

# 3. Someone's treasure – a legacy for all?

## The future of La Antigua Guatemala's Casa K'ojom *Samuel Franco Arce*

**The Casa K'ojom in La Antigua Guatemala, Guatemala, houses a unique collection of physical objects and audiovisual materials devoted to Mayan cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible. What began as a private collection has evolved into a museum where thousands of visitors have learned about Mayan culture and music. This paper highlights the development and care of the collections from the perspective of the Casa K'ojom's founder and current director, Samuel Franco Arce. It reviews the steps he is taking to preserve the collection's analogue and digital material for the future, all the while not neglecting important non-digital artefacts. It also proposes future solutions to issues within an archive that has to address constantly changing technologies, user needs, audiovisual formats and intellectual property rights laws.**

Private collections can become an obsessive passion that drives the collector to explore the deepest waters of the ocean in the search to enrich the value of a particular object or its associated subject. Throughout history, private collections of all kinds, including audiovisual (AV) collections, have provided us with information and entertainment about the places, objects and ways of thinking and living of a particular community, most often thanks to the passion and effort of one person.

This is a story about a personal collection of photographs and audio and video recordings that grew out of a desire to explore, discover and contribute to the research, documentation, preservation and dissemination of the living Mayan intangible cultural heritage. This archive, collected over 30 years of fieldwork research, is full of significant political, social, religious and technological changes and events that have affected the Mayan ways of living and traditional practices. Its audiovisual materials document Mayan music, dance, spiritual rites, weaving techniques and domestic life. There is no similar audiovisual archive available, either public or private.

### **The Casa K'ojom: a documentation centre and museum**

In order to share some content of the AV archives with students, researchers and tourists, and to generate funds to continue conducting field trips to document and record activities in the various Mayan communities, Casa K'ojom (K'ojom means 'music' in the Mayan language) was opened in 1987, as a documentation centre and museum. It is located in La Antigua Guatemala, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1979.

Casa K'ojom was originally based in an auditorium, where visitors enjoyed an AV presentation on Mayan culture through a high-fidelity sound system and multi-slide projectors. Another area permanently displayed traditional musical instruments, dance costumes and masks, ritual artefacts, domestic costumes and objects, naïf paintings and photographs. The experiment of presenting AV content as the main act, combined with an exhibit of related ethnographic objects, made the Casa K'ojom a popular destination for national and foreign visitors.

Casa K'ojom is currently recognized by the Guatemalan Ministry of Culture as an ethnographic museum and documentation centre. It is an active member of the Guatemalan Association of Museums and the National Committee of the International Council of Museums (ICOM). Income is generated primarily through admissions and the gift shop. Occasional funding comes from other activities such as videography and audiovisual editing services, events,

live performances, coordination of research field trips to Mayan communities for groups of students or academics, publications, conferences, workshops, lectures, travelling exhibits and collaboration projects with national and international museums and cultural institutions.

### **Cross-cultural links within the archive**

Through the Casa K'ojom, I have been researching and documenting cultural links between the Asian, African and Mayan cultures. After 2004, the research and fieldwork area expanded to some Asian and African countries. With the aid of grants and personal resources, I have participated in workshops, training courses, field trips and collaboration projects with colleagues from similar museums in different countries in Asia and Africa.

Since its start, the Casa K'ojom has focused on music. One of our first projects was to research and document the link between xylophones from Asia, Africa and America. The marimba, which means 'sounds of wood' in Bantu African language, is a xylophone usually associated with the southeast of Mexico, Central America and Colombia.

There have been a few attempts to try to establish whether the marimba existed in pre-Hispanic times in the Meso-American cultural area, in addition to the *tun*, *tunkul* or *teponastli* (a slit log drum made from the same hardwoods utilized for the wooden bars of the marimba keyboard, used after 900 CE), yet no archaeological evidence has been found related to xylophones. Spaniards' chronicles first mention the use of the musical instrument by indigenous people in 1680, during a public event. Since this time coincides with the period of slave trading from Africa to the Caribbean islands and South America, the marimba is probably a concept brought by African slaves and their descendants. Yet the material for its construction, such as hardwoods and gourds, already existed in the Central American region. Casa K'ojom has a wide collection of audio and video recordings of diatonic and chromatic marimbas from Guatemala, and through field trips we have also managed to record some similar xylophones in Mexico, Malawi, the Philippines, Mozambique and Indonesia.

