MAKING OKAVANGO RESEARCH INSTITUTE LIBRARY'S SPECIAL COLLECTIONS ACCESSIBLE: FROM 2006 TO DATE

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ABSTRACT: *This paper describes efforts to preserve long-term priceless archival resources by making them accessible while ensuring that they are preserved in their original format, using Okavango Research Institute (ORI) Library's special collections as a case study. The depth of these collections, their acquisition and appraisal processes to determine their significance to the library are described, as well as steps that were followed in integrating them in the library's collections. Special collections are often produced informally and stored in environments determined by the personal resources of the collectors. In ORI library, the collections were sourced mainly from researchers or enthusiasts who worked in different capacities in Ngamiland region and had interest in Okavango Delta and the people who live in the region. The special collections provide unique information of historic value that has the potential to support biodiversity conservation in this protected area. The materials form an essential part of the library's resources. The longevity of these materials is often threatened because they are prone to damage due to their fragility and their previous varying physical environments. Caretakers normally restrict access to such collections to preserve them, which is counterproductive to the intent of the collectors and the mandate of the library. It is therefore the responsibility of libraries to ensure that beyond identification, processing and preservation, such collections are made accessible to users. There are, however, numerous challenges that are encountered in the process of integrating personal collections into the library's resources.*

KEYWORDS: *preservation, special collections, collection access, electronic documents, digitisation.*

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Special collection is a term that is used to define any research material that falls outside the main library collections of current publications, serials and monographs Prochaska (2003). The Okavango Research Institute (ORI) Library is a branch of the University of Botswana (UB) Library Services, which serves a broad community of researchers and stakeholders involved in studying and planning for the Okavango Delta region. Its collection of information resources cover a wide range of subject areas of interest to the Okavango research community.

The Institute's research themes include ecosystem dynamics and services, water resources management, sustainable tourism and climate change. The library supports ORI in its vision of being a leading wetland research institute in Africa and the world by preserving and ensuring continued access to the Okavango region's legacy of biodiversity data and information. In its effort of preserving these legacy materials, the library has over the years collected information materials from scholars who worked in the different capacities in the Okavango Delta.

Other than materials acquired through the normal acquisition process, ORI Library has received donations that have proven to be rich sources of information about the Okavango Delta region. The materials enhance our understanding of the history of Ngamiland, and their contents are of interest to researchers and writers, both as background information and data that leads to the development of further knowledge. According to Morrison (2007), the library relied on the insights and observations of researchers to identify information sources for inclusion in the special collections. The Library had to find ways of preserving and making the materials, which are mostly in a fragile condition, accessible. This was made possible through digitising the collections and sharing them using several different platforms.

THE COLLECTIONS

Digitising collections is vital as digitised materials provide broader and intensified access to a larger community and collections of different types (Yan Quan Liu 2004). Moreover, they can be copied to diverse formats and from one storage medium to the other through "refreshing" as Lazinger (2001) calls it, to prevent the destruction of original materials.

The ORI Library has received donations of private collections of more than 4000 books, journals, aerial photographs and maps, professional correspondence, interviews, and other materials accumulated over a 30-year period by a former government officer, Mr Peter Alexander Smith. Many of the materials donated by Smith were rare, unique and out of print. Smith worked in various positions for the Bechuanaland Protectorate Government and subsequently, the Botswana Government, mainly in the areas of tsetse fly and invasive aquatic plant control. Through working in these positions, in and around the Okavango Delta, he became recognised for his knowledge of the ecology and botany of the area. Peter Smith's trips into the Okavango Delta, a major wetland in north-west Botswana, with a very rich flora and fauna, involved scribbling his observations and notes on 1:50000 topographic maps. His donated works now form part of the University of Botswana, Okavango Research Institute Library's natural collections. The maps have approximately 4500 handwritten annotations of observed flora, fauna, places and water channels within the Delta. However, due to their fragility, access and retrieval of information on the maps by library clients is restricted, and decoding the handwriting requires expert knowledge about the features on the maps.

To ensure preservation, access and usage of the information on the maps, a story map was created. This was made accessible through a story map platform. At the scanning stage, the contextual documents were subjected to Optical Character Recognition (OCR) technology to make their contents machine readable and searchable. Each annotation was then transcribed by the library staff.

After transcription, error checking and interpretation by relevant content experts the institute, each annotation was stored as a point in a GIS database. The images and annotations were then transformed for internet access using a GIS internet map server. Finally, a story web map was created from the now 'web friendly' collection by applying web page templates found on ArcGIS Online to create a rich, user friendly and interactive home for the Pete Smith Annotated Map Collection. A basemap from the National Geographic was selected and overlaid with the annotations web map layer. Annotations of the shape files were then loaded onto the basemap. To configure the storytelling application, the compare template was chosen, which enables comparison of past and current features.

Finally, more information was added to the map using botany and hydrology domain expertise, and other users who could shed more light on the annotation data. Landis (2007), supports this and interprets it as a philosophy and procedure that promotes user participation and has roots in diverse fields. The product was then shared through a publicly accessible web-based platform called story map (https:www.odis.ub.bw/portal/apps/StoryMapBasic/index.html?appid=aa5669abd14e9ddb6ab1fb20be2047).

