

18. Applying the ‘baby nursing model’ in under-resourced audiovisual archives in Africa

The J. H. Kwabena Nketia Archives at the University of Ghana

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It is a well-known fact that there has been extensive documentation of African traditional arts in postcolonial Africa, and this has contributed to the growing accumulation of field recordings in Africa that could form the nucleus for archives in individual African countries. These include private collections as well as recordings at broadcasting and television stations; government ministries such as Tourism, Culture and Information; museums and academic institutions. Sadly, these precious traditions – which have been expensively captured – are often not properly managed in their host institutions. The caretakers of this heritage mostly sit by as collections deteriorate and sometimes are disposed of due to lack of institutional support. Such practices prevail in most African archives. This paper proposes a new mode of consciousness of the value of audiovisual heritage materials by comparing them with human babies. This new archival

management principle, ‘the baby nursing model’, has been adopted and practiced at the University of Ghana and has achieved positive results.

In publications about audiovisual preservation from organizations such as UNESCO, SOIMA, the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA), the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) and others, one routinely encounters statements such as:

Audiovisual documents, such as films, radio and television programs, are our common heritage and contain the primary records of the 20th and 21st centuries. They help to maintain the cultural identity of a people.

Or “Sound and Image records account for a large portion of the world’s memory” and are thus “valuable and indispensable both as an intangible heritage and [as] contemporary culture”. Nevertheless, one also reads that “[m]uch of the world’s audiovisual heritage has already been irrevocably lost through neglect, destruction, decay and the lack of resources, skills, and structures, thus impoverishing the memory of mankind” (UNESCO, 2015).

The feeling that these universally shared truisms initially cause an archivist, who is literally surrounded by direly neglected audiovisual heritage collections in his or her region, is pity. Then they lead to the nagging question, what can and should realistically be done for the preservation and the management of these highly endangered sound and image collections in sub-Saharan Africa?

Audiovisual heritage documentation and management

According to Nketia (2000), the initiative taken by the western world to record, preserve, promote and disseminate knowledge of traditional music and related arts is a remarkable achievement of the twentieth century. Nketia further stresses that this initiative has brought new challenges not only to the public but also to creative musicians, performers, educators and records managers.

National independence in many African countries has been followed by a cultural self-assessment. It is a moment when many African heritage institutions, as well as some institutions of learning, started undertaking research and documentation of their cultural traditions (Asiamah, 1994).

There is a general interest in the music and traditional arts in Africa. The continent possesses an invaluable wealth of sound and image heritage that needs to be kept alive (Asiamah, 1994). Africa – the source of all humanity – is a continent always defined by change and innovation. That said, African audiovisual collections are not only rare; they also lack material resources and technological support and have attracted relatively little academic research (McCracken, 2016).

Proper archiving of audiovisual resources in Africa is key to the continent's development, and many archivists and archival institutions around the globe, and particularly in Africa, face the unnerving task of managing these priceless collections. Audiovisual archives in most African countries, including Ghana, are in a state of neglect. These collections are complex and diverse and differ from other archives in many ways. Their physical attributes pose special problems of handling, storage and preservation (Leary, 1988). The preservation of endangered archives is not solely a technical or even a financial issue; it also has a strong social component, which once again underlines the need for cross-disciplinary thinking.

In this paper, I spell out how an archival management principle that I refer to as the 'baby nursing model' could successfully be applied by archivists and heritage caretakers in such chronically under-resourced institutions. For the purpose of this study, the baby represents the archival material or collection, and the parent represents the collections manager or archivist or, in a broader context, the archival institution. There are two basic principles in this analogy: the social factor and the self-starter principle (McQuerrey, 2016).

The baby nursing model

It is a universal fact that nursing a baby is both exciting and challenging (Child Development Institute, 2015). It requires time, self-sacrifice, care and resources. There are several basic baby nursing principles that have been developed by experts in the baby or child development field. These offer valuable tips on how to make the baby nursing journey smooth. Four principles are particularly appropriate for caring for archives:

1. Acceptance of responsibility of your baby.
2. Empathy or emotional attachment to your baby (knowing your baby).
3. Caring for your baby.
4. Identifying problems and getting help when necessary.

Accepting responsibility

Although some babies come by accident, most often it is an agreement between the parents to have the child. Simply put, an acceptance to have a baby is an acceptance of responsibility. Parents set about parenthood with the best of intentions – to bring up the child as well as possible, to make the child happy and also a source of happiness to others. These are real intentions, not just wishes but a determined conscientious commitment (Creffield, 2013). Every good and responsible parent is proud of the baby (Fig. 1).

