has been a plan to create an individual building for the UNA and get it out of the basement of National Agricultural Research Organization. As of 2012, while land had been set aside for the building, the ground had not been broken to begin construction. In fact, Jonathan Rhys-Lewis, the archivist who had led the Danida funded project to create a conservation lab, states in reference to a shift in scope for the Danida project,

*Danida had awarded this project [conservation work at the UNA] to a consultancy firm, K-2 Consult, who assessed the position, and realising that the proposed building, planned for Kampala, would not be completed within 2 – 3 years, decided that the focus had to be changed.* (2000)

Undoubtedly, the reasons for the building not coming to fruition are various. A major issue in Uganda is government corruption. According to Transparency International, for 2013, Uganda scored a 26 out of 100 in terms of corruption where the lower the score, the more corrupt a country is (Country Profile: Uganda, 2014). In terms of rank, Uganda is ranked at 140 out of 177 countries (Country Profile: Uganda, 2014). Uganda is not the most corrupt country in Africa, but its level of corruption precludes quick and easy changes to infrastructure. This is amply illustrated by the fact that a designated archives building has still not been built, more than a decade after it was originally proposed.

In order to help the archive start to build a coherent funding and building argument, I requested that a friend, who was visiting from America, bring some extra watch sized batteries that would fit in a thermo-hygrometer that the archive possessed from the Danida time period. Taking a cue from Roosa, that using data loggers to provide evidence and “collegial discussion between preservation professionals and facilities specialists, rather than as evidence of negligence” (2002) would help build an effective argument for a building, I showed the UNA staff how to use the thermo-hygrometer and made a quick and easy worksheet that they could fill in. The program allows the UNA to gather hard data on temperature and humidity swings. While this data alone will not persuade the powers that be into monetary allocations, perhaps it will help in a small way to develop a more robust argument that a building is desperately needed.

The fact that the UNA has survived for as long as it has, from the benign neglect that has largely ruled its existence, is impressive. Considering the unique situation the archive is in -- part of the government, under-funded, under-staffed, and struggling to fulfill its mission -- the UNA actually does very well. Volunteer efforts have helped catalog and somewhat stabilize the collection. However, there is certainly more work to be done. For instance, there is no disaster plan in place and should a disaster occur, for example, a fire, it is doubtful that the archive would survive. There has been no training about disaster management, and the chemical extinguishers expired in 2002. Potential disaster scenarios include war, terrorist attack, flood, insect infestation, mold, rodent infestation, fire, theft, closing the archive for political reasons, and defunding. Aziagba and Edet point out that Uganda is not alone in
its struggle with disaster management and that challenges exist continent wide:

Artificial or man-made disasters that have affected West African universities include community clash destruction, rioting, malicious damage to materials, negligence, and power surge/failure. Whenever a disaster has struck a library, there has been a long delay before normal library services are resumed. (2008)

Their article is specific to West Africa, though their observations and recommendations could be applied to elsewhere in Africa, including Uganda. While a robust list of recommendations would take up several pages, realistically, the position of the archive is a precarious one, as outlined previously. Therefore, small adjustments to enhance preservation and disaster management should be made. These could include:

- Thoroughly dusting the archive and creating a schedule for upkeep.
- Creating a disaster plan that includes evacuation of persons in the archive as well as a phone tree for current staff.
- Cleaning up and breaking down the boxes in the back room to deter rodents and insects.
- Using some of the broken down boxes to cover the windows for better light control.
- Continuing the data collection of temperature and humidity readings in order to help bolster arguments for more resources.
- Placing buckets of sand in strategic locations to supplement the use of fire extinguishers which may not activate when used.
- Developing and adhering to user policies and staff workflows.

With limited resources available, small changes are the only changes that more than likely can be made until the financial and political situation changes. However, those small changes could certainly mean the difference in decades of life for the collections in the archive. Likewise, in terms of disaster planning and management, even just having a serious discussion about what to do should the government close down or a fire break out, would be beneficial for the UNA. Another positive element that should be continued is to accept volunteer assistance in order to keep the archive running and moving toward a more developed and stable position.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

A more in-depth and formalized study of both of these institutions as well as institutions of similar size and collections should be done. This study should be international in scope, and focus on countries where preservation and disaster management are problematic at best, and non-existent at worst.

CONCLUSION

The National University of Singapore and the Uganda National Archive both face a very different set of circumstances. Yet, in many ways, they are similar. Both institutions are seeking to not only preserve the materials they have, but make them available to the people who want to use them. At NUS, the emphasis is strongly on access, to the point that preservation suffers in some ways because of monetary constraints and a deep focus on access to collections. At the UNA, a whole host of issues impedes the growth of the archive, including political and financial issues, and it endures despite benign neglect and perceived political indifference. In terms of disaster management, both institutions have unique concerns based on their physical, social, political, and economic environments. The UNA would suffer catastrophic losses should a major disaster befall it, and some
disaster planning, even on a very general level, would go a long way to alleviate some of the potential disaster scenarios that could occur. NUS, on the other hand, while having more money, has an institutional focus on collection access that seems to largely preclude disaster planning for the collections. The NUS disaster plan is thoughtful and well developed for continuing access and for preserving human life, but could use some more consideration in terms of protecting the physical materials that NUS currently owns. Ultimately, both institutions can only be evaluated on that which they are and what they do.

In the film Chocolat, the young pastor Pére Henri says, “I think we can’t go around measuring our goodness by what we don’t do. By what we deny ourselves, what we resist, and who we exclude. I think we’ve got to measure goodness by what we embrace, what we create and who we include” (Blomquist, 2000). While Pére is talking about humanity, the idea could just as easily be applied to heritage institutions like NUS and the UNA. What do we include and exclude in our heritage collections and why? How do we preserve items of interest and insure access to materials over the short and long term? What do we prioritize, especially in the face of unique circumstances and potential disaster?

Smith makes a medical connection when she says,

> Senile dementia, amnesia, and Alzheimer’s are examples of what happens when the remembering system as a whole does not work because constituent parts begin to fail. In the case of Alzheimer’s, we can point to physical holes in parts of the brain that may account for some of the failure to remember information and attach the appropriate affect to it. In the historical fabric of any culture there will be such holes as well, and there we find confusion, confabulation, loss of identity and that of purpose. (2007)

Archives and libraries, like brain exercises for the memory impaired, are designed to help fight that memory loss. While we, in the library world, might argue back and forth about how to go about preserving the human record, we do keep it, for as long as we can, in the ways that make the most sense at the time, in the places that we are.

**REFERENCES**


Disaster is in the Eye of the Beholder


**ADDITIONAL READING**


Eastwood, T., & MacNeil, H. (Eds.), *Currents in Archival Thinking*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC CLIO.


**KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS**

**Benign Neglect:** A state in which cultural institutions do very little to actively preserve the collections that they house.

**Context:** The surrounding situation of an event, idea, location, situation, etc.

**Disaster:** Something that goes catastrophically and unexpectedly wrong and impacts the collections/building of a library or archive.

**Embargo:** Whereupon an item or collection is kept sealed and unavailable until a predetermined amount of time has passed.

**Insecticide:** A chemical compound that can kill insects.

**Mold:** A fungus that can grow on anything organic. Mold can be harmful to humans depending on the type and is harmful to paper.

**Rising Damp:** The heavier humidity level in basements, typically caused by improperly sealed foundations or a lack of damp proofing applied to the outside of the foundation.

**Tabletop Exercise:** An exercise in which a scenario is verbally played out among a group of people with one person adding predetermined material to the scenario at preset times.