Another digitisation project provides access to a collection of slides documenting the culture and indigenous knowledge of the San in the Okavango Delta and Bere/Takatshwane region by Dr Hans Joachim Heinz, a parasitologist who lived amongst the Ko! San for many years. He studied their social organisation and documented their botanical, entomological, and anatomical knowledge Heinz (1979).

The slides provide insights to the San communities' collective knowledge of all aspects of their way of life. The slides are accompanied by descriptions obtained by library staff from the San themselves. While the collection had formerly been held in the custody of the ORI library, without a formal agreement in place, copyright was transferred to the University of Botswana in December 2006. The Library intends to publish the photographic collection of the San through SuAVE (Survey Analysis via Visual Exploration), an online platform for visual exploratory analysis of surveys and image collections. It integrates visual, statistical and cartographic analysis and allows users to annotate and share images and distribution patterns Ilia State University (2014).

A collection of books, research reports, photographs and notebooks from the late wildlife biologist, Dr Richard Bell, was obtained as a gift in 2007. Bell was prominent for his knowledge of wildlife monitoring techniques and community wildlife management schemes. Dr Bell worked as a wildlife biologist throughout southern Africa for 30 years. He moved to Maun from Zambia in 1993, worked on a project with the Botswana Department of Wildlife and National Parks, and then set up his own consulting firm in Maun until 2003, when he passed on. His collection come from all stages of his work in Malawi, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Botswana, Tanzania, and Mozambique. Bell was a voracious reader and collector of research materials. He was deeply interested in the philosophy of conservation and had worked extensively with development of community wildlife management schemes. He was known for his detailed note taking - the collection contains approximately 20 hard covered notebooks filled with minutes of meetings and observations, for which an index has been prepared.

In 2015, the library added hunting records collected by Mrs Debbie Peake, a Maun-based taxidermy supplier and secretary of the Botswana Wildlife Management Association (BWMA). The materials are a potentially rich source of biodiversity information. Information collected by the Botswana Wildlife Management Association between 1996 and 2014 about hunting quotas, concession location, and trophy measurements, as well as biological specimens, forms an important piece of the knowledge legacy of legal hunting in Botswana. Following the 2014 suspension of hunting in Botswana, recognizing the valuable insights to wildlife research that these materials can provide, the Association worked with the University of Botswana's Okavango Research Institute to catalogue, transfer and preserve the materials in the ORI's library and archival collections, and to capture the data in a widely accessible online resource, the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF) (https://www.gbif.org/project/82758/data-rescue-for-the-records-of-the-botswana-wildlife-management-association#datasets).

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED

Research libraries are often required to acquire materials supporting the institution's areas of research, and to anticipate the needs of future scholars. Issues of inheritance and legal transfer sometimes hamper the legitimacy of the acquired collection as it takes time to allocate copyright when the inheritance is contested. In some cases, the proper process of transfer is not implemented, resulting in some collections not having deeds of transfer. Moreover, several issues are allied with the usage of digital information as it can be easily distributed across the world through various digital medium, making it prone to modification and difficult for one to detect the rightful owner Shettar (2014). Technological obsolescence can be a challenging issue, as technological infrastructure needs upgrading from time to time. Infrastructure used as storage for the digitized collections can be problematic as systems at times crash Hughes (2004).

Incorporating personal collections into a library's resources often faces challenges such as lack of storage facilities for the original materials, which is the case with the current unique collections at the ORI. The collections' specialised storage facilities require the right temperature and humidity to ensure their longevity. The library does not have adequate storage facilities. This inadequate storage space hinders exposure and access to these valuable collections. For example, the ORI Library's special collection houses some historic images that need to be displayed. Had there been enough space for these collections, these photographs could be exhibited on the walls for them to become a vital part of research materials, library tours, and to be shown to students during orientations. Such displays could also be used to market the library to potential users.

There is also a dire need for capacity building to enable staff to acquire the technical skills needed to work with these fragile collections. Training of staff is not readily implemented by institutions due to financial constraints Sunil (2009). Preservation standards to be followed are a necessity, and access to appropriate materials for packaging is also needed. These can be expensive to acquire. Dappert (2010, 5-13), states that: "Digital media are brittle and short lived. Hardware and software technology continue to evolve rapidly. Changes in organizations and their cultural and financial priorities add risk to continued accessibility and long-term preservation of digital assets". Thus, Conservation of library materials through digitisation should be a priority as it is an emerging area and library professionals should draw attention to proper preservation measures Sunil (2009).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite these challenges, the ORI Library intends to ensure that the data contained in these collections are preserved and made accessible as they can provide insights to environmental research in the region. They also encompass rich context for scientific and economic studies of natural resources management in the region that can as well be substantial in informing decisions. In addition, the ORI Library's experience with these special collections, and their embedded data, should be of interest to other memory institutions and to researchers seeking content for their work.

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