

PRESERVING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE: A CASE STUDY OF THE AUDIOVISUAL ARCHIVES OF THE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR AFRICAN MUSIC AND DANCE (ICAMD)

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ABSTRACT

Archives are part of our cultural heritage. Acquiring, processing and providing access to recorded information are some the reasons why archival institutions exist. The functions of the ICAMD archives are no different. It is an audiovisual archive with collections of African music and dance dating back to the 1950s. That this heritage is worth preserving is the theme of this study. The state-of-the art in the preservation of audio and video recordings are investigated, problems which come to light discussed and feasible solutions prescribed. Face-to-face interview and observation were the instruments considered appropriate for the study. The study revealed that while some positive arrangements are in place, current preservation effort by the ICAMD lacks focus and coordinated planning. A lot more needs to be done by way of providing the necessary resources and the appropriate facilities supported by comprehensive institutional policies on acquisitions and access.

INTRODUCTION

Oral sources have a significant place in the realms of information, communication, research and most importantly cultural documentation. In the sphere of cultural documentation such collections contain irreplaceable information of unique historical content. One of the main features of the Ghanaian culture is the tradition where communication as well as preservation of cultural information is primarily transmitted through oral forms. As a result, the role of writing has been marginal in the preservation of knowledge of our Ghanaian culture and heritage. Although this can be said to be changing given the availability of written records of Ghanaian history, "large amounts of information continue to be carried in the memories of participants in many important events". (Alemna, 1992:423). The need to document important aspects of Ghanaian culture is now more pressing than ever. The world is becoming increasingly globalized and globalization is said to be characterized by "...the diffusion and displacement of not only consumer products but also ... socio cultural symbols and images in new settings" (Bisbergen 2000:7). This means that recording essential aspects of the culture of a people will help increase knowledge about that culture world-wide. Documenting the culture of a people would help preserve that knowledge for posterity. It is primarily for this reason that the International Centre for African Music and Dance (ICAMD) was established in 1992/1993 with the assistance of the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation and Swedish International Development

Authority. The Center is equipped with a library and archives with collections of audiovisual materials, manuscripts, transcripts and books. If these materials and the information they contain are needed for the indefinite future, then their preservation requires active consideration. This is what the study is about.

THE VALUE OF ORAL INFORMATION AS A HISTORICAL SOURCE

There is much debate among scholars as to the value, which should be placed on oral sources of information as a historical source. Two divergent opinions can be drawn; those who admit oral sources have deficiencies yet have value as a historical source and those who totally reject them. While Vansina, (1985:26) admits that there are limitations to oral sources he views oral traditions as a source without which very little can be known about large parts of the world. He makes the observation that 'many African civilizations were to a great extent civilizations of the spoken word'. Mazikana and Moss (1986) also share this opinion when they remark that while oral sources may have drawbacks as historical sources they are by no means inferior. Ngcōngoo (1997:3) reinforces these views; 'It is a myth that history would merely begin with the activities of the white man in Africa'. Gilder (1999:1) emphasized the value of oral sources for documenting the history of South Africa:

The need to collect oral history from previously disadvantaged members of the South African society speak for itself. It is necessary to do so for redress and also because, for some communities written sources do not exist. It will be possible to supplement written sources, where available, with oral history, and ultimately to be in a position to reconstruct the past experience of the previously marginalized communities of South Africa.

However, not all scholars take this compromising stand. Murdoch (1959:43) asserts emphatically that oral sources '... are undependable much beyond the personal recollection of the living informants'. His utter contempt for such source is manifest when he says they are actually '... information that is virtually useless.'

Scholars in the camp of Murdock have faith in written records. The implication is that such sources are unbiased and reflect actual happenings. But Bishop (1998) disputes this point and argues that written sources are not free from biases either. He gives the instance of business records painting a picture somewhat totally different from the true course of events – boardroom squabbles and disagreements. Also, an optimistic view of the organization's financial situation may be circulated in order to put shareholders' minds at rest. All these actions remove the written records still further from what really happened.

Furthermore, Alemna (1992) argues, “myths (a component in oral traditions) are not products of sheer invention. The values expressed in traditions, the structures delineated and the idioms and models used are all cultural products of history. Oral traditions exist within an oral mode of thought, which regardless of how irrational it may appear is rational and coherent when understood in its own terms.”

Supporting the value of oral source to documenting histories Alebgeleye (1985:421) emphasized that ‘if we are to have information about all communities in Africa, particularly outside the pale of early European influence, then oral data have to be collected aggressively and vigorously from the surviving polyhistor and polymaths in these countries’. To a large extent scholars agree that while oral recollections will not supplant written records as primary documents, the combination of oral and written sources should enhance the validity of evidence with each as a check on the other.

