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Networking Cultural Heritage: Africa

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The purpose of this project was to investigate digitization activities at national libraries and to encourage cooperation amongst heritage institutions (libraries, archives and museums) at either the national or international level.

The National Library of South Africa was tasked with reporting on digitization activities on the African continent. This was quite a mammoth assignment. There are 56 countries in Africa! But it gave us an opportunity to make contact with colleagues of other national libraries and to update our address database.

Being a first for the National Library of South Africa, much difficulty was experienced in getting correct contact details. The project was first announced at a meeting of national librarians of the Southern African Development Community in Johannesburg in March 2005. Participants were invited to complete a survey form hosted on the website of the National Library of South Africa. In addition, e-mail letters and faxes were sent to all national libraries in Africa to invite them to report on any projects, and searches were done on the internet.

Few reports were received at the time of writing the report. From the information which was gathered from other sources it became clear that a number of digitization projects were

undertaken in the past 5 years. Involvement of National Libraries was not always clear. A number of projects concentrated on scholarly content and were thus initiated by academic libraries. Involvement of UNESCO was also prominent and concentrated more on archival collections.

Summary of findings

So far we have an indication of what is happening in Africa and further work will need to be done to follow up on these projects. The findings of an investigation by Diana Rosenberg¹ were gratefully used. In general the following remarks can be made on projects in Africa:

Digitization refers to the conversion of non-digital material to digital form. A wide variety of materials as diverse as maps, manuscripts, moving images and sound may be digitized. Digital imaging technology offers distinctive advantages to institutions with collections of scholarly resources. Information content in digital form can be retrieved by readers remotely, although such delivery may tax the capabilities of projection equipment and networks.

Degree of completeness

At this stage we do not know yet how many projects have been completed. Often the digitization involves preparatory phases of organizing, selecting and indexing of material before the actual scanning can take place. The German Colonial Society collection of 55,000 photographic impressions from Africa was completed in 1999. The West African Research Center finished digitizing 150 colonial reports in 2002. Sabinet Online digitized 40 scholarly journals in 2002 and by 2004 another 141 titles were completed. The University of Cape Town in cooperation with the National Library of South Africa digitized 345 drawings of the Bleek Collection in 2003. Michigan State University had digitized ten African journals by 2004. The National Library of Egypt had digitized 100,000 pages by 2004. The DISA project in South Africa completed the digitization of 50,000 pages in 2004. The Slave Trade Archives project was completed in 2004.

Origin

Most projects originated outside Africa and began on a small scale, with training programmes and pilot tests funded by foreign governments, development agencies and universities. At least one commercial enterprise was identified. It is clear that institutions are by now taking their own initiative to digitize local collections and publications.

Degree of cooperation

We found that in many cases, a number of local academic or cultural institutions in a region would group together to a form of partnership or consortium. International cooperation and involvement was in terms of selection, training, equipment, digital archiving facilities and web access.

¹ Rosenberg, Diana (2005) Towards the Digital Library in Africa. *INASP infobrief*, 5 (March) as retrieved from <http://www.inasp.info> on 9 May 2005.

Role of national libraries

Mostly as partners, rather than singular projects based within national libraries.

Funding

External funding was sourced from foreign governments and development agencies. Institutional funds were seldom available. Future sustainability is an issue. However, there is a move towards self-reliance and away from total donor dependency. Collecting contributions towards costs in the form of consulting and training provided to other partners is occurring. There is generally no charging of fees for Internet access except for one commercial entity.

Objectives

Objectives have developed from initial training, experimenting and establishing best practice, to digital library development. There is a focus on academic use and scholarly content. There is a need to improve remote access through networking of resources in electronic forms. No clear priorities have been established for the future yet. We need to consolidate existing digitization before moving into new areas. We also need to share experiences with libraries in the region.

Technical issues

Limited internet connectivity with slow speed and reliability is a barrier to the use of e-resources in Africa. Some libraries undertook publishing and distribution of digitized collections on CD-ROM.

Organizational issues

Digitization was often managed within existing departments. Some libraries developed separate sections and laboratories with new staff positions. Training was not widespread and professional training by library schools were felt to be out of date and did not take into account what was needed in the field.

Legal matters

The matter of ethics and intellectual property was debated in depth in an article by Britz and Lor² in 2004. Could digitization become another form of western imperialism? The notion of a 'digital divide' is a very real challenge in many African countries. How many Africans will benefit and who selects the materials? Are libraries in Africa able to acquire the digitized material? Is the digitized material freely available to African scholars?

