The Conservation and Preservation of Heritage in the Caribbean

What Challenges Does Digitization Pose?

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Abstract

Grounded in the concept of SIDS, this paper looks at the conservation and preservation of Caribbean heritage. The contribution that the MoW programme makes to the conservation and preservation of heritage is also examined. The paper also looks at a number of issues associated with the digitization of this heritage and encourages professionals and policy makers to ensure that steps are taken to conserve and preserve the region’s heritage so that future generations will be able to see and experience that which contributed to making them who they are as a people.

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1. Introduction

Internationally, it is becoming increasingly accepted and evident that there is equity of importance in the heritage of all states – size, geography, location, politics or other constructs are in reality of little moment. Heritage represents, to current and succeeding generations, who their ancestors were, what they did, what they knew, how they lived and what they valued inter alia. Heritage provides backward and forward linkages between generations. Heritage has been described as the “fingerprint of generations” (Freedom Park).¹ Thus, the preservation and conservation of heritage is a solemn obligation that must be undertaken by each generation.

For Caribbean countries, many of which have only recently emerged from the bonds of colonialism, heritage conservation and preservation assume an even greater significance. During enslavement and prior to independence, in many of these states, determined steps were taken to eradicate, suppress or devalue the heritage of the “Other”. As a consequence, scant respect was paid to the heritage of the majority who lived in the space known as the Caribbean. This has led to considerable and

¹ Freedom Park: A Heritage Destination. What Role Does Heritage Play with Freedom Park?

http://preview.tinyurl.com/a88fpxr
irreplaceable loss of heritage in some cases while, in other instances, many containers of heritage are becoming increasingly fragile and/or threatened by a range of degrading factors – manmade, natural or artificial.

A post-colonial shift taking place at the level of national consciousness has been the growing awareness of the importance of heritage in the Caribbean. Determined steps have been and are now being taken to privilege Caribbean heritage which traces its origin to Africa and, where possible, pre-colonial times in the region. The Africa gaze is due to the fact that the majority of Caribbean people are descendants of persons who were brought to the region from that continent. In Caribbean spaces where other ethnicities exist in large numbers, steps are also in train to privilege their heritage. These measures serve to counteract the historical hegemony in the region of a European-based heritage, which was one of the consequences of colonialism.

In this paper, the words “culture” and “heritage” will be used interchangeably and will be taken to mean a combination of things i.e. the beliefs and behavioural characteristics of a group as well as that which is handed down from generation to generation. The term “cultural heritage” will also be used in a similar fashion. While cultural heritage was not included in the original definition of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), since 1994 it has become one of the characteristics that is and can be used to distinguish states that share these features from other states and SIDS states from each other.

This paper looks at the conservation and preservation of heritage using the concept of SIDS as its frame. Preceding any discussion of the challenges that digital technologies pose as conservation and preservation methodologies an understanding of the paper’s historical-cultural landscape is important.

![Caribbean Basin](image)

Figure 1. The Caribbean

This paper’s perspective is geographically grounded in English-speaking Caribbean SIDS states; however, much of what is explored is also the reality of SIDS states in other locations. This positioning is not amiss because an examination of map and list of these countries indicate that most SIDS states are
located in the Caribbean. The Pacific region has the second highest number of SIDs states. The major differences between these two regions are the vastness of the Pacific Ocean compared with the much smaller Caribbean Sea and their cultural differences. While these regions may have had different colonisers, they share a history of colonisation and all that is associated with that experience. For the purposes of this paper no distinction will be made between formats that contain heritage and/or cultural information.

2. What is SIDS?

SIDS was formulated as a concept in 1992. The underlying philosophy of SIDS is that small, low-lying island states have characteristics that present particular challenges. While geography and environment are the leading factors of difference there are also a number of other shared features which make SIDS a discernible group. Although the term SIDS refers primarily to island states, there are some continental countries which exhibit many of the same characteristics found in island SIDS and so they are also classified as SIDS. The following are the major characteristics of SIDS states.