### **Advancing technologies and conserving digital materials**

Looking to future times, the constantly advancing mobile technology found on smartphones, watches, tablets, cameras and other gadgets captures media that can be immediately shared through social media networks and stored in the cloud. This current lifestyle is making each of us an individual AV collector, but we may also need to become the conservators of our personal collections if we wish to safeguard them, especially in these times of faster changing

fragile technology of operating systems, processors, applications, storage, interfaces, resolutions and formats.

For those involved in raising preservation awareness or conducting crowdsourcing activities for private AV content, there is a large community of AV private collectors who need to design and exchange effective models for preservation, access and business in order to be able to share their treasures with the world. The next step for an already acquired AV collection is the challenge of finding an institutional partner, such as an international archive or university, interested in or associated with this kind of heritage. Together, the collector and the institutional partner must develop an agreement to share, properly curate, catalogue and safeguard the collection according to the current international standards. The collection should then be prepared to be shared with and accessed online, or by other related means, by associated networks and the general public around the world.

### **Conserving non-digital materials**

The Casa K'ojom collection of pre- and post-Hispanic musical instruments, masks, costumes, textiles, domestic and ritual artefacts also needs attention in terms of conservation. Most musical instruments and masks are made from different kinds of woods – some soft, some hard. The tropical climate of the region is, unfortunately, great for hosting termites. Some objects have been exposed in the exhibits for almost 30 years, and the collection is currently in need of urgent preventive conservation treatment. Although most of the collection is intact, some objects are showing warning signs regarding their conservation state. The museum is developing an action plan but needs a partner to adopt the collections – which include musical instruments, masks, costumes, paintings, photos and audio and video content with metadata – for conservation and publishing purposes. They could also be developed as content for multimedia exhibits, either in museums or online.

Throughout my 61 years of life, at home, in school and during my professional career as a sound engineer, I have been privileged to live in an era of technological change. I have witnessed the conquest of the moon and space, the development of video, advancements in the digital world, satellite dishes, personal computers, cable television, the Internet, smartphones, tablets and more. I have seen the progress from the analogue days of quarter-inch magnetic tape and film to the multi format variety of videotapes to digital audio- and videotapes to solid-state memory cards, from linear to non-linear audio and video editing systems to a wide menu of codecs found in today's video cameras and software. These constantly evolving technologies have been used to capture images and sounds that form my AV collection.

As a result, the digitizing of this archive is a very complex and challenging task for a small institution like Casa K'ojom.

### **Current issues at the Casa K'ojom**

The storage conditions of the AV collection have been less than ideal throughout all these years. La Antigua Guatemala is a very humid place; relative humidity can get up to 90 percent during the rainy season, and temperatures are around 20 °C on average. Analogue tapes and photos have been stored in a semi-treated space, partially controlled with an electric dehumidifier and fans in the rainy season, to try to keep the relative humidity to at least at 60 percent.

Another major issue may be the lack of available playback machines for the various formats held in the museum. Many of the needed machines are gone. Often there are no spares, and no engineers or manuals to fix them.

The digital assets also represent a new, challenging situation that is complex, expensive and time-consuming. Technologies are developing much faster today, and most platforms have a very short life span. The process of migrating assets is a task to think about if you do not want to have unpleasant surprises in the future. Solutions such as outsourcing storage management of digital assets in the cloud is an option, but may be costly.

### **Intellectual property rights and copyright laws**

Other issues may arise when dealing with user access to collections. Personally, when I first explored the possibility of sharing my collection with other institutions like universities, I encountered the legal framework associated with intellectual property rights and copyright laws related to the content of the archive.

Since most of my field recordings were made during public festivals, rituals, dances and situations involving many performers and people, there are many occasions where there is no chance to obtain a release form signed by everyone. These are public activities that involve a whole community. But not having a signed release to use, reproduce or distribute the content may result in problems unless there is legislation or a legal agreement that specifies such cases, especially for non-profit or educational purposes. There is no way to go back in time to get release forms signed from people who may have already gone somewhere else, or who may have already died. However, whenever the working conditions and environment allow it, a release form should always be signed to ensure that future uses are ethical and accepted.