Once someone decides to have a baby, then it obviously means that he or she has accepted responsibility of taking



FIGURE 1. Miss Dorgbadzi bonding with Baby Fosuaa. Photo by Tiwaa Opoku-Boateng

care of the baby. If an archivist accepts the responsibility to manage a heritage collection, then he or she has accepted the responsibility to offer proper care for the collection. Leary (1988) supports this principle, that most national archives and a growing number of smaller archival institutions have accepted the responsibility to systematically acquire and preserve audiovisual records. Archivists managing these precious collections must therefore accept that these records are unique. They must also be mindful of their obligation to preserve and make available their entire holdings, not merely the most precious items, to satisfy their clients and posterity.

Emotional attachment

Getting to know your baby is part of a fascinating but relatively simple process called bonding. When you bond with your child you essentially ‘fall in love’ with each other. It is an ongoing process of intimacy, understanding and nurturing (Stanford Children’s Health, 2016). Although bonding is a natural process, it sometimes takes effort. Baby nursing is a time for reinforcing bonds that will last a lifetime, providing the child with the inner resources to develop self-esteem and the ability to relate positively with others. It is also a time for parents to discover who this new person really is (Fig. 2).



FIGURE 2. Nana Yaw Perbi getting emotionally attached to Baby Perbi. Photo courtesy the Perbi family

The principle of developing an empathic relationship with your collection is equally vital when it comes to managing audiovisual archives. Audiovisual materials have unique physiognomies which can only be discovered when the archivist applies emotional attachment to them. If this empathic relationship is non-existent, positive results cannot be achieved. Heritage practitioners and those tasked with managing archival institutions should fall in love with the collections under their care, which will definitely reflect in their management practices, decisions or policies. As stated above, bonding is a natural process, but it takes effort to make it viable. When an archivist loves her collection, she will take her time to study its history, investigate the chemical composition of each material, explore proper ways to care for it and be an advocate for the collection. Archivists who are unwilling to advocate for their collection are ‘not lovers of their collection’. They need to reorient their mindset about the expectations of their profession.

Caring

Baby nursing entails proper care. It requires much attention for the little one. Love lies at the core of your relationship with your baby. It needs to flow freely. This free flow of love should be exhibited in the child-caring process. The baby’s health is dependent on the care she receives from the parent (Shelov and Altman, 2009). Parents should properly monitor every movement so that they can meet the baby’s needs. Personal experience has taught me that each child is unique, and it is imperative that parents learn to understand, respect, support and encourage the unique characteristics and abilities of each child. Babies, unlike adults, have mouths but cannot talk to express their feelings. Good parents know when the baby has to eat, bathe, play and more.

Once an archivist accepts the responsibility to manage the collection, the next task is to think about how the materials can be properly managed. Caring for the materials is imperative in the baby nursing model. Just as a parent will obviously provide a clean and hygienic environment for the baby to grow strong, keep healthy and thrive, the archivist also has the responsibility to apply these baby nursing practices to her collection. Audiovisual heritage materials are fragile like human babies, and as such they require optimum care. Leary (1988) asserts that the reward for providing the best affordable care for all items in the archive is the opportunity to work with materials that not only inform in revealing ways but often delight with artistic qualities rarely found in other archival records. Like babies, archival materials have hidden potentials which can only be revealed when massive and generous care is given. Leary outlines some basic principles of managing audiovisual

collections: *appraisal, arrangement and description, preservation and access*. These principles currently exist in most archival institutions in Africa, but the question is, are they properly adhered to? The care factor in audiovisual heritage preservation is critical, but unfortunately, the picture emerging from most archival institutions in Africa is a rather bizarre one (Opoku-Boateng, 2005). Heritage practitioners waste their time and energy complaining about funding, low remuneration and unsupportive superiors, and they sit by as their collections rot. I believe if this energy is channelled into applying basic care to collections and seeking help when necessary, the collections will live and not die and the history of the nation can be told to posterity.

Identifying problems and getting help

Although it is an enormous challenge, parenthood can be more rewarding and enjoyable than any other part of life. According to Shelov and Altman (2009), though sometimes problems are bound to arise, and occasionally you may be able to handle them alone, there is no reason to feel guilty or embarrassed about this. However, when the problems exceed your capacity as a parent, external support should be sought. Healthy families (parents) accept the fact and confront difficulties directly. They also respect the danger signals and get help promptly when the need arises (Shelov and Altman, 2009). Emergency response to unfortunate situations should be one of the guiding principles of good parents when it comes to the baby nursing process.

