



Contexts for Conservation

2013 National Conference - Adelaide 23- 25 October

Filling the niche: Supporting the preservation of audiovisual collections in SE Asia and the Pacific region

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Abstract

The South East Asia Pacific Audio Video Archives Association (SEAPAVAA) aims to provide a regional voice for audiovisual collections and enable a forum to address some common issues and concerns related to the collection, preservation and access to the audiovisual materials for South East Asia and the Pacific regions, including Australia and New Zealand. The National Film and Sound Archive has been a very active member of SEAPAVAA since its formation helping to shape the association's objectives and has also supported SEAPAVAA's work through a wide range of specific projects.

However far from being a one sided relationship the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (NFSA) has benefitted from the exposure to the unique local solutions that archives and collecting organisations have developed in response to the harsh environments and low levels of resourcing available. Knowledge gained over the years of collaboration has been refined and applied to enable better understanding and systems for preserving NFSA's audiovisual collection and disseminated to the audiovisual archiving community globally.

Keywords

Audiovisual, South East Asia, Pacific, preservation, training, collaboration

Background

Internationally audiovisual archives are a small community and there is a strong ethic of sharing of information. For the first few years of its existence NFSA was comparatively isolated by distance and time zones. There was no e-mail or listservs and the opportunity to travel was very limited by costs. The limited information on managing collections was via occasional articles in journals such as the *Journal of Film Preservation* (FIAF). Forming personal networks was difficult but crucial to enabling sharing. For audiovisual archives in many SE Asian countries the problems were exacerbated with language also increasing the isolation.

SEAPAVAA was formed in 1996. NFSA was a founding member and has been active in supporting SEAPAVAA in a variety of ways, including elected roles on the Executive Council, awards to recognise members work in audiovisual preservation, training workshops in conjunction with SEAPAVAA conferences and specific training projects.

While SEAPAVAA has been the major conduit for support to the region NFSA has also partnered with other organisations such as Asia Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development (AIBD), to provide training and other consultancies across the region.

Developing NFSA's relevance to South East Asia and the Pacific

NFSA has long had a culture of research and has added a significantly to the body of knowledge of audiovisual archiving. Over the years NFSA has partnered with industry experts, universities and manufacturers to understand and develop solutions to the problems that beset audiovisual collections. This ethos places NFSA in an almost unique position in the global community, very few other audiovisual collecting institutions have had a similar culture.

Within the field of audiovisual archiving there is an enshrined ethic of sharing and collaboration. SEAPAVAA states in its Objectives:

“Encourage communication and mutual assistance, including the sharing of knowledge, skills, services, resources and experiences among others;”

It was then beholden upon NFSA to share the knowledge gained through its culture of research.

Developing a relationship that not only crosses borders but also cultures is a long term process. While there was common ground in the goals of the respective organisations in the region the approach needed to be mutualistic. Many of the cultures in the region had been previously been dominated by colonial powers and it would be very easy to be seen as a remnant of this attitude. At every step in the relationship building listening and learning was paramount. It was clear from the outset that the approaches used by the basically European and US based audiovisual archives were not necessarily applicable to the region. The low level of resource available even to national organisations was inadequate to keep pace with the “best practice” as advocated by the peak bodies. What was worse was that many of these peak bodies had attempted to provide assistance, however the approaches were not fully compatible with the culture and a “here is how it is done, take it or leave it” attitude seemed to pervade the assistance. This naturally left a distrust of other perceivably “European” organisations entering the region. Crucial to developing the relationship has been a genuine interest in the issues of each organisation and a willingness to place less emphasis on the “best practice” approach or be willing to modify/compromise this approach to develop a pragmatic attitude to goal setting.

This is best illustrated in ISO Standards. These standards define the parameters required for optimum processes and procedures. Clearly meeting the technical standards for tasks such as film storage in a tropical region requires far more in the way of building performance and infrastructure than it does in a more temperate climate. This increased need for high specifications combined with a lower level of resource means that very few archives in the region could hope to meet any part of the standard. Many managers felt that if they couldn't meet the standard then it was a waste of time doing anything. Consequently the standards became an impediment for audiovisual archiving rather than a building block. Working to create the attitude of using standards as aspirational rather than mandatory helped in developing mutual understanding of problems and achievable solutions.

