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The UNESCO Memory of the World International Register

Introduction

UNESCO launched the Memory of the World programme in 1992. It is one of the three major UNESCO heritage programmes, together with the World Heritage Convention and the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Impetus for the Memory of the World programme came originally from a growing awareness of the critical state of preservation of, and access to, documentary heritage in various parts of the world. This perilous situation was caused by war and social upheaval, by neglect and natural disasters, as well as by severe lack of resources. Much had already vanished forever; much was – and is – in danger. The vision of the Memory of the World programme is that the world's documentary heritage belongs to all, that it should be fully preserved and protected for all and be permanently accessible to all. A major step for the programme was taken in 2015 with the adoption by UNESCO's General Conference of the *Recommendation concerning the preservation of, and access to, documentary heritage including in digital form*.¹ All UNESCO member states are encouraged to implement this recommendation in their national policies and practices.

One of the means to increase awareness worldwide of the existence and significance of documentary heritage is the Memory of the World International Register. There are many more: establishing national and regional Memory of the World committees and national and regional registers; publicizing books, newsletters, articles and brochures; creating websites; organizing conferences and workshops; exchanging best practices; building knowledge centres; awarding prizes. But there is no doubt that the most visible and the most noticed element of the programme is the International Register. It is the showcase, the shop-window of the Memory of the World programme. By selecting and presenting

¹ http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=49358&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html (23 January 2023).

Note: This is an updated and adapted version of my presentation at the 2016 ICLA congress in Vienna, Austria. Substantial parts of the text have been taken from the Memory of the World web-pages (<https://en.unesco.org/programme/mow> (23 January 2023)).

documents whose deterioration or loss would be a harmful impoverishment for mankind worldwide, it demonstrates the general importance of documentary heritage.

The International Register is a list of documents with world significance and outstanding universal value. At present (November 2022) it contains over 430 documents or collections of documents. New inscriptions will be added in the course of 2023. They come from all over the world. Apart from the International Register, there are regional registers for the Asian and Pacific region and for the Latin American Region and many countries have national registers. Essentially there is no hierarchy between the registers, the only difference is the wideness of the impact that the documents on these lists have had. If they merely have had impact on a national scale, they are fit for a national register; if their influence transcends national and regional boundaries, they may qualify for the International Register. But their need to be preserved and to be accessible to everybody is the same. In the following I will focus on the International Register, but much applies to the other registers as well.

Documents

It is important to emphasize that the Memory of the World programme and its registers are not about texts, but about documents: the unity of a carrier and its content. Carrier and content are equally important. Therefore, all items on the International Register are specific copies. If a text is available in more than one copy (as is usually the case with printed books), there has always been a reason to select a certain copy, for example because of its age, decorations or provenance.

The concept of a document within the framework of the Memory of the World is a very broad one, both by its material form and by its content. Documents reach from clay tablets to manuscripts, printed books, audio-visual recordings and digital databases. They reach from religious scriptures to travelogues, music scores, slave registers and industrial inventions. They reach from atlases to postcards, archival records and movies. And from very small single items to coherent collections of many thousands of books and archival files. The items on the registers are by no means limited to literary products, although several literary works and personal archives of literary authors have been inscribed. A full list and descriptions of all inscribed items on the International Register can be found at the Memory of the World website.²

2 <https://www.unesco.org/en/memory-world>.

Criteria

Every two years the Memory of the World Secretariat at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris issues a call for new nominations for the International Register.³ Submissions usually come from owners or custodian institutions, but also from individuals without any formal relation to the concerned documents are welcome to draft a nomination, provided that they have consent from the owners. The concerned national Commission for UNESCO must support and formally deliver the nomination. There is a maximum of two nominations per country per nomination cycle, but there is no limitation for nominations jointly submitted by more than one country. The *General Guidelines*⁴ of the programme provide extensive information on the nomination procedure and on the criteria for inscription.

The criteria are applied to all nominations. They are a prompt for describing how and why the item or collection is significant. Due to the many different kinds of documentary heritage, they will have different shades of meaning depending on the type of item or collection under consideration.