- Low lying
- Small in size, with growing populations
- Experience a shortage of well developed, highly diversified skills sets
- Limited resources
- Susceptible to natural disasters
- Impacted by a high incidence of man-made disasters
- Remotely located
- Vulnerable to external shocks
- High transportation, energy and communication costs
- Legal frameworks and administrative practices are not sufficiently developed to deal with pace of development and rapid changes
- Limited opportunities to create economies of scale
- Considerable dependence on international trade
- Absence of a robust national economy based on national resources and a well-developed manufacturing sector
- Cost of technology
- Weak national currencies
- Many were once colonies of a European power

SIDS countries span the globe but are mainly located in three specific regions: The Caribbean, The Pacific and AIMS (Asia, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean and South China Seas).
Figure 2. Location of SIDS countries (modified from Wikipedia)

Figure 3. List of SIDS countries based on location (modified from Wikipedia)

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<tr>
<th>Caribbean</th>
<th>Pacific</th>
<th>Africa, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean and South China Sea (AIMS)</th>
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<td>Anguilla</td>
<td>American Samoa</td>
<td>Bahrain</td>
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<td>Antigua and Barbuda</td>
<td>Cook Islands</td>
<td>Brunei</td>
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<td>Aruba</td>
<td>Federated States of Micronesia</td>
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<td>Bahamas</td>
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<td>Botswana</td>
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<td>British Virgin Islands</td>
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<td>Mauritius</td>
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<td>Cuba</td>
<td>Marshall Islands</td>
<td>São Tomé and Príncipe</td>
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<td>Dominica</td>
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<td>Dominican Republic</td>
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<td>Grenada</td>
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<td>Netherlands Antilles</td>
<td>Solomon Islands</td>
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<td>Puerto Rico</td>
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<td>Saint Kitts and Nevis</td>
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<td>Saint Lucia</td>
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<td>Saint Vincent and the Grenadines</td>
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<td>Suriname</td>
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<td>Trinidad and Tobago</td>
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<td>United States Virgin Islands</td>
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The geographical, environmental, socio-economic and technological factors *inter alia* which separate SIDS states from others are however not the only distinguishing factors. In 1994, at a Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of SIDS, which was held in Barbados, one of the major documents emanating from this event was the Declaration of Barbados (1994).\(^2\) The first affirmation of this Declaration reads in part:

> The survival of [S]mall [I]sland [D]eveloping States is firmly rooted in their . . . cultural heritage. . . [it is one of] their most significant assets; . . . \(^3\)

This almost 20 year old affirmation has elevated the importance of heritage to being a critical part of the SIDS firmament. Culture is one of the major attributes that distinguishes SIDS from other states and heritage is one of the features that makes it possible to differentiate one SIDS state from another. Unfortunately, to date, much more emphasis has been placed on environmental and other issues within SIDS rather than those that are concerned with heritage. This paper looks at the heritage issues of SIDS with particular reference to its conservation and preservation. Some consideration will also be given to the contribution that UNESCO’s Memory of the World programme (MoW) has made to assisting SIDS to conserve and preserve their cultural heritage.

### 3. SIDS and Heritage

In an earlier section of this paper some general issues associated with the impact of history and colonisation on the heritage of SIDS states were explored. A Barbadian experience provides a specific example. In the early 1630s (the island was colonized in 1627 by the British), a critical culture bearer that the enslaved brought from Africa, the drum, was banned as it was seen as an instrument that could incite unrest and enable the enslaved to communicate with each other without the knowledge of the colonisers. Thus, one of the major cultural items of the enslaved became a forbidden object from early in Barbados’ history. Other aspects of the heritage of the enslaved were similarly treated, or, not given space or time to be practiced. The significance of the drum to Barbadian culture has now been recognized thus, often it is central to any cultural performance on the island today.

In the post-colonial era in most SIDS states there has been ongoing cultural renaissance whereby determined and dedicated efforts being taken to research, revive and retrieve the lost, forgotten or fragmented heritage of these sates. A particular challenge for SIDS countries is that much of its heritage is dispersed. There are large collections of SIDS heritage that are scattered throughout repositories in European capitals and beyond as a consequence of the nationality of the colonizing country and how colonial records were administered, managed and maintained. Thus, regional researchers wishing to consult these documents are regularly forced to undertake long and costly overseas trips in order to consult the records of their national or regional heritage. While under some circumstances this cultural heritage can be repatriated, such acts usually come at a cost to the receiving country. Sometimes the

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\(^3\) Ibid n.p.
asking price (if a sale is on the table) is beyond the potential of a SIDS state’s ability to pay. On the other hand, that which has remained in its loci of origin has often not been kept in the best of conditions and so degradation is often evident.

