

Digitally reassembling scattered collections: IFLA, the Memory of the World, and the implementation of the new UNESCO's Recommendation for Documentary Heritage

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Abstract:

The goal of this paper: (1) to give examples of activities in UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme that can count as instances of 'reconstitution' as defined in UNESCO's 2015 Recommendation on Documentary Heritage; (2) to encourage a discussion amongst IFLA experts on what role IFLA should play in the digital 'reconstitution' discussion. This ties in with the IFLA's Key Initiative 3.2.2: Instigate debate and exchange of ideas to explore collection and access issues for libraries in digital / virtual repatriation of documentary cultural heritage content.

Keywords: Digital unification, cultural heritage, UNESCO, Memory of the World

1. Terminology

A document¹ used in the public debate *Memory and Universality: New Challenges Facing Museums*² that took place at UNESCO on February 2, 2007 lists the following terms:

- Restitution
- Return
- Repatriation
- Retrieval/Recovery
- Re-assembly/Reconstitution

¹ <http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/files/39308/12458323313Terminology.pdf/Terminology.pdf>

² http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=32653&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

There is no universal agreement about the precise definition of all of these terms. Some uses have the backing of official Guidelines or outcome documents of expert meetings from UNESCO or ICOM. The demarcation of these terms follows different criteria. The difference between ‘**restitution**’ and ‘**return**’ has to do with *legality*, the former being used only for cases where the heritage was acquired illegally; ‘return’ is used irrespective of the legality of the acquisition. For other terms the specifying difference is based on the party who takes the initiative of the return, about the totality or partiality of the return etc. etc.

‘**Re-assembly**’ and ‘**reconstitution**’ imply a preceding dispersion of the cultural heritage in question. The ICOM *ad hoc* Committee stipulated that requests for restitution should be regarded as more justified as the goal was to ‘reconstitute essential parts of dispersed heritage’.

‘**Reconstitution**’ is used in para 5.3. of the *UNESCO Recommendation Concerning the Preservation of, and Access to, Documentary Heritage including in Digital Form* that was adopted by the General Conference in November 2015:³

5.3. Member States are invited to facilitate the exchange between countries of copies of documentary heritage that relate to their own culture, shared history or heritage, and of other identified documentary heritage, in particular due to their shared and entangled historical nature or in the framework of the reconstitution of dispersed original documents, as appropriate, which has been the object of preservation work in another country. The exchange of copies will have no implications on the ownership of originals.

But if we read this correctly, the real concern of this para of the Recommendation is not *reconstitution* (of originals), but *exchange (of digital copies)*. The Recommendation merely states that reconstitution can be an occasion to share digital copies of the originals that are moved.

In the following we will use the word ‘**unification**’ as an informal term for the act of bringing together documentary heritage that has been dispersed. Three kind can be distinguished:

- ‘virtual unification’
- ‘unification by copying’/‘digital unification’
- ‘real unification’

In **virtual unification** no documents are moved or digitised. A typical example would be a scholarly project in which experts try to determine as precise as possible what a person’s library might have looked like, for example as a means to determine the genealogy of his or her ideas. One can try to reconstruct the bookshelves of an individual or, on a more abstract level, the typical library of mediaeval monk or Renaissance scholar.

If a collection has been dispersed, one can go one step further, viz. by copying the surviving parts and bringing these copies together in one place. As copying is nowadays most often done by means of digitisation, we can often call this **digital reconstitution**. The paragraph in the UNESCO Recommendation clearly shows that the exchange of copies cannot be seen as a

³ <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002339/233916e.pdf>

solution for disagreement of the ownership of originals. This being duly noted, one can nevertheless argue that there are a lot of cases where digitisation can work very well, for example if the value of the collection is mainly situated in the information of the documents, and not in its monetary or wider cultural value, or when two institutions possess equal parts of a dispersed collections and decide to swap copies.

If originals actually are moved to other places, as is the case with restitution, return or repatriation, one can speak of **real unification**. If parties agree to this kind of unification, one can of course digitise the items concerned, so as to give the returning party an alternative way of access to the collections.

2. Digital Unification – what role can IFLA play?

2.1 Background – what is the problem, the library perspective

Collections and original documentary cultural heritage objects have, over time and due to a wide variety of circumstances, found their permanent homes in countries and memory institutions which were not the original producers of these objects. The technological advances over the past decades have now created an environment where digital copies of these objects can be sent to the original country, communities and people more easily.

