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Resources on Caribbean Cultural Identity: Documentation, Preservation and Access

Jennifer M. Joseph and
Joan Vacianna

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ABSTRACT

Documenting the cultural and social history of a people is one of the key ways in which cultural identity is preserved and recorded for posterity. Libraries in the Caribbean and the Americas play a vital role in this process by gathering, preserving and disseminating this information to ensure that the cultural identity of the small island states of the Caribbean is not only well safeguarded, but also accessible. This paper identifies and examines the efforts undertaken by the libraries of The University of the West Indies at St. Augustine and Mona to document and provide access to researchers, regionally and internationally. The paper presents issues related to the digitization of these traditional materials and explains the libraries' obligation to guarantee the ongoing preservation of and access to these original heritage resources which are of regional importance.

History

The University of the West Indies is an autonomous regional institution supported by and serving fifteen (15) countries in the English speaking Caribbean. Founded as a college of the University of London in 1948, the first campus was established at Mona in Jamaica. The second came into being in 1960 when The Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture in Trinidad became the St. Augustine campus. The institution achieved independent university status in 1962 and in the following year, the Cave Hill campus was established in Barbados. In addition, to the three major campuses, there are twelve (12) centres in the other contributing territories and together these are now known as the "Open Campus."

Definition of the West Indies

For the purposes of collection development, the West Indies was, and still is, defined as all the islands in the Caribbean as well as those territories on the South American mainland which were colonized by Great Britain, Spain, France and Holland. Hence, Belize, British

and French Guyana and Honduras fall within the ambit of the University's collection development policy.

The islands of the Caribbean, because of the variety of influences through colonization have a rich and diverse cultural history. The customs, legends and beliefs of the Caribbean people have originated from a variety of cultures. Unlike the developed world, there has not been a major emphasis placed on recording, collecting and preserving data that would provide the basis for research. Libraries in the region have seen the importance and have taken up the challenge and their responsibility to collect, organize, disseminate and preserve the nations' heritage. The libraries of The University of the West Indies and the national libraries have become the leaders in this regard.

From the onset, the University Libraries embarked on a mission to build a strong collection of West Indian material through purchases and donations. However, great emphasis was placed on the acquisition of rare material illustrative of the social and cultural history of the West Indies.

Early efforts at collection building

Kenneth Ingram (1994) describes the University's pioneer efforts to build a collection of material reflecting the cultural and historical heritage of the region. One of the earliest collections acquired in the Library in Jamaica was that of Noel Deerr, who spent many years working in the sugar industry in Demarara and became a world famous authority on sugar. The Deerr collection included books and documents relating to sugar, the history of the West Indies and slavery. Another of the foundation collections was that of Sir Henry Alfred Alford Nicholls, a specialist in tropical medicine from Dominica. This included rare material on the Eastern Caribbean such as John Lowndes' *The Coffee Planter* (1807) and Descourtilz's *Flore Medicale des Antilles* (1821) . The Harry Vendryes collection of books, pamphlets maps and journals relating to the West Indies in general as well as to individual islands and including Sir Hans Sloane's *A Voyage to the Islands of Madera, Neives, St Christopher's and Jamaica 1707-1725* also formed a part of the foundation collections

Preservation

In these early years, The University received a number of official publications from the Governments of Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and Spanish speaking Cuba. Other government publications were salvaged from various official printing offices throughout the region. For the most part, these official publications had not been properly stored to withstand the tropical climatic conditions. The University however, being aware of the great cultural and scholarly significance of the material, took corrective measures to restore the documents and house them appropriately so that they could be preserved and made accessible for the benefit of present and future generations.

Repatriation

In the case of the English speaking territories, many of the primary documents relating to their history were held in repositories in Britain and to a lesser extent in North America. The importance of repatriating these documents was realized and The University obtained funds from the Rockefeller Foundation and the European Union to bring them back to the West Indies (Vacianna 2002) Out of this grew a very rich microform collection of estate papers; documents relating to the work of the church in the region; material pertaining to slavery and its aftermath and other heritage and cultural material.