The impact of man-made and natural disasters is real. Few SIDS states have the ability to provide safe and secure environments to house their cultural heritage. Thus, wars, hurricanes, tsunamis and other events often have a long lasting negative impact on the cultural heritage of SIDS states. Sometimes there is nothing left to conserve or preserve. In the Caribbean, over the years, several archives and libraries have experienced extensive damage and the loss of heritage items through hurricanes. While Mali is not a SIDS state, it is a developing country and the recent destruction of several tombs at Timbuktu is an illustration of modern day damage to a nation’s cultural heritage. In this situation, religious intolerance is the cause of the destruction of these significant heritage signifiers.

Another issue that SIDS states face is cultural penetration or cultural appropriation by large states particularly via technology. These two factors, in some instances, have dramatically changed the nature and essence of the indigenous cultural heritage of SIDS states, sometimes making it difficult for the un- or under-exposed to discern the authentic from the “corrupted” version.

The inclusion of a steel pan register in many electronic keyboards is a case in point. The steel pan is the national instrument of Trinidad and Tobago. Fashioned out of oil drums discarded by American troops billeted in Trinidad during World War II, the steel pan is universally known as being the most significant musical instrument to have been created in the 20th century. The steel pan is also an early achievement in environmental protection and preservation. The Japanese, the initial innovators of electronic musical instruments, created and included steel pan registers in many of these instruments. While these registers are tonally and sonically different from the original instrument they enable keyboardists to simulate a steel pan sound in their performances. The inclusion of steel pan registers in electronic musical instruments represents the use of technology as a means of re/presenting a key signifier of the cultural heritage of a SIDS state. To the unattuned ear the sound from these registers may be acceptable – however, for those accustomed to the live sound of a steel pan there is a vast tonal and sonic difference between original pans and electronic simulations of this instrument. One of the factors contributing to the inclusion of steel pan registers in electronic musical instruments is that the U.S. Patent Office refused to grant a patent for the steel pan to Trinidad and Tobago. Hence, non-Caribbean entrepreneurs with access to considerable cash were able to appropriate and commodify this important signifier of Trinidad and Tobago’s culture. While the steel pan is not a document, its story illustrates how the cultural heritage of SIDS states is under threat.

4. The Memory of the World Programme: A Sensitizing Development for the Conservation and Preservation of Caribbean Heritage

The underlying philosophy of the MoW programme is to protect the world’s documentary heritage. From the programme’s perspective “documents” has a very broad interpretation. Papyrus, clay, paper, fabric, vinyl, ferrous tape, nitrate film and any other tangible objects capable of storing information are interpreted as documents within the framework of the MoW programme. While documents are not the only sources of heritage, because the MoW programme is the oldest initiative of its kind within modern times, the programme has helped to sensitize practicing information professionals and other stakeholders in the area of heritage to the issues surrounding the conservation and preservation of cultural heritage.
The wording of part of its founding documentation is key to this paper. Established in 1992 the pertinent words are as follows:

Documentary heritage reflects the diversity of languages, peoples and cultures. It is the mirror of the world and its memory. But this memory is fragile. Every day, irreplaceable parts of this memory disappear forever. UNESCO has launched the Memory of the World Programme to guard against collective amnesia calling upon the preservation of valuable archive holdings and library collections all over the world . . .

The vision of the programme is simple but powerful: protection of the world’s heritage as it is a mirror of the world and its memory. Theories of identity and memory are beyond the scope of this paper; however, the inclusion of the world “memory” from the onset of MoW’s establishment is an indication of how critical heritage is to identity formation. There are no delimiters on who can make nominations to a MoW register. Inscriptions on the registers – national, regional or international – are entirely based on nominations meeting the criteria of the programme and dossiers being presented in an acceptable format. Thus, small states such as SIDS countries have the same right to make nominations, as do the large and powerful countries of the world. It can therefore be said that the MoW programme is very democratic, treating all states, institutions and individuals with an even hand.

