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20th Century Ashes and the 21st Century Phoenix: Librarians as Political Combatants in Cultural Conflict

*"What is more important in a library than anything else — is the fact that it exists."
~Archibald MacLeish*

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Abstract

Libraries function as democratic representatives of human interests and values. Those values often find themselves in direct opposition to radical ideologies that would censor, amend or otherwise eradicate any idea in conflict with their own. Humanists of the 20th century battled biblioclasts in Germany, Bosnia, China, and Cambodia, among others. The battle has continued into the 21st century where conflict in the Middle East and Africa, specifically Iraq and Somalia, perpetuate *Kriegsbrauch*, the Nazi philosophy which declares war not only on human combatants but intellectual combatants and resources as well. For political extremists, all acts are of a political nature; acts of reading and scholarship provide avenues of dissent. Democratic zeal and dissent are not tolerated by radical regimes. Libraries and archival records of cultural memory unsettle politicians and military dictators who would prefer Orwellian groupthink to independent thought, one mind being easier to control than thousands. Libricide, then, becomes an attempt at destroying the spirit of hearts and minds, as genocide attempts to destroy physical human bodies.

Cultural destruction is not only an act of war it is an act of sedition against civilization. Fortunately there are humanist organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), independent philanthropists, scholars, non-governmental/non-profit organizations, and librarians who continue to work toward reconstruction, recovery, and reconciliation between politics and libraries in the modern world. Library programs and information professionals cannot remain neutral in the face of Pandora's spirits of malcontent: extreme nationalism, militarism, imperialism, and racism have not disappeared at the close of the 20th century. Pulitzer Prize winning writer, Archibald MacLeish, while serving as Librarian of Congress under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, serves as one example of a progressive individual combating those who would censor and destroy humanity's collective cultural heritage. This paper attempts to emphasize established routes of progressive social change amidst sociocultural upheaval as it pertains to libraries and archives caught in the crossfire.

Introduction

Librarians are compelled to become pro-active in lobbying for policies, both foreign and domestic, and to combat and prevent the destruction of libraries and cultural institutions during extreme social upheaval. Physical action may be necessary when legislative action does not garner results. The 20th century was privy to Archibald MacLeish, Librarian of Congress, who sought to recover and protect cultural artifacts endangered by World War Two. MacLeish addressed the issues of librarianship in the presence of influential politicians, “In such a time as ours, when wars are made against the spirit and its works, the keeping of these records is itself a kind of warfare. The keepers, whether they so wish or not, cannot be neutral” (MacLeish, 1940). These sentiments were published before Pearl Harbor, but MacLeish continued to stand mostly alone as a spokesman throughout the war. The 21st century librarian continues to struggle in places such as Iraq and Somalia, fraught with political discord, and cultural endangerment. Cultural warriors have emerged from these locales as well. The examination of these countries, and the united front of international committees and organizations, must take place in order to form a comprehensive global counter-attack against libricide.

Much has been written about the April 2003 looting of The National Museum in Iraq. Little has been written about the political pressure necessary to convince governments that current policy and practice to prevent these occurrences is not sufficient. Furthermore, the lack of policy and enforcement muddles attempts made by governments around the globe to engage in nation-building after the overthrow of a political despot, as was the case with Saddam Hussein and the U. S. Almost two years after Hussein’s execution in 2006, the BBC reported in April, 2008 that 855 reconstruction projects have been terminated due to ongoing violence and poor performance on the part of the contractors. Rampant lawlessness and piracy has reigned in Somalia since President Said Barre was overthrown in 1991. Once a British protectorate and an Italian colony, Somalia has made 14 tries at establishing a government since 1991. Free expression is impossible in Somalia, and in Iraq, “Although, as noted, the 2005 Constitution contains a number of relatively progressive provisions that promote freedom of expression, there has been no legislative follow-up to make these constitutional guarantees an everyday reality” (United Nations Development Programme, 2007). Clearly a need exists.

