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Networking – Shared Memory (2)

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Creating a Shared Memory: Ideas for a Caribbean Programme Designed to Allow for a Common Access to West Indian Historical Resources

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Introduction

Many Caribbean territories experienced successive domination by one colonial power and then another, whether it be by Spain, Britain or France, or even the Netherlands, Denmark or Sweden. These changes resulted in frequent breaks in administrative control throughout the archipelago. Haiti's independence in 1804, then the decolonisation in the mid 20th Century gave way to a relative return of power to the region, and consequently, to the development of significant local repositories to keep the historical archives of the Caribbean islands, the Guyanas and Belize. In the present world of globalisation the Caribbean is more than ever before connected to the rest of the planet, but one wonders whether or not, over and above regional inter-island organisations, cultural exchanges between the island states are more developed than in past centuries.

The project outlined in this paper proposes a significant contribution for CARBICA (Caribbean branch of the International Council of Archives) to re-appropriate, through sharing, islands' documentary resources and so allow for the building of a comprehensive and comparative history of the West Indian territories. Besides providing access to documentation often held in distant repositories, it would enable the regional professional archival community to unite behind a project of use to all, allowing also for the development of new skills (standardization of archival description, integration of information technology), and giving a new impetus to the history of the Caribbean basin.

Historical antecedents: the problem of restitution of cultural heritage

In the domain of archival records, decolonisation was followed by demands for the restitution of cultural heritage from independant countries. But most of the time, historical archives have been kept by the former colonizer, while local technical and administrative records remained. Agreements have allowed to microfilm the historical archives (such as in France for Africa, Algeria and India). None of them concerned the Caribbean countries.

UNESCO and the CIA played a major role during the 1960- 1970 to facilitate access with the programme "Guide to the Sources of the history of nations".

Unfortunately this process, if not abandoned, is considerably less productive than in the past. These inventories concerned first the major repositories (Germany, Spain, France, Italy, the Vatican, UK) because they possessed the main documentary resource on the colonies, and could provide with funding and logistics. In comparison, hardly anything was published concerning documentary material conserved in the ex-colonies themselves. The "Guide of Asian History Sources", with its volumes on Indonesia or the Myanmar which was undertaken between 1977 and 1978 is clearly an exception.

Here and there, other initiatives took over, generally through bilateral agreements.

A new approach to documentary access

These bilateral initiatives seem to have lately a renewed success, with the help of digital technology in the archive domain which can provide new means of sharing information concerning archive repository resources.

To cite a few examples, the luso-brasilian Rescate program which allowed to digitize archives in Brazil and Portugal.

The recent collaboration between Canada and France and their project "New Horizons is a prime example: a database of 20,000 entries 400,000 images from French and Canadian repositories, and a virtual exhibition. This was a project initiated in November 2003 by the Direction of Archives of France, the Canadian Libraries and Archives and the Canadian Embassy in Paris.

These projects emerge in the context of national networking for archives : the British National Archives Website and the Archives Hub, the United States National Archives (NARA), the RED project (Archivos espnoles en red)

and, to a lesser extent, the French National Archives.

Returning specifically to trans-national projects per se, programmes exist to a large extent between old metropolitan powers and their ex-colonies. It is true that the essential archive resources for the 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th Centuries are mainly held in large European repositories. Under these conditions, if the physical restitution of documents continues to remain a demand today, it takes paradoxically, an essentially symbolic dimension.

However, there is an ever growing attention being given to archive sources which are held and can be exchanged between neighbouring states that were once occupied by the same colonial power. This is a new

development that, combined with the earlier ex-colony/ex-occupying power archive-sharing relationship, is proposed in this paper. It proposes to create, between the countries of the wider Caribbean, a method of sharing their capacities and documentary resources, in order to permit access to documents previously dispersed.

A local Martinican experience of such an online archive service

To succeed in this endeavour, prior experience of similar efforts needs to be considered, of which I would like to cite two examples in our region, even much smaller in scale:

- In March 2002, the Martinique Departmental Archives produced online, a “Guide of Sources for the History of Saint Pierre” on the occasion of the centenary of the volcanic eruption which destroyed the wealthiest town in the island of Martinique. This database, developed using a simple descriptive format and multi-levels (source, series, article, piece) produced using Excel then exploited via a Website, had been initiated by the Martinique Archives in the year 2000. It allowed for the recording of documents held in the Martinique Departmental Archives itself, but also for the publication online of details relevant to St. Pierre held in nearly 60 other repositories in Europe and America (and about 200 separate archive collections). Nearly 4000 entries were attached. The Website is the following : www.cg972.fr/archivesmartinique .

This work was made possible thanks to the existence of inventories and guides derived from the UNESCO initiative, and in this with the use of high-performance search Website software like PROCAT. It proved, with these working conditions, that a small team can in the space of two years, bring to term such a project.

- In 2003, the St. Vincent Archives, with the assistance of the Alliance Française, decided to collect documents concerning their island held in French archive holdings. It involved finding and reproducing relevant documents for subsequent English translation to encourage a wider readership. Thanks to French financial assistance, an archivist undertook research in the Archives d’outre-mer at Aix-en-Provence..

This experience demonstrated that strong technical and scientific relationships remain between the Caribbean territories and Europe, be the relationships of colonial domination either past or ongoing. This ongoing interaction encourages an important sharing of knowledge that should be nurtured and exploited. The St. Vincent experience gave rise to the reproduction on microfilm of isolated documents regarding the island, and the request for more microfilm from Martinique as well as from France.