² Britz, Johannes and Peter Lor (2004) A Moral Reflection on the Digitization of Africa's Documentary Heritage. *IFLA Journal*, 30 (3): 216-223 as discussed and cited in *The Fishbowl: Challenges to Digitizing African Cultural Heritage* retrieved from http://www.vaughnthompson.com/weblog/archives/2005/02/challenges_to_d.php on 6 May 2005.

Target audience

Academics, students, researchers and publishers in Africa and the rest of the world.

Contents

Historical, cultural and national heritage materials: maps, manuscripts, drawings, pictures, photographs, reports. Subject matter includes agriculture, religious texts, history, and the slave trade. Scholarly journals and government publications.

Access policies

Mostly free access on the Internet. According to Britz & Lor there is a widespread belief in Africa that ownership of information is not vested as a property right but that knowledge, as a benefit to all, must be shared freely with one another. According to Rosenberg libraries in sub-Saharan Africa were divided as to whether charging fees for Internet access provided the money that is essential for the maintenance of the service or whether it discouraged use.

Long-term strategies

Preservation of digital collections in the long-term had been mentioned at workshops and in recent articles by African authors (2005). The establishment of de-centralized repositories of digital libraries through collaborative programmes still has a long way to go. Few libraries have attained ICT levels required for adequate connectivity. Libraries are at different stages of digital development, with very different needs. There is a need for country-level bodies which understand the requirements of libraries and can drive forward digital development. This could be within government or become a role of consortia.

Guidance and support

There is a need for enhanced support from institutions and continued support from funding agencies, both financial, and in the provision of expertise. Training, in the form of attachments to other libraries, exchanges between libraries, on-site visits by consultants and experts is needed. There is a need to ensure that support programmes are sufficiently inclusive and flexible to the differing needs and levels of expertise of each library. Institutions and countries should be encouraged to formulate plans and actions. Curriculum improvements in library schools to prepare new professionals for the digital environment should be implemented. Consortia should be supported to build strong networks and expertise within countries or regions.

Country reports

DISA (Digital Imaging Project of **South Africa**) was established in 1997. DISA aimed to investigate and implement digital technologies to enable scholars and researchers from around the world to access South African material of high socio-political interest that would otherwise be difficult to locate and use. In addition, DISA aimed to provide South African archivists and librarians with knowledge of, and expertise in, digital imaging. The first phase covered 50,000

pages. Both the National Library and National Archives of South Africa took part in the project. DISA hosted various workshops in Southern Africa on digital imaging, managing digital libraries, and metadata. The next phase, 'Southern African Freedom Struggles 1950 – 1995' will involve other countries in the region.

In 1999 UNESCO launched the Slave Trade Archives project, funded by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD). The aim of the project is to improve access to and safeguard original documents related to the transatlantic slave trade and slavery throughout the world. The project deals with original documentary sources that bear witness to the trade. Digitization of these resources, particularly those at risk from deterioration, will help to establish a collective memory of this part of history. Countries from West Africa are mostly involved (**Senegal, Benin, Gambia, Ghana, Cape Verde**). Training sessions were held in **South Africa**, Cape Town (2001), Ghana (2001), Senegal (2002), Gambia (2002), Cape Verde (2003) and Benin (2003). The project was extended until the end of 2004.

The Stadt- und Universitätsbibliothek Frankfurt digitized a collection of 55,000 photographic impressions of the former German Colonial Society. These include pictures from **Togo, Cameroon, Namibia, Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda** and many other African countries. The collection covers topics such as agriculture, geology, vegetation, settlement activities, traditional commerce, transport, economic development and political history. The project, by way of microfilm scanning, was completed in 1999. The collection is available on the Internet.

Ndiyoi Mutiti of the Arquivo Nacional da Zambia in a survey conducted in 1999, involving archives in **Botswana, Kenya, Malawi, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe**, found that hardly any digitization programmes were in place. Only one country was undertaking a photograph imaging project whilst another country had identified the need for document conversion and had planned a feasibility study.

The Timbuktu (**Mali**) manuscript libraries project (launched in 2000) is a Malian based initiative supported by a team of national and international experts in the fields of history, paper conservation and electronic document management. UNESCO provided training in digitization and electronic archiving. The main goal of the project is to preserve and provide wide access to the invaluable literary heritage of the Timbuktu region. 1000 manuscripts were selected for cataloguing, restoration and digitization.

The Historical Archives of Mozambique in cooperation with DISA hosted an 'International Workshop on Automation and Digitization of Libraries and Archives' in Maputo in 2001. Case studies of the automation and digitization of national archives were presented by participants from **Mozambique, Zambia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Lesotho and South Africa**.