These possibilities have long been subject to discussion and in 2008, Dr George Anastassopoulos, President of UNESCO General Conference 2007-2009, discussed digital unification, saying:

A convenient albeit pale excuse for old collections to stay where they are, offering plundered cultures the weak compensation of an access to cultures without a soul...the 34th session of UNESCO's General Conference asserted in 2007 that virtual access to cultural property cannot supplant enjoyment of such property in its original and authentic setting... We have to keep in mind that Africa has lost around 95% of its cultural property.⁴

Further to this, *the UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Preservation of, and Access to, Documentary Heritage including in Digital Form* endorsed by the UNESCO General Conference in 2015 states:

2.6: Member States that hold in their memory institutions collections originating in or of relevance to other States are encouraged to share digital programmes and copies of such heritage with the Parties concerned.

Both statements are strong signals to both current holders of the cultural heritage in question and communities where this heritage originates. There is a definite call on UNESCO Member States to unify people and communities with the cultural heritage objects' information which was lost to them in the past.

Many libraries hold documentary cultural heritage which originates in different communities. Many libraries are already working actively with the communities or origin to find ways to at

⁴ Dr George Anastassopoulos, 17 March 2008. Available at: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/laws/pdf/Statement.pdf>

least make the information of this documentary heritage available to the original communities in a digital format.

When approaching digital unification several problems are likely to be encountered when digital objects are made available to the communities of origin.

- Communities do not agree with only receiving digital copies of objects they claim as rightfully theirs
- Copyright of the digital objects may remain with the organization that holds the physical object (e.g. How do national and international systems of ownership, copyright, and intellectual property rights affect the cultural property moved from its originating country? How can the rights of the originating culture be considered? Does the copyright term of the country of origin apply, or of the country where the item is held?). However, a lot of the material will be in the public domain, which is a positive aspect
- Some consider that digitisation projects could inhibit efforts to repatriate the physical object as the community has gained access to the object via the digital version
- Access issues (e.g. Who should have access to the digitised items? How can the digitised collection and the supporting technology reflect indigenous protocols for managing their cultural knowledge?)
- Creating the digital archive (e.g. Who is appropriate to initiate the creation of a digital copy of the artefact? The organization that holds the artefact, or the culture that created it? Who pays for the creation of the digital copy?)

Whatever the side of the argument, this is a conversation which is very much needed and many libraries are already engaging in this exchange, enabling former owners of collections to access and own dispersed collections digitally.

3. UNESCO & Memory of the World

The UNESCO Memory of the World Programme (MoW) was established in 1992 established and has three goals:

- to facilitate preservation, by the most appropriate techniques, of the world's documentary heritage;
- to assist universal access to documentary heritage;
- to increase awareness worldwide of the existence and significance of documentary heritage.

The last point, awareness raising, is mainly achieved via the Memory of the World Register that lists documentary heritage with 'world significance' from all over the world. Every two years there is a possibility to send in nominations for the Register. After the examination of these nominations by the Register Sub-Committee, the International Advisory Committee (IAC) of the Memory of the World Programme advises the Director-General of UNESCO which items should be added to this list.

The Register has become the most important part of the MoW programme. In its initial phase, however, this was not yet the case. In the report of the first MoW meeting, which took place

in Pultusk, Poland, in 1993⁵, the Register was not yet foreseen. Criteria which would later become the criteria for inscription in the Register were at this stage criteria for the selection of documents for preservation or reproduction. Initially, MoW was set up as a catalyst for international projects, not as the World Heritage List for documentary heritage.

Examples of such projects are found on the MoW website. Here we find information on a total of 27 projects.⁶ Because precise dates are often lacking, it is difficult to establish how old these projects are, but most of them seem to be dated from the early years of the programme. The preponderance of projects from Central and Eastern Europe corroborates this; these countries belong to the most active ones in the first phase of MoW. A lot of these projects aim at making a CD-Roms, which also points to an early date.

Two of these 17 projects can count as examples of digital unification project:

3.1 *Bibliotheca Corviniana*⁷

The *Bibliotheca Corvina*, the library of king Mathias of Hungary and Croatia (1458-1490) was the second biggest library of in Renaissance Europe, containing at the death of Mathias some 2000 volumes. 261 of these are known to exist today in some 50 libraries. This project aimed at the ‘reunification in a digital version of the Bibliotheca Corviniana’⁸

The website of the project still exists⁹, but shows no traces of recent activities. It shows that in September 2003 53 books from the collections had been digitised, amounting to 8200 pages in total. We were unable to find these on the website.¹⁰ We are not aware whether other 75% of the books have been digitised after 2003 or not.