THE CASE STUDY

The ICAMD

The ICAMD operates as semi-autonomous unit within the School of Performing Arts, which has separate departments of Music, Dance and Theatre Arts. The Centre facilitates interaction among visiting scholars, artists, students and staff in their areas of research and interests. It aims primarily to promote international scholarship and creativity in African music and dance. In this respect, the Center focuses on developing materials and resources that would make it a conference and study center, a base for the dissemination of knowledge and materials about African music and dance that meet the needs of scholars, research students and creative artists.

The Center’s equipment includes facilities for recording on DAT audio cassettes as well as dubbing reel to reel tapes, audio and video cassettes. A public address system and sound amplifier/mixer are available for conferences and performances. Still cameras, video recorders, computers, printers and colour scanner enable documentation and preservation of research.

Aim of the Study

The goal of this study is modest: it documents the preservation efforts and practices of ICAMD audiovisual archives. Interviewing all two members of staff of the archives provided data for this study. Interviews were reinforced by observation. Relevant secondary sources were also consulted.

Archives are part of the information industry. Major functions with respect to the management of information include acquisition, processing, storage and housing,

provision of access and preservation. The data collected for the study were analyzed and presented under these headings.

FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY

The Collections / Acquisitions of the ICAMD

The audiovisual collection of the ICAMD cover a wide range of materials collected over the past 50 years. Collection began in the University of Ghana long before the Center was established in the early 1990s. Collections at this time were stored at the Institute of African Studies.

The 1950s was a period of intense recording and collecting activity. It is reported that research initiative spearheaded by Professor J.H. Nketia during this period resulted in the collection of over 600 reel to reel tape recordings of traditional music from various parts of Ghana. Additional to this, 500 reel-to-reel tapes were received as donations from foreign scholars who came to conduct research in Ghana

The core of the music and dance collection during this period was acquired from various sources. This includes commercial records available locally and samples of those issued by the International Library of African Music in South Africa, Musée de l'Homme, Odra and other companies. This core collection was subsequently catalogued and established in the 1970s as archives of the Institute of African Studies. All the recording on reel-to-reel tapes has subsequently been dubbed on cassettes and digital audio tapes, (DAT).

Donations come from various sources; from individuals, organizations and collaborative research efforts. Items from individuals include the *Mary Seavoy* Collection (of field tapes, records, videos, slides, photographs). From the British Sound Archives comes a cassette dubbing of Rattray's cylinder recordings of *atumpang* (drum language) *bragoro* (puberty songs) made in the 1920's. Other contributions from individuals include field recordings made at Nandom and Sisaala, Lambushie and parts of Burkina Faso, and a video version of a silent film at the Smithsonian Institution made in the 1920s by Herskovits in Asokore in Ghana.

The archives has also benefited from recorded materials from Unesco Collections, Tervaven Museum and, gifts from scholars from Zimbabwe and Nigeria. A very important source of material for the archives is the Culture of African Network (CAN) project. This project provides the opportunity for participating countries – Ghana, Mali, Ethiopia, Sudan, Mozambique and South Africa – to share their holding through intranet connectivity. This project, it is reported, has discontinued.

The collections are rich and diverse, ranging from performances to field recordings including unique ethnographic data, spoken word, and rare items of local and

national significance. Since the acquisition of the core materials in the 1950s and 1960s the archival holdings of the ICAMD have more than doubled in size.

The current holdings of the archives include:

- 1150 audiocassettes. A greater proportion of this is on popular music, mostly by local musicians.
- 40 recordings on DAT
- 260 VHS tapes made up of 80 VHS commercial recordings of music, and dance and 184 VHS tapes of conferences, workshops and other events covered by the center.
- 110 compact disc recordings on traditional and popular music, and western classical and popular music.
- 260 VHS tapes comprising 80 VHS commercial recordings of music and dance and 184 VHS tapes of conferences workshops and other events covered by the centre
- 30 reel-to-reel tapes of old traditional highlife.

The archive appears to have no coherent acquisition policy. It seems to take whatever it is offered. The absence of a coherent acquisition policy is indicative of the fact that there has been little or no systematic planning devoted to acquiring materials for the archives. This situation seems contrary to good statement of purpose for the archives. The ICAMD archives exists primarily to collect, organize, describe, preserve and make available for purposes of reference and research its collection, but the generally lukewarm attitude to the present archival operation does not support such a mission. Acquisition policy it has been observed provides the backbone around which an archival institution can acquire comprehensive holdings in a planned, coordinated and systematic manner. (Schwirtlich and Reed, 1993). There is a lot to be gained by the ICAMD for drawing up such a policy; it will not only provide a focus for the collection of sources but also give donors a ready reference to consult and, decide on materials relevant for the archives. In this respect the policy becomes a reference for staff when assessing potential acquisitions and for donors looking for suitable repository.