Vannini provides a Latin American and Caribbean perspective on the MoW programme when she writes that the programme is “an international effort to safeguard the at risk documentary heritage to democratize its access and to raise awareness about its importance”. An examination of the MoW International Register reveals that the following Caribbean SIDS states have either single or joint nominations on this register: Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Guyana, Netherlands Antilles, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia as well as Trinidad and Tobago. Trinidad and Tobago has six inscriptions on this register of which four are single and two are joint. Further scrutiny of MoW’s International Register indicates that, to date, the Caribbean has been the most active SIDS region in the programme. The Caribbean’s high level of involvement in MoW suggests that the region is taking active steps to identify its cultural heritage and that it is cognizant of its responsibility to guard its heritage for current and generations to come. The region’s involvement in the MoW programme also indicates that people in the Caribbean have begun to place a value on their heritage, which is the antithesis of what happened in the heritage of the region during colonialism.

One of the requirements of having an inscription on a MoW register is that the nominator has to indicate what conservation and preservation measures will be taken with regard to the collection being nominated. This obligation becomes a critical incentive to stimulating discussions and action in conservation and preservation at national levels. For the Caribbean therefore, MoW has served as an important modality to encourage action with regard to conserving and preserving regional heritage.

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4 UNESCO, n. d. Quoted in Harvey, pp. 263.
5 Individuals as well as private and public institutions are eligible to make inscription nominations to any of the three registers of MoW.
Two of the enduring outcomes of the MoW programme are that the programme has increased interest in the culture of the “Other”. It has also stimulated interest in visiting the location of the MoW inscription to view the inscribed documents. MoW inscriptions have become additional stimulants to cultural tourism, a sector in the tourist industry that many SIDS states are keen to develop. The MoW programme therefore provides opportunities for the cultural riches of all to be shared by all.

Although this paper is concerned with the documentary heritage cognizance is taken that within SIDS states often it is the intangible heritage that dominates in many of these societies given that they are oral in nature and practice. The ensuing discussion on conservation and preservation is of equal value to both the tangible (documentary) and intangible heritages.

Although the concept of SIDS and the MoW programme were developed based on different needs and within different communities, that they were created in the same year, 1992, is a happy coincidence. SIDS provides a platform for countries with challenges that were not previously recognized as being critical to sustainability and survival while the MoW programme was created to preserve the heritage of all states. Through the MoW programme the heritage of small states can be privileged in ways that were not possible prior to the establishment of this programme.

5. Conserving and Preserving Caribbean Documentary Heritage: Challenges

In this section specific issues to do with conserving preserving the documentary heritage of the Caribbean will be explored. As a region with many SIDS states, there are several factors which impact on the preservation of the Caribbean’s heritage. These include a shortage of persons with the appropriate expertise; the cost of technology; a lack of easy access to and the cost of required consumables; remoteness from sources of supply; and, a susceptibility to natural and man-made disasters. These are some of the characteristics, listed in an earlier section of this paper serve to distinguish SIDS states from groups of states. In addition, there are several particulars that are intrinsically associated with the region’s documentary heritage.

Caribbean heritage is dispersed as a result of the region’s colonial history. For some single states, this heritage is located in several European countries. The history of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is a useful case in point. Metropolitan countries holding records of this twin-island state are England, France, Holland, Latvia (Courlander during colonial times) and Spain as, at some point in time, these were the metropolitan countries that ruled one or more of these islands. Trinidad and Tobago only became a twin-island state on the attainment of independence in 1962. While some records are duplicated in Port-of-Spain, many originals (and often only copies) are located in external repositories – official and private. Repatriation is not often a solution because of cost and/or unwillingness of the holding institution to deplete their holdings. Further, within the Republic records are also dispersed because of the different governance structures that have existed over the years. This dispersal has also contributed to the degradation of some heritage containers. The scattering of this state’s records makes it very difficult to have a full and true picture of the extent of records of Trinidad and Tobago.