3.2. TANAP

TANAP (*Towards a New Age of Partnership*) was a project on safeguarding, digitising and studying the archives of the Dutch East Indies Company, a Dutch trading company active in Asia between 1602 and 1796. Information on the project can be found on its website¹¹. From the very inception of TANAP, the Netherlands government sought the support of UNESCO and its Memory of the World Programme, in order to channel political tensions that might arise in such a project on the shared heritage and history of former colonizer and the former colonies. The project brought together five countries where sizeable portions of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) archives are kept: South-Africa, India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and The Netherlands. The project was launched to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the Dutch East Indies Company in 2002.

In 1996 the project was subject of a Draft Resolution to the 29th General Conference.¹² The Proceedings mention it as a Benelux project (!), open to everybody, to digitise the East India

⁵ <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0009/000963/096365fb.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/projects/>

⁷ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/flagship-project-activities/memory-of-the-world/projects/full-list-of-projects/hungary-bibliotheca-corviniana-project/>

⁸ Nomination form, p. 1:

http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/mow/nomination_forms/bibliotheca_corviniana.pdf

⁹ <http://www.corvina.oszk.hu/>

¹⁰ <http://www.corvina.oszk.hu/BCD-it/index-it.htm>

¹¹ <http://www.tanap.nl/>

¹² Andries van Helden *Een halve eeuw UNESCO : Idealisten en ideologen, intellectuelen en boekhouders*. The Hague (2001), p. 137

Company's archives, that is an example of the kind of projects that the MoW Programme could support.¹³

In 2001, the Netherlands brought up TANAP again in the 31st General Conference:

*The ever-continuing development of ICT provides a powerful impulse for the establishment and subsequent use of peaceful links between individuals and peoples throughout the world. UNESCO can and should explore the almost limitless possibilities of exploiting these new global means of communication with a view to enhancing mutual understanding, strengthening mutual interest and respect among all cultures, increasing access to better educational opportunities and facilitating a better and fairer sharing of scientific and other knowledge. New technologies also allow us to safeguard the cultural memory of the world, as the Netherlands is now doing in cooperation with four other countries, good friends of ours. I am referring to the digitalization of the voluminous seventeenth-century archives of the Dutch East Indies Company which have been preserved in other countries.*¹⁴

Two years later TANAP was inscribed as a joint nomination of the five countries involved, but the project of digitising the materials, training experts and carrying out research was mainly done without much steering or intervention from UNESCO. Indeed, it has been rumoured that a completely unconnected disagreement between the Netherlands and Indonesia about a vote for a seat in a UNESCO body, actually hindered the cooperation between Indonesia and the Netherlands on the expert level for a period of time, so that the UNESCO status of the project was mentioned as little as possible in that period.

TANAP was not a repatriation or unification project, because no originals were moved. The archives had always been decentralised, so it is not so much a reassembly as an assembly. As some of the documents in Asia were hand-copied and transported to the Netherlands in the time of the Company, it is of course possible that materials perished in one place, have been made available again by the digitisation of these old copies. For these cases, TANAP can be seen a reconstitution project.

4. Examples of Memory of the World nominations that can count as reconstitutions

Some of the items inscribed in the MoW Register can be viewed as reconstitutions of documentary heritage.

4.1. Bibliotheca Corviniana (Hungary, Austria, Italy, Germany, France, Belgium)

The MoW project described above resulted in a successful inscription of the *Bibliotheca Corviniana* in the MoW Register in 2005.

4.2. Archives of the Dutch East India Company (Netherlands, India, Indonesia, South Africa, Sri Lanka)

As already mentioned above, the same is true of TANAP, which was inscribed in 2003.