It would be ludicrous to assume libricide can be stopped once and for all by mere policy change; however, responding to these incidents with the quip, “Stuff happens,” as U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld did (U. S. Department of Defense, 2003), implies that certain factions of the U.S. government do not care much for post war nation building, so long as the war’s primary purpose makes headway. While a U. S. tank made ‘headway’ through the front gate of the Iraqi Academy of Sciences in Waziriyya (Al-Tikriti, 2007), a woman named Alia Muhammad Baker, Chief Librarian at Basra Central Library, after being denied by Iraqi officials to move the collection, secretly transported 30,000 books, or 70 percent of the collection, to a friend’s restaurant nearby—even as government workers vacated the building, and soldiers abandoned an anti-aircraft gun on the roof (Dewan, 2003). The remaining 30 percent of the collection was burned (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 : Basra Central Public Library (burned)



Figure 1.2 : Sciences Reading Room (looted)



The National Archives, Basra University Central Library (see Figure 1.2), and The National Library were photographed by The International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS) during a report compiled by Jean-Marie Arnoult of Paris, *Inspecteur general des bibliothèques*, entitled “Assessment of Iraqi cultural heritage: Libraries and Archives.”

The ICBS is formed by five European NGO's and has committees in 14 countries around the world. Notably absent is the United States. The ICBS went on to ratify The 2006 Hague Blue Shield Accord on September 28, 2006. Members met, "...to discuss and agree on the most effective way to support the new International Committee for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, established under the Second Protocol of the 1954 Hague Convention" (International Committee of the Blue Shield, 2006). While NGO's and universities in the U. S. are active in the current struggle for cultural preservation, the government hasn't been active in implementing policy since 1943 under the Roosevelt Administration, when the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas sought to put men and women in the field. Along with the American Council of Learned Societies and a group of intellectual elites from Harvard, Associate Justice Owen L. Roberts headed the Roberts Commission, which eventually led to an Allied command unit called the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives section (MFAA). The unit attempted to "cordon off historic buildings, minimize looting, and give first aid to art and books; when the war ended, the MFAA turned its attention to the recovery and restitution of cultural objects" (Peiss, 2007). Unfortunately, the MFAA no longer exists, but efforts by other individuals and groups around the globe have continued to address cultural crimes in modern conflict.

It is only through the continued leadership of such entities as the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)—parent organization to the ICBS—and the United Nations partnered with local NGO's and the amazing resolve of individuals such as MacLeish and Muhammad Baker, that governments and militaries will address the often neglected cultural casualties of war.

20th Century Ashes

The turmoil of the 20th century was not so different from any other era before it. From the books of the sophist Protagoras, the disputed circumstances of the burning of the Great Library of Alexandria, the burning of Taoist libraries by Kublai Khan, destruction of Aztec and Mayan texts, to fires in London, Copenhagen, and The Library of Congress—these are but a few in a great chronology of fires, wars, and witch hunts. While the 21st century covers its mouth in shock, it has only scratched the surface of implementing

international law, and enforcing rules of engagement that proactively seek and protect sites retaining cultural memory.

Perhaps the Third Reich of Germany conducted the most widely discussed act of libricide in the 20th century under the fanaticism of the Nazi party. However, while the MFAA salvaged some of the cultural artifacts of Europe, Allied bombs did not discriminate between factories and libraries in Dresden, nor in 131 other German cities, “to the extent that all or part of the various libraries [were] lost in twenty-seven cities” (Polastron 176). In Japan, it is said only 5,000 books remained in the entire country when Americans landed on the island in 1945. The hardest hit was Hibiya Public Library in Tokyo. In short, it is impossible to prevent cultural casualties in total. What set the Nazi war machine apart was the premeditated and organized devastation of intellectual freedom carried out by those who declared “the Book, weapon of the German mind!” namely attributed to the Reich’s Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, Dr. Paul Joseph Goebbels, but carried out by students, librarians and SS officers alike. Leo Lowenthal, German sociologist, “ironically noted The Third Reich’s perception of ‘the Nazi phoenix rising out of Jewish and communist ashes’” (Polastron 184). The phoenix, derived from Egyptian and Greek mythology is a symbol of renewal, regenerating at the close of its life cycle or when wounded. While Germany sought to renew itself from World War One, it did so by reducing millions of others to ashes. Lowenthal, a defender of free expression, captures an ideology that seeks to demonize the other and manipulate imagery for propaganda’s sake.