ARRANGEMENT AND DESCRIPTION

Once collections are in the custody of archivists the next step is to handle them professionally. The collection need to be arranged and described before they are made accessible to future users, whether these users are researchers, browsers, those with commercial concern to reuse the material or interested members of the general public. As Kitching (1999:2) rightly observes "it is sound principle to get your memory in good shape before you try to use it".

It emerged from the study that, while the archives has growing collections of audiovisual materials the current methods of cataloguing and housing these materials are not entirely satisfactory. The ICAMD, archives lack a comprehensive descriptive database of its collections based on established standards, though the advantages of such a catalogue should be manifest. What exists is an in-house cataloguing system developed by the staff and understood by them only. Without formal training in archives administration, the archives staff lacks the professional competence to provide the kind of archival finding aids, which would facilitate easy access to holdings. This, notwithstanding, the staff deserves commendation for designing a system that seems to be supporting the archives in the interim. It must be emphasized, however, that as collections increase and become more complex due to their diverse sources, their nature and content, a comprehensive catalogue and other archival finding aids like the Descriptive List, Inventory and the Guide would be required to provide an efficient and effective retrieval function.

The collection of the ICAMD support education and research and to some extent supplements the academic curriculum of the School of Performing Arts. Therefore it is important that the ICAMD emphasize cataloguing access as a very high priority.

At present over 600 audio and video recordings have not been catalogued, thus inhibiting accessibility. If action is not taken to ensure that collections are processed and catalogued promptly the purpose of the ICAMD archival effort would be defeated.

The Preservation Concerns of Audio and Video Recordings

The life span during which audiovisual materials are useable could be affected by all the factors that cause damage to traditional library and archival collection. Kastaly (1999.1) identifies three main causes of damage that may lead to loss of library and archives collections. These are:

- The nature of the material, including what they are made from, how they deteriorate naturally, what accelerates or retards their deterioration and their format.
- The physical environment, which can have very severe effects on library and archival material. Environmental factors include heat, humidity, light air pollution, insects and moulds and possible natural disasters. The building and storage systems within it are also part of the physical environment.
- Human environment (human activities such as poor handling, heavy use, etc.).

Although audio and videotapes/cassettes are electronic media, they possess a physical dimension that makes them vulnerable to deterioration. Like traditional library and archival material the physical properties of audio and videotape/cassettes consist of organic materials that degrade under the influences of heat, moisture and pollutant gases. In archives, control of storage conditions has rightfully, become a core strategy to prolong the useful life of audio and videotapes/cassettes. As these media age, they begin to break down chemically until the point is reached, where they are no longer capable of being tracked for satisfactory playback and transfer to other format. How

and when this occurs depends of several factors, the most important being time in storage and exposure to heat, moisture and pollutant gasses.

The chemical breakdown of audio and videotape binders due to hydrolysis has been well documented. (Harvey 1993). The binder's hygroscopic tendency to absorb atmospheric moisture releases acids and alcohol products or catalyst that hastens the tapes destruction. Elevated humidity and high temperatures accelerate the process while drier and cooler conditions slow them down. Videotapes/cassettes kept in hot and humid climates have little chance of longterm survival unless placed in careful controlled storage conditions. (Schuller, 1992).

AN OVERVIEW OF THE PRESERVATION EFFORTS OF THE ICAMD ARCHIVES

1. Preservation and Security (Environmental Issues)

Staff reported that preservation activities have been limited due to scarcity of resources but they do their best within the constraints of resources available to observe basic preservation practices. This includes among other things observing good housekeeping procedures. Aware of the conditions that favour insect and rodent infestation of library and archival storage facilities, the archivists ensure that the storage area is always kept clean and tidy. By dusting and cleaning the repository dirt and dust is removed and incipient attacks by insect detected and treated. With respect to housekeeping practices, no evidence of bad practice or neglect was found.

Temperature and humidity conditions during long term storage of library and archival materials have significant impact on their preservation., and as Clement (1987) has noted there is scientific evidence to show that the lower the temperature and humidity the longer documents would retain their strength and appearance. Growth of biological agents is also increasingly discouraged as temperature and relative humidity levels are reduced. Schuller (1992) reports that the ideal storage condition for video and audiotape/cassettes is a constant storage temperature of 0° Celsius with fluctuations not exceeding +/-1° and a relative humidity of 30-40% with minimal fluctuations of +/- 5 % for the tropics. Harvey (1993) also notes that once air conditioning is installed it should run 24 hours a day, seven days a week or its good effect is undone.