The failure to provide finance at levels that facilitate the conservation and preservation of the cultural heritage in SIDS states is well known. While policy makers may empathise with and understand requests to conserve and preserve heritage, this does not translate into the necessary financing being made available to do what is required. On this Smith states:
government officials are known to wax eloquently on the heritage of our past and its value to present and future generations. But in reality it has fallen to the private sector to act as stewards of large parts of our recorded past.7

For example, the general dearth of appropriate housing within the region for cultural heritage owned by the public sector negatively impacts on the physical condition of such items. To some extent the lack of financing for the conservation and preservation of heritage in SIDS societies is because policy makers are generally unaware of the national and international value of their heritage and what its conservation and preservation means to future generations. This disconnect is often the cause of under financing that leads to format degradation of various kinds. In official circles, competition for support between the aesthetic and social welfare are unrelenting. It is challenging to defend arguments about the social value of cultural heritage compared to societal needs for running water and roads. Decision makers, including some information professionals domiciled in SIDS states are not fully seized of how heritage can be leveraged to good advantage. While not writing specifically on the situation in SIDS, Smith’s words nevertheless resonate with such spaces. She writes:

However, most people... are not aware of the economic costs or societal benefits of providing access to cultural content over an extended period of time. This lack of understanding has proven to be a significant stumbling block in securing adequate resource to preserve our analog collections.8

In the Caribbean, it is often the private sector that has taken the lead in conserving and preserving the region’s heritage. This comes at a cost, however, because issues like the public good take second place to the mission of the private entity. Public access also is often at a price – whereas access to one’s heritage should not always be accompanied by a price tag. A comparison between the work and activities of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society (BMHS) (a semi-private entity) and Barbados’ Department of Archives (DoA) (a government department) indicates that the BMHS has made considerable strides in conserving and preserving the heritage of the island and region that it owns. Considerable effort has also been made to add value to the holdings of the BMHS. Conversely, little has been done by the DoA in terms of adding value to its holdings and moving the institution from being a storehouse operation to an archive in the modern meaning of such institutions.

Professionals are responsible for making the case to conserve and preserve a nation’s heritage. Often, within this cohort, there is not always the proactive stance that one would wish. Smith advances that professionals need to put forward more compelling arguments as to why the cultural heritage needs to be conserved and preserved.9 Smith also warns that the lack of use should not be taken to mean that the object has no value.10 The value of heritage accrues over time and by not taking the necessary conservation and preservation steps now, future generations will be denied access to their heritage, an essential contributor to their understanding of their past, present and who they are.

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8 Ibid. pp. 5.
9 Ibid. pp. 7.
10 Ibid. pp. 11.

Advances in technology and communication have opened new conduits and formats for conserving, preserving and accessing cultural heritage. Foremost amongst them at this time are digitization, which provides images of the objects and the Internet, which facilitates remote access to these objects. These technologies have, as Smith opines, “accelerated the demand for access to information”.\(^{11}\) Digitization and the Internet help to level the playing field between rich and poor, north and south, developed and developing countries in that they expedite unprecedented and fast access to content. In addition, these technologies provide the means of addressing interest in the culture of the “Other” and expose the heritage of SIDS countries in unparalleled ways. The challenge for SIDS states however is to develop the internal capacity to digitize their cultural heritage, acquire the required and appropriate technologies as well as to accrue the knowhow to keep such objects accessible at all times.

Despite the known challenges, it is becoming increasingly clear that if SIDS countries want to make strides in conserving and preserving their cultural heritage, digitization is the leading option. In addition to expanding access to content this technology also provides a platform through which content holders can financially exploit their holdings thereby creating a revenue stream that is not time sensitive. Such income can help to underwrite the costs of conservation and preservation. The commodification of cultural heritage is also likely to contribute hard currency to the coffers of SIDS states which are usually strapped for such assets.

Jamaica’s *Daily Gleaner (The Gleaner)* has been digitized from its first issue, which appeared in 1834. This fully searchable full page database provides access to a wealth of historical information (over a million pages) that is generally not available from any other source. *The Gleaner* has attractive subscription rates and has streamlined its accounting practices whereby access can be purchased on an anytime, anywhere basis for a day, three months or a year. This means that the company is earning foreign exchange on a 24/7 basis. Digitization therefore has become a revenue stream of foreign exchange for *The Gleaner*. In 2012, the digitization of *The Gleaner* assumed important significance as part of the research process to develop plans for the island’s 50th anniversary of independence, which was granted in August 1962.