Senator Joseph McCarthy’s 1950’s era communist witch hunt briefly revived Goebbels’ sentiments about the power of ‘the book,’ that is, the wrong sort of book. The most valuable lesson from McCarthyism may be that fanaticism can be arrested. McCarthy’s brief influence proves that a democratic society is not immune to ideological extremism, furthermore, it preyed on “predispositions within the population toward anti-intellectualism, anti-liberalism, and virulent anti-communism” (Knuth 54). These “predispositions” and prejudice that lurk beneath the surface are explored in the 1956 film, *Storm Center*, starring Bette Davis. Davis is Alicia Hull, head librarian of Kentport Public Library. She comes under fire by the city council when she refuses to remove a communist manifesto from the shelves. While her actions are based on principle, she’s labeled as a “Red” and the library is burned in a McCarthy inspired frenzy. The Legion of Decency

considered the film pro-communist, perhaps due to the fact that community members appear remorseful about their actions at the close of the movie. This remorse may be interpreted as the phoenix of the film, offering hope that a community can rediscover its potential to emulate and protect democratic principles.

The lesser known stories of Bosnia, China, and Cambodia are just as potent as those from Europe and the United States. Balkanization of the former Yugoslavia led to national, ethnic and religious discord, spiraling into all out war between 1991 and 1995. Sarajevo fostered Serbs, Croats, and Muslims, a microcosm of the ethnic diversity represented in Bosnia. This multiculturalism did not settle well with Serbian nationalists. Ultimately, Sarajevo struggled “between the rural and the urban, the primitive and the cosmopolitan, and between chaos and reason” (Glenny 164). As the Nazis attempted to wipe out Jewish culture, so too did the Serbs attempt to stamp out Muslim culture. Yet even as the National Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina was attacked with mortars and burned for three days in August of 1992, “Librarians and volunteers formed a human chain to pass out books despite the sniper fire” (Knuth 128). This resolve is reminiscent of the residents of Louvain, Belgium, who rebuilt their library after World War One only to have it bombed again in World War Two.

China’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR) resulted in persecution of librarians and purging of libraries. Although China is now considered communist-lite, their collective paranoia was still apparent as late as 1999 when Yongyi Song, a librarian at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, was held in Beijing for six months after seeking out primary documents on the GPCR for research. Song was released after lengthy protests from the West. Criticism of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) simply doesn’t happen within its borders. Song became a naturalized citizen of the U. S. and went on to publish scholarly articles and books on the PRC. Today he is the Technical Services and Collection Development Librarian at California State University, Los Angeles and currently serves as President of the Southern California Chapter of the Chinese American Library Association. The American Library Association awarded him the “Paul Howard Award for Courage” in 2005 and in 2006 the Visual Arts Guild of Los Angeles awarded him a “Champion of Freedom of Speech Award.” Paul Howard, benefactor of the former award, defines courage as, “the quality of mind which enables one to face adversity,

difficulty, or danger with resolution and fortitude . . . it is that characteristic which enables librarians to seek the achievement of goals in spite of all opposing forces” (ALA, 2008). With great courage, the people of Tibet have endured the destruction of their ancient state printing house in the Potala, their Buddhist scriptures burned, desecrated, and in some cases literally turned into plaster for the construction of houses (Knuth 219). In India, where many Tibetan exiles live, the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (LTWA) grew to 80,000 print materials in the year 2000, not including oral interviews, legal and social documents, and photographs. An estimated 40 percent of Tibet’s literature has been salvaged from the Maoist agenda to infiltrate and destroy this once independent Himalayan mountain country.