Regional Cooperative Projects

At the same time there were various regional cooperative projects to collect, preserve and disseminate information about the collections. John Veenstra (1973) describes the projects undertaken first by UNESCO and later by the University of Florida to establish a cooperative microfilm project for the preservation of cultural and heritage material housed in Caribbean Libraries. Alma Jordan (1973) explains how the Universities and Research Institutes in the region worked together to implement a scheme for cooperative national acquisitions in the Caribbean. Access was provided through the various cooperative bibliographic and indexing projects described by Irene Zimmerman (1973). These measures did much to enhance the acquisition, preservation and provision of access to Caribbean cultural material and these early schemes gave rise to the SALALM – Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials as well as ACURIL – Association of Caribbean Research and Institutional Libraries. These two associations are still very active today.

Composition of the Collections

Over the years, the collections of the Libraries which make up The University of the West Indies have continued to grow with each reflecting the peculiar aspects of the culture and heritage of its island home. On the Mona Campus in Jamaica, the collection now includes rare maps, historical manuscripts, journals and newspapers, a microform collection and the manuscripts of some famous West Indian literary writers such as Derek Walcott and Roger Mais among others. Mona has also embarked on a “Caribbean Leaders Collection” and to date, the papers and documents of two former Prime Ministers and the artifacts of another have been acquired. Mona library’s latest acquisition is the collection, including all the manuscripts, of the late Professor Richard Sheridan, eminent economic historian who wrote extensively on West Indian history.

The St. Augustine Campus Main Library is a major repository of unique Caribbean materials which reflect broad aspects of Caribbean culture and more specifically, the life and culture of Trinidad and Tobago. Like the Mona Campus, St. Augustine’s collection is in all formats and has been established to preserve and provide primary information for current and future researchers. The West Indiana and Special Collections Division, inter alia, has ninety-three special collections which are primarily unpublished source materials. These collections include the papers of the country’s first Prime Minister - Dr. Eric Williams, Nobel Laureate - Derek Walcott and those of other significant personalities. These collections include photographs, postcards and paintings.

The Oral History Collections

In 1981, the library at the St. Augustine Campus began an oral history project which has become known as OPreP –the Oral and Pictorial Records Programme. This project was initiated by the then Campus Librarian who recognized the need to strengthen historical sources of information through direct interviews with persons who had lived through major events in the life of Trinidad and Tobago. Several areas were identified at the start of the program and efforts have been made to interview persons with experience and knowledge of various aspects of the country’s cultural and social history. Some of these areas include the development of steelband, calypso and the other art forms; the University; the labour disturbances etc. The vision of OPreP was also to collect photographs of buildings and various sites which have an historical significance.

Interviews are taped and then transcribed into a hard copy. These transcribed sessions have been published in the form of a newsletter since March 1988 first on a quarterly basis and more recently, twice per year (June and December). The newsletter is now available online via the library’s website.

At the Mona Campus, the Social History Project which is similar to OPreP, has been spearheaded by the Department of History and is located in various departments and centres on the Campus. Interviews have been conducted on Jamaica’s culture and lifestyle, its folklore and The Mona Library therefore maintains a relatively small collection of audiotapes and cassettes which document Jamaica’s cultural history. (Rouse-Jones and Brown (2000).

Status of Digitization Projects

Much of the material housed at the University of the West Indies needs to be digitized and made globally available. Digitization improves and widens access to information, facilitating global access for persons interested in conducting research on our unique Caribbean islands. In addition, digitization is essential for the preservation of rare materials, thereby reducing the need for users to handle fragile items.

Mona’s first venture into digitization involved material in course reserves, past examination papers. Two years ago the Virtual Library of CARDIN, Caribbean Disaster Information Network, which is housed in the Science Library was launched.

Currently, Mona is in the process of digitizing the Roger Mais Collection which consists of the manuscripts, novels, short stories and correspondence of one of Jamaica’s famous author who died more than 50 years ago.