The Lascelles Family, headed by the Earl of Harewood named after the family seat in Harewood, Yorkshire, England, garnered their wealth over the period 1648-1975 through their extensive Caribbean landholdings – primarily in Barbados and Jamaica; trading in the enslaved; and, merchant banking. The papers relating to the activities of this family in the Caribbean during this critical period of the region’s history are chiefly located within the walls of the family seat and the West Yorkshire Archives. In 2012, the Earl of Harewood presented digital copies of these holdings to The University of the West Indies’ Cave Hill Campus in Barbados and to the BMHS. Through digitization it is now possible to access, in Barbados, records which were either only known about or are new to the research community on the island.

These examples indicate how digitization has helped to conserve and make accessible the documentary heritage of the Caribbean. A major challenge in the digitization of heritage is that as technology advances digital platforms change, upgrade and/or become obsolete. Strategies therefore have to be put in place to ensure that digital objects remain robust and accessible. Two issues need to be addressed:

\[^{11}\) Ibid. pp. 7.\]
1. How should originals be treated? and
2. What digital preservation strategies will be used?

While in some quarters there is the feeling that originals can be discarded, in reality this is a dangerous policy. If digital surrogates become corrupted or inaccessible for any reason, the existence of the original makes it possible to recapture digitally the inaccessible digital content so that it is once more available. Digitization is therefore, contrary to the belief in some quarters, not a substitute; rather it is an alternative option to provide access. It is also a methodology that assists in the preservation of originals as digitization reduces the amount of physical contact the originals experience. Therefore, it is absolutely crucial for SIDS states to ensure that their heritage is kept in its original state and that arrangements are made for their safe keeping in proper conditions. In addition, library and archive collections accrue value based on their holdings of original documents and not digital surrogates.

There are now on the market many products being offered as digital preservation solutions. However, many of the challenges associated with digital conservation also impact on the preservation of heritage in SIDS states. The lack of expertise and the lack of funding are the two leading issues. Many professionals in SIDS states feel that once an object has been conserved and digitized that nothing else needs to be done. One of the major mistakes frequently made is that no provision is made for storing backup copies of the digital surrogate in a safe secure off-site location. Off-site storage ensures that if anything should happen to the institution or digital objects that it holds, it will be possible repopulate the digital platform with its pre held content. Another omission/oversight is that no consideration is given to how digital platforms will be updated and made current with changes in technology – including the unfortunate experience of the provider of the preservation system going out of business! This issue is of critical import to the digital preservation process. As digital platforms are usually proprietary technology the conversion of one’s holdings from one system to another is fraught with technological difficulties and challenges. The choice of a preservation system therefore has to be carefully considered with much thought being given to what is possible in the short and long-terms.

Given the small size, financial challenges and dearth of expertise in SIDS states, one approach that heritage institutions in these countries could consider is standardizing conservation and preservation strategies in order to achieve economies of scale. It is recognized, however, that there are several internal issues that would have to be skilfully negotiated in order to counteract known and real challenges. These include that heritage institutions often belong to more than one entity. Within the cohort of owners there would exist different reporting structures, different sources of funding and different missions. Any cooperative approach would have to be expeditiously handled and accompanied by a willingness to see beyond the “I” to the “we” in order to achieve what is best for the nation as a whole. The provision of solutions to these challenges is beyond the scope of this paper but they are recognized as being real and in need of serious reflection.

7. Conclusion

Grounded in the concept of SIDS, and using the Caribbean as its geographical focus, this paper has explored a number of issues that impact the conservation and preservation of the heritage of such states. The paper also provided a number of examples and historical reasons why the heritage of the region is diffuse and not located in one space or place. The issue of repatriation was also considered, as were the several factors that stood as obstacles to such movement.
The possibilities of using digitization for conservation and preservation were explored, as were some of the challenges that SIDS countries face in any attempt to digitize heritage. While there have been several positive steps towards the conservation and preservation of the heritage of SIDS states much more needs to be done. Professionals charged with managing these assets have to be in the vanguard of initiatives required to advance heritage conservation and preservation in SIDS countries. The aims of the MoW programme can serve as a very valuable tool to support any arguments being advanced to conserve and preserve heritage in SIDS states – most of which are members of UNESCO. Given the fragility of many heritage containers in SIDS countries it is imperative that conservation and preservation professionals in these states act without delay. Such action becomes all the more pressing because as Smith rightly argues:

A people who do not own and control their own cultural heritage are a people who can be held captive by false histories, fabrications and lies.12

References