Influenced by Mao, the Khmer Rouge took control of Cambodia in 1975 where literacy was punishable by death. In this case, books and libraries were not in jeopardy as much as the educated classes who cared for and encouraged access to them. Retired professor at The Royal School of Library and Information Science in Denmark, Pierre Evald, has examined the modern status of library science in Cambodia. Evald visited four libraries in February of 2000, among them, the Hun Sen Library at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (see Figure 1.3), which opened in 1997 and began providing internet access in 1998. One of the most heavily used libraries in Cambodia today, an increasing number of staff there possess a BA or MLS. This revival of intellect attests to the power of people to refute libricide even when an estimated 80 percent of the country’s Buddhist texts ended up

Figure 1.3 : Ciculation counter in Hun Sen Library



in baskets, hats, or simply destroyed. The Cornell University Library launched a project in 1989 to assist in the rebuilding of the Cambodian National Library, which included microfilming fragile palm and mulberry leaf manuscripts. The individuals and groups discussed above did not remain neutral in the face of persecution. Librarians are political combatants by the very nature of their job. Representatives of culture, history, literature and artifacts, information professionals are called to rise on a united front whenever regimes—from Serbian nationalists to

Pol Pot—threaten the integrity of material and human collections.

The human chain in front of Sarajevo's National Library, the bravery of Song, and the work of Evald, prove that 21st century librarians have indeed risen from the ashes of the 20th century.

Iraq

Modern Iraq is partly comprised of the region known as Ancient Mesopotamia, one of the birthplaces of human civilization. Some of the earliest forms of writing—cuneiform script on clay tablets—were developed here. Historically speaking, Iraq is dotted with archaeological sites and home to three World Heritage sites. UNESCO defines world heritage as, “belong[ing] to all the peoples of the world, irrespective of the territory on which they are located” (UNESCO, 2008). A 1972 Convention adopted guidelines for the identification, protection, and preservation of World Cultural and Natural Heritage Sites. Included in the 878 properties defined by the World Heritage Committee are the Samarra Archaeological City north of Baghdad, and the ancient cities of Ashur, and Hatra. Two out of the three sites have been deemed endangered by UNESCO. While these archaeological locations have uncovered clay tablets and other artifacts, these items are often moved to institutional repositories such as The National Library and The National Archives.

As previously discussed, 21st century Iraq has most recently been subject to libricide since March of 2003. The Hague Convention asserted that “damage to cultural property belonging to any people whatsoever means damage to the cultural heritage of all mankind” (International Committee of the Blue Shield, 2006). Michele V. Cloonan, dean and professor at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Simmons College in Boston, recently spoke at the University Buffalo, addressing the cultural damage done to Iraq when Saddam Hussein's regime came to power in 1979. Between 2004 and 2007, “Cloonan worked with colleagues in the United States and Europe to train Iraqi librarians and library school educators. Their work was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Embassy in Baghdad and a private foundation in the United Arab Emirates” (University Buffalo, 2008). Coalitions such as these must exist in times of peace as well as war. By the time non-profits, international aide agencies, and scholars have organized themselves after a conflict has broken out, the damage has already been done. Preemptive organization and established institutions are necessary to lobby,

legislate, and legitimize cultural preservation before world wars, ethnocide, and terrorism wreak havoc. Librarians cannot be reactionary if they expect collections to survive today's volatile political climate. Having an 'Emergency Action Plan' along with global partners will not prevent libricide from happening, but it will provide the structure necessary to intercede at the earliest possible moment and work to combat it from every front.