At St. Augustine, some of the collections have already been digitized and are available on the library’s website, including the Colonial Bank papers and the Young Diaries. The Colonial Bank was the forerunner of one of the region’s major banks – Republic Bank. The collection consists of incoming correspondence to the bank from London during the period 1837 to 1885 and provides an insight into the social and economic history of the island of Trinidad. Sir William Young was governor of Tobago 1807-1815. His diaries which have been digitized and are available on the website, consist of documents which give an historical, statistical and descriptive account of the island at that time. This is a rich source of primary information.

In addition, the audio tapes in the Andrew Pearse collection have been converted to CD's while many of the photographs from the collection of the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture (the forerunner of the St. Augustine Campus) have also been digitized but are not yet available on the website. Both St. Augustine and Mona, recognizing the need to step up the process of digitization are planning to purchase the necessary equipment in the near future with funds from potential donors.

Digitization Policies

In all of the libraries, resources are limited and the reality is that everything cannot and does not need to be digitized. Both Theresa Graham (2003) and Yan Quai Liu (2004) speak of the need to implement policies regarding the standards, preservation and selection of digitized material. The following factors have influenced our decision making process:

- Copyright considerations are of paramount importance as if the material is not in the public domain, then permission has to be sought.
- The avoidance of duplication - * where a document has already been digitized, efforts and resources will not be duplicated. This is the case of James Hakewill's *A Picturesque tour of the island of Jamaica: Drawings made in the years 1820 – 1821* which was removed from the list because it had already been digitized by another organization.
- The intellectual value, the current and potential use
- The physical format, size and condition of the original.

Priority is given to material that is of interest to a global audience in view of the expense. Thus for each item to be digitized, there has to be a rationale.

The Problems

Many problems are encountered in the digitization project and a major one is the cost. The equipment is expensive and the higher the quality of the desired resolution, the more expensive the machines will be. Staff training which includes on the spot training, attendance at relevant workshops and even visits to institutions takes up a large portion of the money. There is also the problem of the availability of server space. At Mona, the Library does not have sufficient server space and we are forced to depend on the University's central systems unit to provide this. However, they sometimes can see no urgency to make the allocation of server space. The decision as to the software for the creation of access can also cause problems. The Mona Library has opted for OCLC's Contentdm but there are queries as to whether the data should be hosted on our own server or on that of OCLC because some of our colleagues fear the loss of control.

Financial Assistance

We rely on some Foundations both local and international for funds to assist with the digitization project. The Jamaican Foundation called CHASE has been helping with the Caribbean Leaders' Project. News have recently been received that the Tubman Institute of York University in Canada has just been awarded funds to carry out a Jamaica Digitization Programme under the British Library's Endangered Archives Project. This will include the

collections of the University, the National Library, the National Archives and the Archives of the Catholic Church in Jamaica.

The first two collections that were digitized at St. Augustine were sponsored by the Reed Foundation. This Library is in the process of seeking funding for further digitization projects of Caribbean resources. An application was recently submitted under the British Library's Endangered Archives Project for financial assistance for microfilming and preservation of two major collections, i.e. the Royal Gazette and the Eric Williams Memorial Collections. The Royal Gazette was one of the main forms of communication and documents an important period in the country's colonial history. The Library holds bound volumes which span the period 1860 – 1960. In view of the very fragile nature of the collection, it is important that efforts are made to preserve it. Again, the Eric Williams Collection covers an important period in the country's history as it documents the life and works of the person known as the Father of the Nation. This collection must be preserved and made accessible to researchers.

Conclusion

Libraries in the Caribbean must continue in their effort to collect, preserve and make accessible the resources which describe the unique history of its diverse people.

The Libraries of The University of the West Indies at Mona and St. Augustine campuses are pioneers in this regard. Recognizing their role, the libraries have also been creating the information through oral history projects and continue to actively pursue and collect primary data. In view of the high costs of digitization, the libraries are making efforts to partner with the other organizations and universities to achieve the goal of providing global access to relevant data about the Caribbean.

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