### **Future plans for the Casa K'ojom collection**

The content of the Casa K'ojom could be utilized by university students studying ethnomusicology, ethnography, anthropology, archaeology and world history. Over a million Mayan emigrants live in the United States and other countries, and these communities would appreciate access to this content. Some in the Mayan community left their land and families at a very early age; others were born abroad. In addition to those living abroad, the Mayan communities in Guatemala and Mexico (about 10 million) could access this archive full of memories of their ancestors, roots and cultural identity.

The AV collection can be organized and published online to be shared with people all over the world. Texts, photos, audios and videos could be classified by ethnic groups, or according to geographic environment, vernacular architecture, agriculture, language, traditional costumes, markets, festivals and rituals.

There are some concerns in transitioning from a personal collection to an institutional organization, but this is where the individual collector can be invaluable. For instance, as the person who documented the AV collection of the Casa K'ojom, I can offer guidance and support during the curatorial process and can provide information on technical and descriptive metadata. Even though basic descriptive information may be written on labels of analogue tape boxes and digital assets have basic descriptive metadata embedded, additional information provided by the producer will always be useful and appreciated by the publisher and by end users.

### **Using the archive for educational purposes**

Thirty years after beginning this personal adventure, which we may call 'someone's treasure', I would like to share this legacy, as long as proper administration and technologies allow it. My future vision for the best use and conservation of this collection is its adoption by an institution, such as a university with interest either in ethnomusicology, musicology, anthropology or ethnology, or Mayan and world cultures. Ideally, an agreement could be reached between the collection and the university in which students can get school credits by performing different activities in the field and in their classrooms. Students can undertake tasks such as digitizing, editing, ingesting metadata into a well-established open archival information system (OAIS), uploading files to the web and creating back-up copies. In addition, these students would have access to more than 100 musical instruments in the Casa K'ojom collection to be used for research purposes, including playing and recording them.

At present, I can be fully engaged in the curatorial process. I can also hold lectures on intangible cultural heritage and AV assets, use and risk preparedness, and intellectual property rights. Practice training sessions on field recording could also be a useful experience for students interested in the AV field.

Not only do I wish to pass the collection of AV assets to a new generation, but I want to pass along my own knowledge of the AV field. I have worked with sound technology for more than 40 years: beginning with my first lessons about sound recording at the Polytechnic of North London, followed by my job as a label manager of A&M, EMI and Capitol Records for the Central American area, where I was introduced to the real world of musicians, recording studios, disc jockeys and radio and television producers, newspaper reporters, discotheques, live performances, photographers and filmmakers. I did additional work for National Geographic and BBC Panorama, and worked with other television networks, museums, NGOs and corporate businesses. Since 1987 I have been the director and archivist at Casa K'ojom, where I have shared the archive's collection with thousands of visitors.

Since 2009 I have been involved with the SOIMA programme, first as a student and later as a member of the teaching team in various SOIMA courses around the world. It has been a unique opportunity to meet colleagues facing the same challenges in safeguarding their AV collections. Through the SOIMA courses, we can learn about others' solutions, and we have the opportunity to learn from experts on the teaching team. Through the SOIMA network, we can collaborate to develop different solutions for the future conservation and use of our AV collections. My participation in the SOIMA courses has reinforced, updated and broadened my

knowledge and has helped me catch up to technological changes in a very practical, effective and entertaining way.

## Conclusion

The Casa K'ojom archive has been meticulously built over the past decades. The collection is very valuable for the Mayan community, but it also has broad significance as an archive and collection of artefacts which preserve the memories and heritage of a cultural group. My work at the archive has been extensive, and I believe it is important to share my experience with new generations. For the good of the archive, I encourage a dually beneficial collaboration with a university program or another institution that can utilize our collection while also using it to teach techniques and practices critical to the audiovisual field such as digitization, metadata description and safeguarding of digital files.

**Samuel Franco Arce** has been working in the field of audio preservation for more than 25 years. After training at the Polytechnic of North London, he worked in the music recording industry in Guatemala as a producer and studio engineer. From 1985 to 1997, he worked in the Americas, the Caribbean and Europe as a freelance field sound recordist for crews from the National Geographic Society, BBC, RAI, ABC, NBC, PBS and Columbia Pictures. In 1987 he founded Casa K'ojom, a research centre and museum. He has documented Mayan traditional music, dance, rituals and intangible cultural heritage through photographs, audio and video recordings and has produced several documentaries and publications related to the Casa K'ojom and other museums nationally and worldwide. Since 2003, he has also been documenting traditional music in Asia and Africa as part of his research on African, Asian and Mesoamerican xylophones.