Figure 1.4 : Homeless books stored in a mosque



University of Chicago's Oriental Institute, provides an online database of objects recovered and missing at <http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/dbfiles/Iraqdatabasehome.htm>. The list of known and unknown museum numbers appear en masse on the page, their blue hyperlinks eerily similar to the blue-inked numbers etched on the wrists of millions of Europeans during World War Two. The Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary Project launched in 1974 by Dr. Samuel Noah Kramer (see <http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/epsd>) provides another avenue through which to salvage and preserve cultural heritage in the Middle East. The Oriental Institute also hosts MELA, or the Middle East Librarians Association, who in turn head a committee on libraries in Iraq, compiling reports on the status of libraries and remnants of libraries affected by the Iraq War. The committee describes itself on its web site as, "members who have first-hand knowledge of, experience or strong interest in matters related to libraries in Iraq who will be able to field questions, play the role of contact and suggest ways to assist in rebuilding efforts." While a handful of scholars, private corporations, and institutions from around the globe have contributed to rebuilding Iraq's libraries, security issues in Iraq and budget constraints in the United States have left many projects unfinished. In his April 2008 article for *The Nation*, R. H. Lossin closes with the following sentiment:

If the raison d'être of the library profession is the preservation and dissemination of information, and thus the communication of ideas and the promotion of open discourse, then this question of empathy and solidarity should be the profession's guiding purpose. Books might seem like an afterthought for people facing violent death, poverty and shattered future, yet the library now receives 750 patrons a month. If there is any hope for stability and reconstruction in Iraq, a little more library solidarity is due.

Left in isolation, libraries in Afghanistan and Pakistan could follow in the path of Iraq's National Library. While librarians in the United States are struggling to afford books and hold on to salaries in the recent economic downturn, neither can they afford to ignore the plight of libraries half a world away that are even worse off.

Somalia

Somalia's history with the written word has been relatively short. Somalis are traditionally an oral people. A literacy campaign promoted by the government in the mid-1970's increased the occurrence of citizens fluent in English, Italian, and Arabic, as these were the prevalent languages of literacy instruction. The Somali National University, established in 1970, survived only until 1990. From the ashes of the Somali Civil War, Mogadishu University (MU) emerged in 1997. MU boasts 11 "faculties" [sic], including Computer Science and Information Technology. The collection boasts about 30,000 items and a Library building is planned to be completed before the end of the 2008-2009 academic year. According to their website www.mogadishuuniversity.com, a virtual library project is also said to be underway at MU (see Figure 1.5) in conjunction with the

Figure 1.5 : Shelves at MU



African Virtual University. The online *CIA World*

Fact Book estimates there are 98,000 internet users in Somalia being serviced by three Internet Service Providers (ISPs). The African Libraries and Archives Collection at Stanford University includes a comprehensive online guide to current news, media, and culture entitled, "Africa south of the Sahara: Selected Internet resources"

available by linking to <http://garamond.stanford.edu/depts/ssrg/africa/libaf.html>

Somalia does not have any sites listed by UNESCO as significant to World Heritage, however this does not preclude the importance of culture on the horn of Africa, its history with British and Italian imperialism, and its relationship to Islam. UNESCO outlines a 10 point list of criteria for consideration. Nominated sites must qualify under at least one of these criteria. UNESCO's Program of Education for Emergencies and Reconstruction (PEER) was instituted in Somalia in 1993, and has since provided assistance in 18 additional countries. PEER has donated textbooks and references to MU, and the University asks other academic institutions to donate texts as well.

Entities such as The Federation of Universities of the Islamic World (FUIW) and The Association of Arab Universities (AARU) have power in numbers, when it comes to offering support to an endangered or demolished institution. These universities must mobilize in the face of imminent upheaval and depend on one another to present a united front when lobbying governments for protection, restitution, and aid. A journal entitled, *Libri: International Journal of Libraries and Information Science*, out of Germany, published an article, "The role of libraries in Somalia's reformation," by Ali D. Abdulla in 1998. Even so, Somalia's libraries have not received much attention from international librarianship, Somali or African studies at large, nor has Somalia reached the point of political stability necessary to rebuild. Sool, Sanaag, and Hawd Development Agency (SSHDA), a non-profit providing humanitarian and developmental assistance to the above named regions of Somalia and eastern Ethiopia, included a Public Libraries Project within their larger Public Education agenda. According to SSHDA, Somali literacy was only at 5 percent in 1972 and according to the online *CIA World Fact Book*, boasts 37.8 percent in 2008. During the greatest upheaval of Somalia's Civil War, between about 1986 and 1995—a conflict which continues today—libraries were mostly destroyed in the capital of Mogadishu. In addition to local communities and the Diaspora, international aid agencies assisted in the effort to rebuild and revitalize these institutions. The task of the SSHDA library sub-committee was to develop a plan for establishing libraries in Laasanod, Buuhoodle, and Erigavo (Sool, Sanaag, and Hawd, 2001). Whether the intentions of SSHDA were carried out could not be established by the research conducted for this article. The organization's website gives no indication of having been updated beyond 2001.

