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Networking – Shared Memory (2)

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Shared Memory: The Contribution of Historical and Archaeological Societies in the Eastern Caribbean to the Memory of the Region

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Background

The Caribbean is a multi-cultural region where five predominant languages- English, French, Spanish, Dutch and Portuguese- together with a number of dialects derived from these languages, are spoken. The islands of the Caribbean stretch in an arc from the tip of the Florida peninsular in the north to mainland Venezuela in South America.

This study is confined to the English speaking eastern Caribbean countries which comprise Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Montserrat, St. Kitts and Nevis, Dominica, Barbados, Saint Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Grenada and Trinidad and Tobago. These islands vary in size from thirty-five square miles (Anguilla) to one thousand, nine hundred and eighty square miles (Trinidad and Tobago). Physically beautiful, verdant and green with exotic flora and fauna and natural features like waterfalls and volcanoes, these islands contain no mineral wealth except for Trinidad and Tobago with its substantial petroleum reserves.

All ex-colonies of Britain, these countries were granted their independence from Britain between the 1960s and the 1980s except for Anguilla and Montserrat which are still dependencies of Britain. The determination of these island nations to achieve and excel is encapsulated in their island mottos "Together we aspire, together we achieve" (Trinidad) "Pride and Industry" (Barbados) "The land, the people, the light" (Saint Lucia) "Each endeavouring, all achieving" (Antigua and Barbuda). Each island has unique physical features although they share many common "island" characteristics. They too, share a common heritage - the arrival of Christopher Columbus and the European nations, decimation of the indigenous Indian population, African Slavery, Plantation Economy, East Indian and Chinese Immigration, Crown Colony Government and Adult Suffrage. They share many cultural elements - in their folk stories, folk dances, folk songs and many other aspects of the oral history and tradition with variations in each island affected by particular historical occurrences.

Shared Memory

In the computer world the phrase "shared memory" has a specific meaning and could be defined as "hardware architecture in which *multiple processors operate independently but share the same memory resources.*"

The italicized portion of the definition, aptly describes the idea of "shared memory"; the way in which the several institutions of memory – libraries, archives, museums, archaeological societies, historical

societies, cultural foundations, research institutions and heritage societies – operate independently but all tap into the same memory resources (the storehouse of knowledge) of their respective nations.

The Work of the Historical and Archaeological Societies

Apart from libraries, archives and museums which are easily recognized as heritage institutions, historical and archaeological societies work assiduously to preserve the heritage but few realize the extent to which these institutions have contributed to the preservation of their countries' memory. In the eastern Caribbean the first historical society was established in Barbados in 1933; it was instrumental in establishing the Barbados museum which is one of the best in the Caribbean. According to Ms. Alissandra Cummins (*Director*), the **Barbados Museum and Historical Society** has published an annual scholarly journal since 1933 which disseminates both historical and contemporary research on Barbados and Caribbean history, art, natural history and genealogy. Much of this information is extended to others through published research, television programmes and documentary and other video/film productions. It has also played an active role in sharing information through its occasional publications including the *Rewriting History* series in conjunction with the University of the West Indies; exhibitions (both permanent and temporary) as well as educational programmes which include public lectures, heritage tours, workbooks for children, special research groups and oral history projects.

The **Archaeological and Historical Society of Saint Lucia** was established in 1954 and, incidentally, is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary this year with a number of interesting activities to mark the occasion. This Society played a major role in sensitizing the government and people of the country about the importance of institutions like archives and museums and, in 1974, was designated "Preserver of Records" by Cabinet decree. Although no archival legislation existed, the society went into Government Ministries and Departments to rescue records and store them in special buildings allocated by the Government for this activity. Many historical documents were also purchased or collected and these all form the nucleus of the holdings of the present **National Archives Authority of Saint Lucia**. In the 1960s the Society set up the first museum in Saint Lucia which unfortunately no longer exists although the Society has an extensive collection of both archaeological and historical artifacts. Like its Barbadian counterpart the society has been involved in Exhibitions, Public lectures, Publications, leading out in archaeological digs, documenting, public outreach and education especially through History clubs in Secondary schools with Mr. Eric Branford , the Administrative Secretary, leading out in this area.

In 1936, the **Trinidad and Tobago Historical Society** was established by Historians and expatriates. This Society was very active and contributed significantly to the Social History and Developmental History of the country. The main thrusts of the society were Public lectures and Publications. Unfortunately the Society was totally disbanded in 1993, on the death of the last President. All the records of the Society were contributed to the **National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago** while the vast collection of books was donated to the **National Library**.

In 1991, by Cabinet Minute 489 of March 1991, the **Archaeological Society of Trinidad and Tobago** was established. The "Citizens for Conservation", Government workers, Historians and other interested persons came together to establish the society. The society has put together a fine collection of artifacts and a great number of maps and has created a Register of these maps. The emphasis is Social History and Archaeology. The collection is housed at the Archaeological Centre of the University of the West Indies. The Government supports the society by allocating it an annual subvention but without staff to manage the collection it is difficult to open it up to the public.

