



Digitizing Polynesian Photographs in American Samoa

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Meeting:

146. Asia and Oceania

WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 75TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL
23-27 August 2009, Milan, Italy
<http://www.ifla.org/annual-conference/ifla75/index.htm>

Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to explore the collection of Polynesian photographs that have been digitized at the Feleti Barstow Public Library in American Samoa, Oceania. This is a descriptive, case study. Qualitative research method has been adopted as the main method, with the participant observation and personal interview as the approaches for data collection. Subject scope of this paper is focused on the collection of approximately 4,000 items of Polynesian photographs, which the Feleti Barstow Public Library has acquired by way of smooth transfer from the American Samoa Government Office of Archives and Records Management, the Jean P. Haydon Museum, and the American Samoa Historical Preservation Office. In the course of the study, the author found that nearly 3900 items of Polynesian photographs, which were formerly uncataloged and virtually inaccessible to the public, have now been electronically digitized and catalogued, thereby making them available to the people of American Samoa, and through the planned library web-based catalog, to other libraries, institutions, and individuals throughout the world. For limitations, this study is confined itself to exploring Polynesian photograph collections and interviewing library staff in the Pacific Collection Room at the Feleti Barstow Public Library in American Samoa. Therefore, it is suggested that future research should be conducted beyond the current geographical boundary, i.e., to study the Polynesian photograph collections in other libraries, institutions, researcher centers, and associations in the South Pacific region, and possibly, throughout the world. The results of this research would have the significant practical implications to the practice of centralizing and digitizing library collections, as well as to the practice of preserving and disseminating indigenous photographs. The value of this paper would be unmeasurable in terms of its contributions to the global understanding of the people, history, and culture of Polynesia through the online sharing of local Polynesian photographs that have been mostly unknown and largely unavailable to the public. This paper would also prove to be of lasting value of preserving visual images of cultural heritage to the librarians, historians, photographers, and the worldwide Internet users, as well as to the people of Polynesia and their future generations.

Introduction

In the information age, emerging technologies have been increasingly applying to the implementation of library services to its users worldwide. Technological future begins now and we have to pay attention to trends, technologies, and possibilities in order to remain relevant in the lives of library users (Gordon, 2007). The advanced, sophisticated softwares allow Internet users to access library materials in full text, photo images, audio sounds, and video recording. Among all those fantastic features, the digitization of photographs would consider to be the most valuable project in terms of its preservation of cultural heritage and revitalization of precious images right in front of the Internet users. The purpose of this study is to explore the collection of Polynesian photographs that have been digitized at the Feleti Barstow Public Library (FBPL) in American Samoa, Oceania. The digitized photographs have been cataloged and are now available to the people of American Samoa, other libraries, and individuals throughout the world on the FBPL's Web site. The digitization project will contribute to the global understanding of the people, history, and culture of Polynesia. Moreover, it will also prove to be lasting value of preserving visual images of cultural heritage to librarians, historians, photographers, the Internet users, as well as to the people of Polynesia and their future generations.

The Islands of American Samoa

American Samoa is an island group located in the South Pacific Ocean. It is one of territories of the United States. American Samoa lies approximately halfway between Hawaii and New Zealand, and consists of five volcanic islands (formed about 7,000,000 years ago) and two coral atolls, all of which cover a land area of 199 square kilometers. Today the local population is about 69,000 (Tulafono, 2009). Over 95% of this population reside on the main island of Tutuila which is the territory's center of government, business, and education. Tropical climate is hot and humid, with the rainfall varies from 200 to 300 inches a year and the average temperature of 26.88 degrees Celsius. The threat of tropical cyclones and hurricanes are imminent.

Nearly two-thirds of the population in American Samoa are citizens or nationals of the United States, 90% of the population are Samoan, other 10 % are composed of the Asians, Caucasians, African Americans, and other Pacific islanders. Some people come with more than one ethnic origins and that feature their multicultural heritages. There are slightly more male than female, and the median age is 21 years (The State Plan for the Library Services and Technology Act in American Samoa: Fiscal Year 2008-2012). With the cultural heritage of Polynesia, most Samoan people, who learned at their early childhood, are extremely good at dancing and singing and they show these talents on the occasion of entertaining family guests or performing at various ceremonies and festivals on the island.

Feleti Barstow Public Library

The Feleti Barstow Public Library was first established in American Samoa in 1914 by the United States Naval Governor of American Samoa with the initial collection of about 3,000 books donated by his friends in the United States (The State Plan for the Library Services and Technology Act in American Samoa: Fiscal Year 2003-2007). Library building was destroyed in 1994 by the Hurricane Val and its collections were thereafter dispersed within the school library system on the island. The new library building that covers 10,000 square

foot was completed in 1998 and officially opened to the public in 2000. It is the only public library in American Samoa and was named in memory of Frederic (Feleti) Doclos Barstow who passed away in 1931 after his fourth trip to American Samoa where he stayed for several months visiting his friends on the islands of Tau and Tutuila.

The library features include a children's room, a conference room, the computer laboratory, the Pacific collection room, Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC), and the Polynesian photograph archives. Housing a collection of nearly 40,000 volumes, the library serves as the center for lifelong learning with the aim to provide current and historical reading materials in a variety of formats to meet the informational, technological, and cultural literacy needs of all age groups in American Samoa (The State Plan for the Library Services and Technology Act in American Samoa: Fiscal Year 2008-2012). In this sense, the library provides literacy program for preservation of the Samoan language, and educational program for learning English as a Second Language (ESL); offers regular classes on computer basics and the Internet basics; provides public access to the subscribed electronic reference databases; conducts regularly-scheduled weekly story time and reading programs for children; and occasionally hosts special events such as evening reading of creative writings with local writers, as well as displays artwork and handicrafts by local artists and students (Feleti Barstow Public Library Organizational Profile, 2009).