Here NFSA was able to apply its research capability by taking the conditions and resources found in SE Asia and the Pacific, extracting crucial elements from the standards and analysing the gap. The resulting analysis could be further dissected into areas where a pragmatic or compromise approach was feasible and those that really required a best practice approach. While undertaking this type of analysis the experience gained in analysis also benefitted NFSA by expanding our knowledge and capacity to deal with the issues we also faced with archiving at risk audiovisual objects.

Training workshops

Training has been a major conduit for regional support. Training has largely taken the form of specific workshops as listed in the table below, however NFSA has also hosted several interns for specific training projects.

Year	Location	Title/Precis
1996	Manila	Film and Video Preservation: introduction to the principles and practices of av preservation, sponsored by AusHeritage
1997	Manila	Film and Video Preservation & Restoration: a 4 week intensive workshop with participants from the region, sponsored by ASEAN
1998	Hanoi	Advanced Workshop on Vinegar Syndrome and Mould Affected Films: 2 week intensive course with participants from the region, sponsored by UNESCO
2000	Jakarta Kuala Lumpur Singapore Ho Chi Minh City	Travelling Workshop on Audiovisual Preservation: sponsored by UNESCO
2004	Vientiane	Audiovisual Preservation, sponsored by NFSA
2005	Bandar Seri Begawan	Audiovisual Preservation: for Brunei Darussalam organisations, sponsored by SEAPAVAA
2006	Bangkok	Audiovisual Preservation: for Thai organisations, sponsored by ASEAN
	Phnom Penh	Audiovisual Preservation: the first av preservation specific workshop held in Cambodia, sponsored by ASEAN
2007	Phnom Penh	Introduction to Audiovisual Preservation, sponsored by SEAPAVAA
2008	Manila	Audiovisual Preservation, held at the University of the Philippines for the Society of Filipino Archivists
	Singapore	Audiovisual Preservation sponsored by ASEAN
2009	Jakarta	Advanced Audiovisual Preservation: sponsored by SEAPAVAA
2010	Bangkok	Introduction to digitisation of audiovisual materials; sponsored by SEAPAVAA
	Kuala Lumpur	Audiovisual Preservation held in conjunction with the South Asia Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (SARBICA) conference, sponsored by SARBICA
	Kuala Lumpur	Audiovisual Preservation: 3 week intensive training course for the National Archives of Malaysia (NAM)

		and other Malaysian collecting agencies, sponsored by NAM
2012	Ho Chi Minh City	The Digital Audiovisual Archive: sponsored by SEAPAVAA
2013	Bangkok	Film Identification for Collection Assessment: sponsored by SEAPAVAA

Table 1: Major NFSA supported training workshops in SE Asia Pacific

Other support

NFSA has also undertaken preservation, conservation and restoration projects for film, audio and video from the region. Two major projects have been the photochemical restoration and preservation of the classic Filipino film “Giliw Ko” from the only remaining print, and the treatment and duplication of 2” video tapes from Brunei.

The “Giliw Ko” restoration was a gift from the Australian Government to the people of the Philippines to commemorate the centenary of independence in 1998. The restoration started with the only remaining copy of the film, a 16mm print. From this NFSA created high quality preservation materials (negatives and intermediate positives) and remastered the sound track and produced a cinema quality release print that was screened at a gala performance celebrating Philippine culture.

2” video tape format has been identified by the South East Asia Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (SARBICA) as the highest priority at risk audiovisual format for the region. The NFSA has one of the few laboratories that can not only transfer 2” video but also carry out the necessary conservation treatments to enable the tape to be replayed and duplicated. The videotapes held some of the earliest recordings of Brunei before independence in 1984.

As part of NFSA’s fellowships project, ‘Scholars and Artists in Residence’ (SAR), NFSA has hosted several research fellows who have accessed, studied and enriched our collection of items that originate from South East Asia. Mr. Neco Sarmento’s examination of the East Timor Collection at NFSA in 2011 is a notable example of the SAR initiative. Due to the numerous conflicts in the region, a significant majority of the audio and visual history in Timor have been destroyed. The only surviving footage archiving the troubled history in the region are held in overseas collections, such as the collection held at NFSA. Using our collection, Mr. Sarmento was able to identify key names, dates and events that would otherwise have been lost. The result of this research has led to another special project to create a book titled “NFSA Timor-Leste Collection Profile” jointly funded by NFSA and Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT). This document provides remarkable insight into the audio visual Timor-Leste materials held in Australia’s national collection. The profile features catalogue entries and essays for a total of 795 NFSA held moving image, recorded sound and documentation works that captured the history and culture of Timor-Leste from the early 20th century. This publication was presented to the Timorese Government as a commemorative gift marking the tenth anniversary of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste. NFSA is committed to providing continued technical support to the establishment of the Archives in East Timor with the goal of repatriating digitally preserved collections.