According to Leary (1988), preservation is a particularly important responsibility for audiovisual archivists. These types of records are generally more perishable than the other formats, and their preservation costs per unit are relatively high. Leary further states that effective preventive maintenance requires protecting the materials from the two primary contributors to deterioration – improper storage and use – as well as identifying the signs of deterioration in time to take corrective action. Just as no parent would want to see the baby die from a sickness that could have been prevented, archivists should embrace Leary's concept to prevent further destruction of their materials. Additionally, it is important that besides the problem of identification and taking corrective action to eradicate the threat, archivists should have emergency responses and contingency plans at hand with regard to their collection, which will prevent potential future catastrophes. In situations where the threat identified in the collection is beyond their capacities, external support should be considered.

In recent times there are numerous consulting firms and organizations in the developed countries, particularly Europe

and North America, with focus on audiovisual heritage preservation strategies. Besides, there are training opportunities such as ICCROM's SOIMA, New York University's Audiovisual Preservation Exchanges (APEX), the Federation of International Association of Films (FIAP) School on Wheels and efforts sponsored by Canal France International (CFI), the Southeast Asia-Pacific Audiovisual Archive Association (SEAPAVAA) and others. These programmes, if consulted by archivists in these under-resourced archives in Africa will put the archive on an appreciable level.

Nonetheless, if the archivist does not apply the self-starter principle or social factor principle of managing her collection, it will definitely be difficult to attract such kinds of external support to effectively manage archival collections.

The journey of the J. H. Kwabena Nketia Archives

The collection I care for is a famous and widely used archive, holding African cultural heritage resources that were collected by the renowned musicologist and authority on African music and aesthetics J. H. Kwabena Nketia at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, Legon, as early as 1952 (Fig. 3).

This was Nketia's view when he started documenting indigenous cultures from across the country and the African continent:¹

We at the School of Music and Drama believe that African traditional arts should be recorded, they should be preserved, they should be studied. But we



FIGURE 3. Front view of the J. H. Kwabena Nketia Archives at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana. Photo by Mrs Selina Okle

¹ This speech was extracted from the quarter-inch open reels which are currently being digitized under the MAARA project. Nketia made the speech in 1965 during the University of Ghana's convocation.

believe also that they should not merely be studied, recorded, preserved, but practiced as living art. We believe also that the art must develop and that the study of African traditions should inspire creative experiments in the African idiom. We believe further that there is room for creating new cultural synthesis out of African traditions, new cultural synthesis out of both African traditions and new techniques and resources from other areas. A happy synthesis, however, can only emerge when the creative and sensitive artist is sufficiently and intelligently exposed to the traditions that he brings together in a new artistic synthesis. And, while emphasizing African traditions as a foundation on which we build, we don't ignore other traditions which might help the student to enlarge his resources or acquire new techniques or broaden his outlook (Paris, 2015).

Over the years research expeditions by other (ethno) musicologists, fellows and visiting researchers of the institute have increased the archive's holdings with thousands of recordings on vastly different media such as quarter-inch open reels, vinyl records, audio cassettes, compact discs, VHS tapes, DVDs, etc. The archive's contents include music from all over Africa and in particular Ghana, priceless recordings of already vanishing traditions as well as large samples of more recent, and therefore usually not systematically collected, popular music. One of the key characteristics that makes the archive unique is that the earliest recordings by J. H. Kwabena Nketia are the largest and most systematic set of recordings from an African ethnomusicologist spanning some 40 years of field research.

Earlier (and probably premature) attempts during the 1990s to digitize the quarter-inch open reels that are the core of the archive's collection in a sort of bottom-down process definitely did not follow the baby nursing model. Therefore the archive ended up with various bewildering legal and technical issues. Already the chosen medium of that time, digital audio tape (DAT) (almost fallen into oblivion by now), proved to be somewhat inappropriate for the specific conditions in Ghana. Other institutions came in a couple of years later and offered their assistance, but those offers were usually coupled with the condition to take a clone of the 'baby' permanently into foster care (i.e. to host copies of the material on their own servers and make them available to their patrons).

Obviously such a condition bears wide and highly uncomfortable implications for archivists who have good reasons to fear that aside from the ethical considerations it

will threaten the further usefulness and existence of their own positions and institutions.

The support of ICCROM's SOIMA training and, following that, New York University's Moving Image and Archiving and Preservation Program (MIAP), through its research initiative Audiovisual Preservation Exchange (APEX) Ghana, and AVPreserve set in exactly where this parent's capacities to care for her baby had reached their limit.