A workshop on 'Safeguarding African Documentary Heritage' was held in Cape Town in 2001 (funded by UNESCO/IFLA). Participants from **Angola, Botswana, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Mozambique, Rwanda, Senegal, Swaziland, Togo, Zambia and Zimbabwe** were trained in preservation management and traditional and digital reformatting techniques.

In 2001 the West African Research Center (WARC) in Dakar (**Senegal**) began a comprehensive

program of digital library development in collaboration with Senegalese researchers, archivists and librarians. The program is intended to serve as a model for expansion of digital preservation activity to other countries in the region and creation of a network of mutually supportive cultural institutions engaged in the digitization of important documents from their collections. This network is known as the West African Digital Library Network (WADiLiN). Over 150 colonial reports from the Fouta Djallon region were digitized. WARC launched a two-month training programme that covered image capture, Web publishing and metadata standards. Michigan State University (African Online Digital Library project) has been working closely with WARC.

The West African Museums Programme (WAMP) would provide museums in several West African countries with digital cameras and training in digital image capture. As **Senegalese** institutions digitized their collections, files and accompanying metadata would be sent to MSU.

The Universite Gaston Berger (UGB) in St Louis was seeking funding to digitize dissertations relating to the **Senegal** River area. UGB will serve as a focal point for digital library development. The Archives National du Senegal purchased equipment to digitize a collection of 3000 postcards dating from 1900 to 1950.

The Institut Fondamental de l'Afrique Noire (IFAN) in **Senegal** received a grant from the Canadian development agency to digitize materials from their vast cultural, historical, and scientific holdings. IFAN had begun staff training at WARC and installed a digitization lab. They plan to digitize manuscripts from the William Ponty collection.

The Centre de Recherche et de Documentation du **Senegal** (CRDS) received WAMP funding for the conservation, organization and digitization of photographic collections.

Sabinet Online in **South Africa** has been digitizing more than 180 online versions of South African journals, which were originally published in hard copy. This service (SA ePublications) was launched in June 2002 with 40 online journals. Sabinet has also made huge investments in the digitization of South African official (government) publications.

In 2002 a feasibility study was undertaken for the development of a virtual library for universities and institutions of higher learning in **Nigeria** (funded by UNESCO and the Government of Japan).

The University of Cape Town, in collaboration with the National Library of **South Africa**, digitized 345 drawings and watercolors from the Library's Bleek collection in 2003. (funded by the Andrew W Mellon Foundation).

The National Library and Archives of **Egypt** had digitized 100,000 pages of national heritage material in cooperation with the French government, the Library of Congress and UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme, by 2004.

The Egyptian National Center for Documentation of Cultural and Natural Heritage, and the National Library of **Egypt**, in cooperation with UNESCO, digitized 2,000 manuscripts of Arab, Turkish and Persian origin related to the medical sciences, and held by the National Library of

Egypt in Cairo. The manuscripts will be made available in the public domain for the benefit of researchers, analysts and other interested readers. The digitized collection will also be published on a trilingual CD-ROM in Arabic, English and French.

The Greenstone digital library software has been developed and distributed in cooperation with UNESCO and the Human Info NGO in Belgium. Training courses were run in **Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo**. Greenstone is an open source software tool for building digital libraries. It provides a way of organizing and publishing digital library collections.

The University of **Botswana** in cooperation with DISA hosted a workshop on managing digital libraries in Gaborone in 2004.

A cooperative project with African publishers was coordinated by the African Studies Center of Michigan State University. Digitization of ten selected major African journals was completed in 2004. The journals will be available in open access to all scholars in Africa and the wider world.

In 2004 the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) undertook a survey on the state of digital libraries at universities in **Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe**. Most librarians stated that their plans for the next three years were to consolidate existing digitization before moving into new areas. New areas included digitizing local collections and publications. There are immediate needs for support in full text digitization.

At the Fourth Islamic Conference of Culture Ministers held in **Algiers** in December 2004, a conference on 'The Arabic Manuscript' was announced, which will take place at the University of Cambridge in 2005. The purpose of that conference will be the creation of an international association to facilitate the digitization, accessibility and study of Arabic manuscripts.

Elisam Magara of the Makerere University recently presented a paper in Toronto (Museums and the Web 2005) in which digitization requirements for the preservation and democratizing of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) in **Uganda** are listed. The majority of the respondents (including the National Library of Uganda) agreed with a proposition for digitization although most of them had not computerized their own records. The NLU has undertaken a cd-rom project that targets locally published books. A conference on library automation of university libraries is scheduled for June 2005 in Kampala. One of the conference objectives is to share experiences of library automation (including digitization) with libraries in the region.