Digitization of Polynesian Photographs

The Pacific Ocean consists of Micronesia (situated in the North Pacific Ocean), Melanesia and Polynesia (both situated in the South Pacific Ocean). Polynesia generally refers to a triangle, covering the vast expanse of tropical island-nations that include Hawaii, New Zealand, Tonga, Nieu, Tokelau, Kiribati, Cook Islands, West Samoa, American Samoa, French Polynesia, and Easter Islands.

With the funds from the United States Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the Feleti Barstow Public Library initiated a Polynesian Photo Archives in 2000, which is a digitization project of nearly 6,000 Polynesian photographs the library has acquired by way of smooth transfer from the American Samoa Government Office of Archives and Records Management, the Jean P. Haydon Museum, and the American Samoa Historic Preservation Office (Polynesian Photo Archive Collection: Cataloging and Archiving Historic Still and Moving Images in American Samoa, 2000).

The Polynesian Photo Archives is located on the second floor in the Pacific Collection Room of the Feleti Barstow Public Library in American Samoa, Oceania. All electronically stored photos have been cataloged for an easy access and quick retrieval. The Room is well-equipped with the aim to control temperature and humidity that would otherwise jeopardize the fragile pieces of paper prints, photo prints, and slide films. Library users can browse digital images on the computer, print them, attach them to the email, copy to a flash drive, or burn to a CD with some applicable fees, except for some items which are under copyright protection.

Currently, there are over 4,000 images that have been electronically digitized, dated from the first image of 1860s to the most present ones, all with the cultural significance and historic values. The original images have been collected from or donated by the American Samoa Government agencies, private collections, and individual donors, which include photographic prints, digital images, scanned copies, paper prints, and slide films.

The Polynesian Photo Archives is well visited by teachers, students, genealogists, authors, photographers, researchers, as well as local newspapers and television. Some library users are so delightful when they are searching for their villages and can identify or recognize the people they know, their ancestors, family chiefs, or family grounds in digital formats. A small selection of historic images is now available for public viewing online at <http://fbpl.org/polynesian.html>.

Polynesian Photos on the Internet

Among over 4,000 photographs that have been electronically digitalized and stored on the Internet, the images were classified by subjects such as the Samoan islands, people, church, schools, buildings, ceremonies, villages, Samoan tattoo, festivals, indigenous arts, as well as archaeological objects and artifacts. Polynesian photographs, which have been digitized, cataloged, and preserved, will become a permanent, retrievable part of the planned Polynesian Photo Archives in American Samoa. This long-range plan includes accessing, copying, and cataloging appropriate still and moving images available from private collections, other archives, and institutions, all of which will therefore be shared regionally and internationally through a Web-based server. In addition, historic Polynesian images, which are now stored in other private or institutional collections worldwide, will continue to be access, acquired, and incorporated into the catalog system. The Web-based union catalog is permanently open and available to all Internet users.

Some selected digitized photos which are available on the Feleti Barstow Public Library's web site are classified by subject categories as follows:

- Construction of a hospital ward fale
- A Taupo (village maiden)
- Man, woman, and child standing in front of a thatched roof fale
- Two knife dancers
- A Samoan knife dance
- Knife dance performed by a young Samoan
- The making of Kava
- Mania serving Kava
- Presentation of a ceremonial fine mat
- Presentation of a pig
- William Willia and his raft "Seven Little Sisters"
- U.S. Marine dancing with Samoan beauties
- Samoan tattoo artist using traditional tools
- Fitafita naval brass band
- The last two-deck canoe in Samoa
- High Chief Tui Manu'a
- Two Samoan women culturally dress
- Swain's Island 1939
- Robert Louis Stevenson and friends
- Commandant Benjamin Tilley
- Samoan marines at parade
- Members of the Historical Commission
- Women's Intercultural Society of American Samoa
- The Jean P. Haydon Museum
- United States President Lydon B. Johnson

Conclusion

In the high-tech and information age, the electronic cataloging and preservation of photographs have made the complicated and tremendous task much more possible and easier than ever before. Pictorial records and photo images of Polynesia are essential for the maintenance of its cultural identity and continuity. Now the digitized photos have become so needed and are in great demand for research and publication, with specific requests from teachers, students, authors, historians, photographers, and journalists. This study has been confined itself to exploring the Polynesia Photo Archives at the Feleti Barstow Public Library in American Samoa, Oceania. It is therefore suggested that future research should be conducted beyond the current geographical boundary, i.e., to collect the Polynesian photographs in other libraries, institutions, research centers, and associations in the South Pacific region, and possibly, throughout the world. The author hopes that Polynesian photographs currently stored in other locations worldwide could be generously shared with the planned Polynesian Photo Archives in American Samoa. Thus, all digital Polynesian photos will be centralized and preserved in American Samoa and disseminated throughout the world by the Web-based catalog. The value of the digital Polynesian photos will be unmeasurable in terms of its contributions to the global understanding of the people, history, and culture of Polynesia. The resulting standardization, centralization, and preservation of visual images of Polynesian photos will certainly be a precious cultural heritage to librarians, authors, historians, photographers, the Internet users, as well as the people of Polynesia and their future generations.

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