The conclusion of this second archive endeavour can be recognised on two fronts: on the one hand, thanks to this project the present paper has been formulated to make such exchanges more systematic and encourage their development throughout the archipelago. On the other, the St. Vincent project has highlighted the constraints and material limitations: a larger scale initiative cannot be based on a selection of individual documents in the form of photocopies, but must rather be founded on the identification of coherent themes, and, failing that, on the placing in context of documents and isolated references..

The project: a network of Historical West Indian sources

The project presented here is centred on a spirit of partnership, using diverse expertise and energised by a shared objective. Each of the Caribbean territories would consequently play a key role in the operating process, so encouraging a growing region-wide interest in archival resources in the years to come.

The objectives and the strategy

The project consists of making available and sharing information about known historic documents which may be conserved locally on other territories in the West Indian islands, the Guyanas and Belize.

For example, Martinique would develop and provide a list of sources and documentary collections concerning St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Haiti etc., and St. Lucia would do the same for their sources which mention Martinique, St. Vincent and so on. Likewise, as it is well known that the majority of archive resources concerning the region prior to the 20th Century is held in the repositories of ex-colonial European powers, we will seek to complete or update where necessary, the guides to sources on West Indian history held by these European countries.

The result will include:

- A common database, accessible to all, which will describe all these documents, making the data format compatible with ISAD (G) and the other internationally recognised and descriptive norms, notably EAD/XML.
- A campaign of digital photography of the most important source materials whether they be relevant to the West Indian region in general, or to the history of individual territories. The collection will be made available on CD ROM to all participating nations and may be sold to non-participants be they countries or individual researchers.

This project requires serious collaboration between the countries of CARBICA on the one hand, and also agreements between these countries and those of EURBICA.

Practically speaking, its initiation and development would require a pilot group committee and the definition of a development strategy over a five year term:

- work in pilot countries over the first year to allow for a testing of the programme on a large scale
- the identification of the most important gaps in the history of individual participating countries susceptible to be filled by the addition to nation archive databases of additional resource material
- the creation of exchange conditions in those countries least adapted to methods of archive research instrumental methods
 - training in classification and standardized archive description and in digitization
 - classification of source materials identified as priority concerning neighbouring territories (sources of a diplomatic nature, those dealing with immigration services, those of top political institutions, sources relating to the period pre-dating the 21st Century, at which time there were frequent changes in the ownership of many colonies by the various colonial powers)
 - supplying the equipment necessary for exchanging documentation: computers, telephone communications to the Internet etc., software technology
- the creation of a database using the information developed in the pilot countries over the first year of the programme
- an expansion of this database using details supplied by the more recent countries participating in the project
- the identification of principal sources relevant to the history of the entire Caribbean region
- the digitization (a programme covering 3 to 5 years) of major documents, themselves identified using criteria such as their age, the multilateral character, or, on the contrary, their uniqueness in highlighting events and major historical events of each territory

The practical aspects

A study will need to be devoted to the interest in such a project in each nation in the region: noting the technical expertise available and the material means to put such a project into action. This preliminary enquiry will allow the identification of pilot countries which will begin the work. A suggestion for such a region-wide national questionnaire has been prepared and copies have been distributed to you today. It is hoped that with your help the contents can be refined further.

There will also need to be research undertaken both locally and on a European scale, the sort of assistance needed for the project to become a reality: financial assistance, technical assistance to train local archivists and to develop the uniform database structure for future transformation into XML in order to make information available online. The British Archives Website known as the Archives Hub may be used as a useful example. In addition it will be necessary to create a database structure and the tools that will be required for sharing the information.

Finally, in each archive service within the West Indian grouping, a detailed search of all documents (mentioning the item in every respect) will be needed to ensure that all information relevant to neighbouring countries is brought to light. This will allow for an exchange of thematic inventories between the different Caribbean territories as well as the distribution of the material online using the Internet, made uniform with a standardised method of archive description (derived from ISAD (G)).

The obstacles

Linguistic barriers: there are diverse languages used throughout the Caribbean region. The translation of the regional archive database would seem therefore indispensable. It is open to question whether the documents themselves would need to be translated also, which, if done, would require an initial transcription of the documents.

There exist diverse programmes for multi-linguistic usages on the Worldwide Web. For example “The International Committee for the multilingual access to databases on heritage”.

The cost

Training is without a doubt going to be the biggest hurdle, notwithstanding the evident financial costs for new technology and the problems of future maintenance of computerised services. A recent study undertaken by UNESCO and accessible on its Website highlighted these issues as being key in the documentation efforts of the patrimony of the Pacific countries. The report concluded also that there was an obvious importance for sharing online such information with neighbouring countries, all having very unequal traditional documentary resources.

Technical aspects

It seems to me that, more than in any other domain, digital technology has a primordial role to play. Microfilm, practiced for the past fifty years is certainly economic in production costs and in stocking, but it is far from user-friendly for the purposes of consultation. Interoperability should, of course, be considered in such collective project.

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The selection process of documents for reproduction

It appears pointless to undertake digitize a few chosen pages from a coherent documentary source: ideally, and as far as possible, such reproduction should be made of organic and complete series or sub-series of documents, which lend themselves to historical research.

More than ever as large western libraries or universities have undertaken “digital library” programmes, it is necessary to integrate and coordinate a Caribbean initiative with these, and even suggest a collaboration to them .

Conclusion

This paper is intended to engender debate and suggestions for a scientific project that, although directed at a public audience, would have a profound impact on the methods and organisational structures at the heart of our archive services. In effect, it implies training to manipulate new technologies as well as encouraging a deepening of our knowledge of archival theory and its application and the development of the use of information technology in our Archives.

To this regard, such a project would perfectly fit in the new strategies of ICA especially point 3 (preservation and access) and 4 (professional training).

It seems it might create among the Caribbean countries more awareness of our common heritage.