NFSA is currently developing an international engagement strategy which will not only assist us to prioritise the support that we provide, but also may identify areas that we have not previously engaged with. More importantly it will help us to identify the partners

(commercial companies, aid programs and government agencies) who may be able to assist our efforts.

Benefits to NFSA

The relationships developed by NFSA interaction with archives from across the SE Asia Pacific region has stimulated a lot of thought regarding how and why we approach issues the way we do and challenged us as an organisation to question our current thinking and revisit some assumptions. Two case studies on how NFSA has benefited as a result of regional interactions are:

Vietnam Film Institute

For many years NFSA punched 4 ventilation holes in the sides of film cans to store nitrate film. The principle being that as the acid generated by decomposition diffused from the film it could further diffuse out of the film can and away from the film reducing the concentration of acid to further catalyse decomposition. This was an untested assumption.

The VFI was conducting research into the treatment of decomposing film and also examined the diffusion of acids from decomposing film attempting to determine effective and low cost approaches. The VFI looked at far more active approaches involving off gassing the film for a period of time. The VFI tried various approaches including spacing the film in the reel with fishing line. Their research into treatments delivered sufficient promising results, although the techniques were not feasible from a collection management point of view.

Working with the VFI's results the NFSA critically examined the behaviour of the microclimate inside a film can under various conditions and also the ideal tension for diffusion of acids from a wound reel of film. From this collaborative work a new design for film cans that has since been adopted by all the major film can manufacturers and a range of film handling and storage strategies were developed that provide an improved preservation outcome at very low cost.

The research streamlined NFSA's film handling procedures and the publicity generated from the research elevated NFSA's reputation in the audiovisual archiving global community.

National Film Archive and Video Centre, Laos

The predominant approach to developing an archive has traditionally been the need for a large infrastructure investment, purpose built vaults, HVAC etc. Upon its inception the National Film Archive and Video Centre (NFAVC) was given no assistance other than being given stewardship of a large collection of films and a group of small buildings that were totally inappropriate for storing film in a tropical environment. Undaunted the NFAVC started with the smallest of steps, lifting the boxes of film off the ground with unused bricks sourced from adjacent building sites. At the same time the few staff started to run a preventative maintenance program involving rewinding the films by hand. In small steps the NFAVC built up the infrastructure and due to the cyclical maintenance program was able to maintain the collection despite the inhospitable conditions. Eventually the NFAVC was able to have a new building with well designed and constructed vaults and support infrastructure built, a result of long hard work and effective demonstration of the importance of the collection and diligence in stewardship.

In a survey of the chemical stability of the films in the NFAVC collection conducted by NFSA it was seen that the cyclic maintenance had been very effective. A far lower level of deterioration was measured in the NFAVC collection when compared to other regional collections, that, while being stored under "better" environmental conditions had no program

of cyclic maintenance. Given the history of the collection this could only be attributed to the rewinding and opportunity to off-gas (diffuse) deterioration by-products from the films.

The effectiveness of the cyclic maintenance program has been incorporated in NFSA's collection management practices for parts of the collection.

Conclusion

NFSA has strived to develop audiovisual archiving across the region, however this cannot be just a one way process. Understanding of cultures and region specific issues must occur before any meaningful relationships can be formed.

Biographies

Shingo Ishikawa began working as a Paper Conservator at the National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra in 2007. At the NFSA Shingo is the manager of the Documents and Artefacts Laboratory and also supervises the Still Image Services team. In his conservation tasks Shingo works with paper based and other objects related to film, audio and broadcast industries.

Mick Newnham is the Manager of Conservation & Research, at NFSA. Since 1995 Mick has been providing consultancies and training in audiovisual preservation and collection management on behalf of organisations such as UNESCO, SEAPAVAA and ASEAN. These consultancies have been conducted throughout Australia, SE Asia, USA, Europe, the Caribbean, Mexico, West Africa and India. Mick is a lecturer and tutor in audio visual preservation with the Charles Sturt University on-line course "Preservation of AV Materials".