Applying the 'baby nursing model'

The MAARA project

Making African Academic Resources Accessible (MAARA) is a collaboration between the University of Ghana's Institute of African Studies (IAS) and the APEX effort at New York University's MIAP. The goals of this initiative are to:

- build capacity for archival quality digitization at the IAS Archive to support the transfer of audio tapes dating back to the early 1950s;
- create broad access and ensure digital preservation of the newly created digital assets through collaboration with the University of Ghana Computing Systems (UGCS); and
- promote Ghana's rich sound heritage by facilitating new uses of these materials for teaching, learning, scholarship and production.

The project took off in July 2014 with the installation of an audio digitization station at the J. H. Kwabena Nketia Archives.² The project also represents the final stage in the creation of a model digital repository for audiovisual heritage materials in Ghana. The core design was developed from the ground up as a labour of love by audiovisual caretakers and users from both institutions, as well as librarians, archivists, educators, scholars and students (APEX Ghana, 2014) (Fig. 4–6).

The effort has not only digitized the collections and made them accessible both within the university and worldwide, but it has also given the J. H. Kwabena Nketia Archives the capacities to successfully continue that work. It is worth noting that permanent sustainable projects in an archive are key to the archive's positive development (Asogwa, 2011).

The new phase of the Nketia Archives

The transformation at the Nketia Archives has been extremely encouraging. There is now a regular allocation in the university's budget for the archives (because it has contributed to the university's ranking and

² See www.apexghana.org.



FIGURE 4. Ladies of the MAARA project showcasing quarter-inch open reels to announce the project's start. From left: Rhina Amakye, Mona Jimenez, Judith Opoku-Boateng, Fidelia Ametewee, Kara Van Malssen and Selina Okle. Photo by George Gyasi Gyesaw

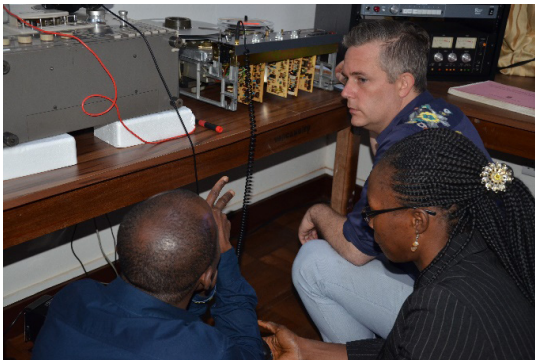


FIGURE 5. Chris Lacinak of AVPreserve training Nketia Archives staff on setting up an audio digitization laboratory. Photo by Selina Okle



FIGURE 7. Listening station at the Nketia Archives.



FIGURE 6. Kara Van Malssen from AVPreserve helping George Gyasi Gyesaw with database modification as part of the MAARA project. Photo by Selina Okle

recording studio, digitization laboratory and an office space for staff (Fig. 7-9).

In addition, staff enrolment has shot up, there are internship programmes, and archivists from sister and other educational institutions turn up on a regular basis to learn about digitization and basic archival practices. With some pride it is possible to say that the archive has now turned into a model in the subregion.

This achievement is thanks, I believe, to the application of the 'baby nursing model' in the J. H. Kwabena Nketia Archives. The effort taken in accepting responsibilities for the collection, developing an emotional attachment to the materials, caring for them and, importantly, seeking help when it was required led directly to the involvement with SOIMA and APEX Ghana – a collaboration that has had incredible results.

international prestige). Also, the facility has been expanded from a two unit facility to a seven unit facility comprising a listening station, paper repository, audiovisual repository, reference room for listening and viewing, oral literature

Conclusion

The 'baby nursing model' may serve as a highly useful yardstick for under-resourced archives and archivists in similar situations. It is a principle that should be fully



FIGURE 9. Audio digitization lab at the Nketia Archives. Photo by Fidelia Ametewee



FIGURE 8. Viewing facility within the Nketia Archives. Photo by George Gyasi Gyesaw

embraced by archivists and archival institutions. In addition, it helps donors and (cross-disciplinary) partners recognize the specific needs, capacities and sensitivities of their counterparts in the so-called developing countries. The journey of the Nketia Archives should be understood not only as an exemplary case study but also as a general contribution to archival studies (self)-recognition as an increasingly global enterprise. It is a discipline that strives for universal aims even as it is continuously confronted with vastly different regional, social and cultural challenges.

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