The first criterion is *authenticity and integrity*: are the documents what they claim to be? Are they real: no forgeries? Are they original: no later copies? (Or, for example in the case of early manuscripts: are they as close to the origin as can be?) Is the history of the documents clear, including the history of the collection that they belong to? Are they complete and uncorrupted, both as individual documents and – if applicable – as collections?

The next question is about the world significance of the documentary heritage, in the first place because of its *historic significance*. The document(s) may deal with very important political, economic, social or spiritual developments; or with events, times and places of world-changing importance; or with eminent personalities in world history; or with unique phenomena or critical innovations; or with examples of excellence in the arts, literature, science, technology, sport or other parts of life and culture.

World significance may also lie in the physical nature of the documentary heritage, in its *form and style*. The documentary heritage may be a particularly fine exemplar of its type. It may have outstanding qualities of beauty and craftsmanship. It may be a new or unusual type of carrier. It may also be an example of a type of document that is now obsolete or superseded.

³ From November 2017 up to April 2021 the nomination cycle for the International Register was on hold because of a comprehensive review of the Memory of the World programme.

⁴ https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/mow_general_guidelines_en.pdf (23 January 2023).

Thirdly, world significance may be derived from the *social, community or spiritual significance* of the documents. For example, a community may be strongly attached to the heritage of a beloved leader or a saint, or to the documentary evidence related to a specific incident, event or site with particular associations.

The final criterion for inscription is the *uniqueness or rarity* of the document(s). Is it the only one of its kind ever created, or one of a few survivors from a larger number? Are there other documents which may be similar, though not identical?

Selection for inscription results from assessing the documentary heritage, on its own merits, against these selection criteria. This assessment is done by an international group of experts in the field of book history, library and archival sciences and heritage studies. They provide reasoned recommendations to the Memory of the World International Advisory Committee, which, at its turn, makes a final recommendation for approval by the Executive Board of UNESCO.

Nominations and inscriptions are free of costs. They don't bring in revenues from UNESCO either, but they often strengthen the position of an institution when looking for funding for security, restauration, preservation or digitization.

Variety

The enormous variety of documents makes the International Register very attractive and appealing – as a shop window should be. Rock engravings from Lebanon can be found next to the world's first narrative feature film from Australia, the *Tabula Peutingeriana* map from Austria alongside Che Guevara's personal papers from Bolivia and Cuba, archival records from the Tuol Sleng genocide museum in Cambodia besides the French Bayeux Tapestry or the Irish *Book of Kells*. Documents take many forms and come from all over the world.

Nevertheless, there is a clear overrepresentation of European countries and European documentary heritage on the International Register, even if we take into account that in the course of history Europe may have had a stronger written culture (and consequently more documentary heritage) compared to the oral traditions in some other parts of the world. Moreover, documentary heritage that has been submitted by non-European countries often has to do with European 'discoveries', European colonialism or resistance against such colonialism, with European slave trade etcetera, and less with local culture (for example the Colonial archives in Benin or the Archives on the French occupation in Mauritius). In recent years, however, non-European countries have successfully submitted more nominations, in particular on indigenous documentary heritage.

Old, rare and extremely beautiful documentary heritage has been inscribed from the start of the International Register in 1997, together with documents relating to important historic developments, events and people. More recent is the tendency towards documents which deal with human rights, such as the slave registries from several Caribbean countries and the 'Archives of Terror' from Paraguay. The same goes for documents on rather recent history, for example the Criminal Court Case by the State of South Africa against Nelson Mandela. Such topics are not always free from political sensitivities and controversies. Perspectives on recent history can be quite divergent. The inscription of documents on the Nanjing Massacre (1937) was seriously disputed. The debate on the nomination of documents related to the so called 'Comfort Women' has not yet been solved. In this context it should be remarked that the Memory of the World programme and its registers are not about selecting or defining 'good' and 'bad' documents, but about safeguarding and giving access to *all* significant documentary heritage. Attaching historical interpretations or a moral perspectives is the task of others. At the same time, both the nominated documentary heritage and the nominations themselves are supposed to contribute to UNESCO's mission: 'building peace in the minds of men and women'.

