

Chapter 63

Disaster Is in the Eye of the Beholder

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores preservation and disaster issues in Singapore and Uganda from the point of view of the author's volunteer experiences in the summer of 2012. This is a snapshot of how two very different institutions, on different sides of the world, preserve materials and prepare for disaster, the many obstacles they encounter, and how they work with and through those obstacles. Preservation and disaster concepts are briefly discussed with the main focus on the historical context of the cultural institutions of education and the access to and preservation of their materials.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2012, I worked on two volunteer projects, one doing information literacy work at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the other leading a cataloging team at the Uganda National Archive (UNA) to catalog the Secretariat Topical File Collection, a collection of documents that related to the administration of the Uganda Protectorate under British Colonial rule. At first glance, these two projects seemed completely unrelated, other than through a library science connection. A common thread that tied them together however, was the preservation of materials and the potential for disaster.

Preservation: the image that most often comes to mind might be items stored in a dark and dusty archive or the British Library or perhaps a library at a very old and established university. While the goals of archives and libraries are somewhat different, Helen Tibbo sums up archives concisely when she writes:

Archiving always has the goals of preserving and making accessible documents, records, and other data of enduring value. Enduring value stems from a document or record's intrinsic attributes, the contextual documentation that surrounds it, its relationship to other records and entities, and assurance of its authenticity and reliability. (2003)

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These concepts could just as easily refer to libraries. Tibbo is essentially discussing the view of archives and libraries that materials must retain their contextuality and provenance to remain useful and relevant. While Tibbo is broadly defining what archives do, there is an assumption that archives will be able to fulfill all of the tenets that she puts forth. The reality is far different, due to everything from backlogs of cataloging, to poorly created records, to active destruction of materials for environmental, ethical, historical, political, or cultural reasons. Because preservation literature deals overwhelmingly with the European context, we often don't think about the applications of preservation principles in extreme environments or how non-European countries and cultures might preserve their written heritage. A subset of preservation is disaster management, which encompasses two ideas: planning/preparedness in anticipation of a disaster and management during the disaster. Wong and Green rightfully point out that "...disaster preparedness is an on-going process and exercise. It is appropriate to say that disaster planning is the groundwork preparation for disaster preparedness" (2006). Disaster management and disaster planning are often used synonymously, with the concepts being nestled within the larger idea of preservation.

While preservation of materials is typically one of the goals of heritage institutions, such as archives and large research libraries, this may not be the case of smaller libraries or libraries whose main focus is on user access. Regardless of goal, libraries and archives should take an active interest in disaster management as both types of institutions are susceptible to all manners of disaster, from fire and flood to war and terrorist acts. However, according to the Heritage Health Index of 2014, "...80% of U.S. collecting institutions do not have a written emergency/disaster plan that includes collections with staff trained to carry it out" ("A public trust at risk," 2014). Considering this shockingly high percentage in the U.S. alone, it is likely that a similar or even higher percentage exists for international statistics on disaster planning and management.

In the following pages, two case studies will be presented that revolve around volunteer experiences in Singapore and Uganda. Principles of European preservation will be discussed solely for the sake of comparison. Cloonan states, "Preservationists seek to bridge the gap between preserving objects and preserving cultural traditions. Deciding what and how to preserve can be a cultural, social, and political act. Thus, approaches to preservation vary over time and across cultures" (2010). In terms of preservation then, being aware of the complex contextuality of what is in the archive or library is just as important as keeping in mind potential future uses and current threats to the materials. Similarly, it is equally important to keep in mind the contextual background of the institution when focusing on disaster management.

BACKGROUND

Libraries have been around for centuries and with them the concept of benign neglect—"the idea that most artifacts do not deteriorate rapidly if ignored, thus buying time before preservation attention is needed" (Harvey & Mahard, 2014). Benign neglect is very common in libraries and archives and can be extremely costly, in part because preservation of materials includes working with building issues, collections, furniture, and/or individual items. For a popular culture image, think of Gandalf in the film *The Lord of the Rings*, when he races off to do research about the one ring. He sits in a dimly lit room, which is overly cluttered with parchments, and digs through documents until he finds what he is looking for (Jackson, 2001). This image of an overstuffed archive in the dark is, from a preservation standpoint, certainly one of benign neglect. The intention is good as the archive is darkened and the materials are

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