The study reveals that the ICAMD archives had no real control over temperatures let alone humidity: The ICAMD has no purpose-built archival repository. The current storage area has a multi purpose use; the facility houses the office of the archivists and the reception area where staff attend to clients' request. The multi-purpose use of the repository area has thwarted all efforts by the staff to maintain stable temperature and humidity as repository doors are left open during office hours and air conditioners switched off after close of work.

This situation confirms an observation made by Clement (1987) that 'control of environmental conditions (temperature, humidity, light, atmospheric pollution) is very much tied up with the type of buildings in which libraries and archives are housed, the extent to which the buildings were purpose-built or adapted...' It must also be pointed out that air conditioning come with cost implication. For a small archives like that of the ICAMD, good quality fans to keep the air moving and humidifiers and dehumidifiers to regulate the relative humidity is a far cheaper option if air conditioning is beyond the resources of the archives.

There was evidence of an attempt to prevent sun light from entering the repository by the use of opaque window blinds. But while care has been taken to install fluorescent light with low wattage, the tubes are left without any special ultra violet absorbing filters such as plastic shades to filter out the harmful ultra violet rays of the light.

Harvey (1993) makes the point that security is the first line of defence for protection of archival holdings – as a safeguard against theft, fire and other unauthorized access. The ICAMD repository is secured against theft or intrusion by a 24-hour security service and the use of high quality locks and doors. The repository has fire extinguishers but would be better if either a smoke detector or a heat sensor is added.

These problems are not beyond the resources of the archives to rectify. Much can be done as funds become available to refurbish the storage area for the purpose for which it was intended.

2. Deterioration

Besides environmental hazards many things can go wrong with audio and videotapes/ cassettes that will prevent completely successful playback or in the worse case result in catastrophic failure.

Causes are often traced to careless and indifferent handling of poorly maintained equipment, in other words problems that can be corrected through training and implementing appropriate procedures

A planned approach towards physical inspection of tapes is a key measure in preventive activities. Physical inspection includes a more or less automated or manual evaluation of tapes to examine such imperfections as wrinkles, scratches cracking, creases, shrinkage and uneven wind and so on.

While the ICAMD has a scheduled rewind exercise of the video and audiotapes/ cassettes to check such physical defects, inadequate staff has rendered this rather useful exercise fruitless.

Some fading has been noticed by the staff in some of the collection, indicating the need for copying the items or re-formatting them. Copying involves straight forward dubbing or reproduction of a tape, as in making reference copy for routine use or to service another format. Re-formatting is converting the original to an updated format. Physical inspection would need to be arranged by the archives with a view to identifying and isolating collection which need reformatting, copying or restoration. Since the ICAMD has no plans at the moment for such an adventure, sustained improved storage conditions are required to prolong the useful life of the holdings.

USE OF MATERIALS

Access to the materials in the ICAMD archives give scholars a rich array of data that may be approached from their respective research stances. The primary users represent the disciplines of music, dance, sociology anthropology, African history ethnomusicology among others.

The users include students and faculty. Besides, an expanding group of international scholars interested in African music and dance also use materials from the ICAMD archives. Accurate records on usage were not available at the but examples have been documented: Some researchers have come from the United States of America, United Kingdom, Germany, and the Netherlands and a number of African countries.

Despite some positive initiatives to promote preservation by the archives, a well-planned and coordinated preservation plan for the present and future seems lacking. The failure is rooted in a certain reluctance to establish a formal archival programme that take into account the preservation needs of the holdings.

CONCLUSION

All physical formats for preserving information are subject to decay over time even under ideal conditions. What archivists can do as custodians of such materials is to minimize or at best retard their rate of deterioration. Leary (1988) makes the observation that "audiovisual records are generally more perishable than paper and their preservation cost per unit are also high". This notwithstanding, the ICAMD must commit itself to addressing the preservation concerns of its holdings within the constraints of its resources, however limited.

Hiring professional archivists or training existing staff; providing the required environmental conditions by refurbishing the archival facility; establishing a mission for the archives programme are all essential tasks that need to be addressed by the ICAMD.

There are other issues which also require attention: there is need for coherent policy which takes into account issues of acquisition, preservation and access; and adequate financial support if the archival programme is to meet the objectives of the ICAMD effectively.

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