While the SSHDA library project appears to have collapsed, other efforts to bring literacy to the country on Africa's horn have survived. Somali pirates have frequently made news headlines of late, but unfortunately organizations such as Africa Educational Trust and Book Aid International (working specifically in sub-Saharan Africa) rarely make mainstream news. These two organizations work together with funding from the UK and Finnish governments, and have established reading rooms in primary and secondary schools in the more politically stable areas of Somaliland and Puntland state. Lady Hermione Ranfurly founded Book Aid International in 1954 while living in the Bahamas where her husband served as the Governor General. Her concern for children short of books on the island evolved into an organization that today serves 12 countries in Africa. Indiana University at Bloomington has a Digital Somali Library that focuses on materials in the Somali language. The Somali Studies International Association and several grants from the U. S. Department of Education have contributed to this ongoing project. Oxfam International, the renowned NGO fighting poverty and injustice around the world, issued a statement October 7, 2008 signed by 52 NGO's working in Somalia concerning the deteriorating humanitarian crisis there. Africa Educational Trust was among the signatories. Oxfam declares that 1.1 million people are displaced within the country. 24 aid workers have been killed in 2008 alone, 10 remain missing (Oxfam International, 2008). In a situation such as this Lossin's words come back to spur us on, despite violence, famine, and death, "this question of empathy and solidarity should be the profession's guiding purpose." Indeed librarians as political combatants must be ready to face the unspeakable.

Conclusion: 21st Century Phoenix

Another political combatant of the 21st century phoenix include Aaron Lansky, who, in 1980 began salvaging Yiddish books, "from attics and basements, demolition sites and Dumpsters" (Lansky ix). By 2004 he claimed to have collected half a million books; whereas before scholars had claimed "Yiddish was dead" Lansky solicited 35,000 members to join his National Yiddish Book Center. Clearly an interest in Jewish *yerushe* (inheritance) remained even as thousands of books remain lost. Lansky quotes Yiddish scholar Max Weinreich who states that, "Because Yiddish has magic, it will outwit history." The magic perhaps, is in the passion of individuals to rummage in dumpsters, sift through rubble, and risk their lives in order to salvage human memory.

Too often discourse focuses on the dissection of conflict without providing realistic solutions. What this paper has attempted to do is identify global, national, and community players who are actively involved in the preservation and proliferation of libraries in the face of cultural conflict. Humanity loses something of itself when culture is erased, history rewritten, memories forgotten, storytellers passed on, and identity redefined. Librarians of the 21st century are political combatants, as MacLeish reminds us, “whether they so wish or not,” and sooner or later our commitment will be tested. The remarkable stories of individuals and groups working on behalf of libraries around the globe should not only garner our empathy, but our action as well.

Photographs (Figures) Cited

Figure 1.1

<http://www.ifla.org/VI/4/admin/iraq2407/pages/BASPL7.htm>

Figure 1.2

<http://www.ifla.org/VI/4/admin/iraq2407/pages/BASBU9.htm>

Figure 1.3

<http://www2.db.dk/pe/cambodia.htm>

Figure 1.4

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/dec/21/education.books?gusrc=rss&feed=culture>

Figure 1.5

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