¹³ *Proceedings of the General Conference*, 29th session, volume 3, p. 725:
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001192/119245mo.pdf>

¹⁴ *Proceedings of the General Conference*, 31st session, volume 2, p. 427:
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001289/128966m.pdf>

4.3. *The Arnarnagnaean Manuscript Collection (Denmark/Iceland)*¹⁵

Árni Magnússon (1663-1730), professor of Danish Antiquities at the University of Copenhagen collected almost 3000 manuscripts on Scandinavian literature, including the Edda and Kings' sagas. In May 1965 Iceland and Denmark agreed to return the manuscripts of Icelandic provenance to Iceland. The entire process of transfer took 26 years. In 1997 the last item was handed over. All manuscripts were copied on microfilm or digitally. The collection was inscribed in the register in 2009.

This is an example of a return/repatriation, so a 'real repatriation', combined with copying/digitising for the benefit of both the old and the new owner.

4.4. *Codex Suprasliensis – Mineia četia, Mart (The Supraśl Codex – Menology, March) (Poland, Russian Federation, Slovenia)*

The Codex Suprasliensis is a 10th century Old Church Slavonic manuscript originating from Bulgaria. It had a dramatic history since its rediscovery by the Russian Slavist Mikhail Bobrowski in the monastery of Supraśl (Poland) in 1823. Parts of it are now kept in the National Library in Warsaw, the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg and the National and University Library in Ljubljana.

The first complete publication of all existing parts of the codex was done by S. Severjanov in 1904. The Codex Suprasliensis Project¹⁶ that aims to unite digital images of all three parts of the Codex Suprasliensis, is not one of the 27 Memory of the World Projects listed at UNESCO's website. In addition to reuniting the parts of the manuscript, the project aims to develop an electronic version of the Codex Suprasliensis, together with critical apparatus, parallel Greek text, translation, vocabulary, grammatical analysis, and tools for searching.

So this is a reconstitution by digitising, not a collection, but a single book. It was inscribed in the MoW Register in 2007.¹⁷ In this case, bringing together the institutions involved from Poland, the Russian Federation and Slovenia was not a difficult task¹⁸, but in other instances political tensions can wrack a nomination, as was the case with the following example.

4.5. *Classical Multi-ethnic Collection of Traditional Music by Béla Bartók, Zoltán Kodály and their followers 1896-1945*

This nomination was coordinated by the Institute for Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences written in 2006, with the support of two other Hungarian institutions and institutes from Slovenia, Serbia and Croatia. The nomination form can still be found at UNESCO's website.¹⁹

Bartók (1881-194) and Kodály (1882-1967) were composers whose work is strongly influenced by but also ethnomusicologists who collected traditional music in Hungary and neighbouring countries, using modern techniques like Edison Phonographs. These collections

¹⁵ Nomination form:

http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/mow/nomination_forms/Arnarnagnaean.pdf

¹⁶ <http://csup.ilit.bas.bg/>

¹⁷ Unfortunately, the nomination form is no longer retrievable at the UNESCO website.

¹⁸ Information provided by T. Komorowski of the Polish National Commission for UNESCO

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http://www.google.nl/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&ved=0ahUKEwinlr3fxePNAhWIKcAKHYv2AzMOEggnMAI&url=http%3A%2F%2Fportal.unesco.org%2Fci%2Fen%2Ffiles%2F22622%2F1154522177149_Hungary_Traditional_music.doc%2F49%2BHungary%2BTraditional%2Bmusic.doc&usg=AFQjCNE2tudCEpGW7_o4mwstzuwdNe9v0w&sig2=hYCWdKofU_57c5-0A15ofQ

are kept in institutions in various countries. Due to political tensions between Hungary and Slovakia at that time, the *Institute for Musicology of the Slovakian Academy of Sciences* is not amongst the associated institutions. The nomination mentions this institution as merely 'being aware' of the nomination. Probably because of this remarkable gap in the proposal, UNESCO has not inscribed this nomination.

5. Conclusions and propositions for discussion

What role can IFLA play?

The question we now want to bring to the audience of experts is how IFLA can contribute to the global discussion around providing access to documentary cultural heritage, considering the sensitivities of the environment and local expertise? What role do you see IFLA play in this conversation (e.g. hosting of a high level conference, drafting of a position statement etc.)

What role can the Memory of the World play?

The Memory of the World should promote the use of its Register to support heritage institutions to cooperate in safeguarding, digitising and studying shared heritage in the spirit of respect and cooperation that is a core value of UNESCO.

UNESCO, IFLA, ICA and similar umbrella organisations for documentary heritage institutions should get inspired again by the original spirit of the MoW Programme and give less attention to the Register and more attention to projects for preservation and access.

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