Linguistic and literary documentary heritage

Not surprisingly the International Register holds quite a lot of literary and linguistic documents from all over the world. They may be of special interest for the ICLA.

The Bleek collection from South Africa provides a fine example of an exceptional linguistic source. W.H. Bleek (1825–1875) and some of his family members carried out extensive research into the San (Bushman) language and folklore. Bleek developed a phonetic script for transcribing the characteristic clicks and sounds of the Xam language which is used by linguists to this day. A great deal of the collected material has still remained unpublished.

In 2015 selected data collections from The Language Archive at the Max Planck Institute in Nijmegen, The Netherlands, were inscribed. This holding consists of 64 digital collections with audio-visual and textual resources, documenting 102 languages and cultures around the world. They have been recorded, annotated and digitized for providing high-quality representative samples of the respective languages in their natural context. This was the first inscription of digital documentary heritage on the International Register.

Other highly interesting linguistic sources include the collection of books in and on indigenous languages from Mexico, the invention of the Phoenician alpha-

bet, submitted by Lebanon, and the Myazedi-quadrilingual-stone-inscription from Myanmar. Many of them are still waiting for further research.

The same goes for literary sources. Works and personal papers of several famous and influential authors have been inscribed. To name just a few: Hans Christian Andersen, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Astrid Lindgren, Martin Luther, Christopher Okigbo, George Orwell, Leo Tolstoy, Derek Walcott. Their personal archives often hold abundant and unpublished correspondences, notes and sketches. The International Register also lists anonymous works of world significance: the Derveni papyrus, the Grimm fairy tales, La Galigo, Latvian folksongs, the Nibelungenlied, Rigveda, Shahname, a slave song from Barbados and many more.

One of the literary inscriptions which deserves to be highlighted is the Schools' Manuscript Fond, which is part of the collection of folktales from the Irish Folklore Commission. In 1937/1938 primary school children (aged 10–14 years) collected 750,000 pages of oral tradition from elders in their communities, an exceptional method of collecting such materials and unprecedented in this quantity.

The archives of Père Castor hold complete records of the activities of this French publishing house of innovative children's books. Composed by Russian, German, Polish, Czech, Dutch, Swedish, Belgian and French authors and designers, these books are now considered to be classics of children's literature, and they have been translated into twenty languages. The archives clearly show the impact of modern educational thinking on books and albums for young people.

Tales about the thirteenth-century Javanese hero *Panji* became popular throughout all Southeast Asia. *Panji*-manuscripts held in Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom have been inscribed on the International Register. Thanks to this inscription Leiden University Library started a successful crowd funding to finance the digitization of their collection of more than 250 *Panji*-manuscripts.⁵ The inscription was also reason for a scholarly symposium on these tales.

Memory of the World and ICLA

These few examples may again demonstrate the variety of the documentary heritage on the Memory of the World International Register, and also the chances for new and further literary research. One should be aware that only nominated documentary heritage can be inscribed. So if important names or works are missing, they have probably never been nominated. Scholars of comparative literature may

5 <https://digitalcollections.universiteitleiden.nl/panjitalessmanuscripts> (23 January 2023).

well undertake a critical survey in this area, identify lacunas, point at 'hidden' collections and possibly submit new nominations.

In the assessment process much value is attributed to translations. If literary works have been translated into many languages, this is a clear indication of their global impact and significance. Translation studies is another area where ICLA and Memory of the World may benefit from each other.

Although the purpose of the International Register is nothing more than being a showcase for the need of preserving, raising awareness and giving access to documentary heritage, it is clear that inscriptions often add prestige to an institution or a country that holds such heritage. Apart from research into individual inscribed items or collections, it would also be very interesting to study the impact of inscriptions on literary scholarship in general.