The **Nevis Historical and Conservation Society** was established in 1980 and has been doing a tremendous work in Nevis by operating both an Archive and a museum. The impetus to set up the Society originated with Historians, Government workers, lawyers, business persons and resident expatriates. The work of the society is supported by the Government through the provision of an annual subvention, secondment of staff from the Government service, duty free concessions, training and the payment of all utility bills. The focus of the society is Developmental History, Social History, Archaeology and Sociology.

The **St. Christopher Heritage Society** and the **Brimstone Hill Fortress and National Park Society** operate in the island of St. Kitts (which is also known as St. Christopher). The **Brimstone Hill**

Fortress and National Park Society was established in 1965 and the motivation to set up the Society came from Historians, Government workers and resident expatriates. The Society has its own research library, archives and museum. It also operates the ***Brimstone Hill Fortress and National Park*** which is a World Heritage Site from 1999. The collections of the Society are open to the public and include all kinds of artifacts and paper records. The Society is well supported by the Government through a government subvention and duty free concessions. The emphasis of the Society has been Environmental Studies, Sociology, Archaeology, Developmental History and Social History. Meanwhile the **St. Christopher Heritage Society** was established in July, 1989 and incorporated as a non-governmental organization with the expressed mission to protect and promote the natural, historical and cultural heritage of St. Kitts. The Society was established by a group of committed, patriotic locals who have the heritage of the country at heart. The Society operates the **National Museum** and has a very extensive research library.

The **Historical and Archaeological Society of St. Vincent and the Grenadines** is a thriving Society which has its headquarters at the University of the West Indies School of Continuing Education compound. It issues a well-known newsletter through out the Caribbean and is recognized for the work it does in the country educating the people about their history and culture. During the 1990s the Society worked very closely with Ms. Yulu Griffith, the then Acting Archivist. The strength of the Society is the commitment of its Executive and its members such as Dr. Edgar Adams, Dr. Adrian Fraser and Mr. Paul Lewis. Like most of the other societies the Government supports the Society financially. Publications and outreach projects like Oral History are high on the list of activities for the Society.

Antigua and Barbuda has a long established **Historical Society and Museum of Antigua and Barbuda**. Mr. Desmond Nicholson, an Englishman, has been the brains behind the Society from its establishment in 1956. He was also the one who spearheaded the setting up of the museum. He has written much about the history of Antigua and Barbuda and has trained local staff to carry on the work. The Government supports the Society by providing the building which houses the museum, duty free concessions, payment of utility bills and payment of line staff. It was very unfortunate that the museum suffered a minor fire towards the end of May 2004 because of faulty electrical wiring. With Government assistance the whole building has been re-wired. Ms. Michelle Henry reports that the museum's research library has been completely computerized and appropriate databases have been designed. She works very closely with the National archives of Antigua and Barbuda where she deposits all paper based records. As with other such institutions the Society depends on local and overseas grants, the sale of publications and the operation of a Craft Gift shop.

The Way Forward

The work being done by the Societies in the Eastern Caribbean cannot be understated. There is need to fully and completely document the extent of their work and to find out exactly what records and documents are in their care. The list would be quite extensive in relation to the sizes of the countries and their population. The countries have over 500 linear feet of records apart from the many collections of artifacts. These include personal records, government records, business records, newspapers, gazettes, maps, plans, photographs, postcards, prints, paintings, audio-visual materials and monographs. In many cases the work of the Societies augments the work being done in the Archives. There is urgent need to set up databases of the materials so that sister organizations could be aware not only of the work being done but the extent of the holdings. This could be done along the lines of the survey which was carried out by the Barbados Historical Society and Museum in an effort to find out the extent of the slavery records in the region with the assistance of UNESCO. Eighteen categories of records were identified comprising Letters and Correspondence, Estate Plans and Land allotments, Accounts Ledgers, Deeds and Wills, Bills of Sale, Government Records, Church Records, Manumission Records, Military Records, Conveyances, Legislative Records, Estate Inventories, Ships' Records, Census Records, Slave Registers, Publications and Other Miscellaneous Documents. Having identified these specific groups of records, public access is now easier.

Another area of collaboration between the Archives and the Societies could be in the conservation and restoration of paper-based records since most Archives have Conservation workshops suited to this type of work. A good model for emulation could be that which exists in Saint Lucia. The Archaeological and Historical Society gave birth to the National Archives which is now a Statutory Authority. However, the National Archives has jurisdiction over records of historical and national

significance while the Society maintains and preserves the archaeological and historical artifacts. In this way the two entities concentrate on the areas they are best equipped to handle and do not duplicate efforts.

Conclusion

It should be a goal of the Historical Societies to come together to network and make available their unique resources for the education and enrichment of the Caribbean people. This is particularly important as the countries of the Caribbean move towards a common market and economy, a process which is slated to begin as early as December 2005. This type of unity will necessitate knowledge of both the history and culture of these countries as people freely move from country to country. It is only by doing this we can better understand each other, embrace our differences and celebrate our identity.

Given the length of time these Societies have been in existence, they are well-placed to help in this regard. This could be facilitated by the use of technological tools to create databases, develop websites and communicate electronically thus enabling all the cultural and heritage institutions in the Caribbean to preserve, consolidate and share the memory of the region.