

Co-constructing digital archiving practices for community heritage preservation in Egypt and Iraq

Abstract

We document cultural heritage to preserve cultural heritage, to ensure its survival by pushing back against the entropic forces of forgetting and neglect. These entropic forces are particularly acute for intangible cultural heritage preserved in digital form and produced in fragile and conflict-affected settings. And whilst professionals from across the ‘memory’ professions have responded to these challenges, based on our experience of development work with young people in Egypt and Iraq, they have done so in ways that are ill-suited to the worldviews, cultural practices, educational experience, and learning models of those outside centres of archival power. This paper describes the delivery of ‘digital archiving’ workshops, training, support, and resources developed by an interdisciplinary and multi-sectoral collective of academics, practitioners, community leaders, and community participants. Working at the intersection of development studies, heritage management, and digital preservation, this paper argues that cultural heritage practices are enriched by foregrounding particular place-based and contingent activities that productively peel back the provincialism of the canons of enlightenment memory work.

Keywords

heritage, digital archiving, memory professions, development work, co-creation, fragile and conflict-affected settings.

Recordkeeping classification schemes, catalogues, and descriptive systems embed the worldview, values, power structures, and ways of knowing of the sociocultural and political mainstream. (McKemmish et al, 2020)

We document cultural heritage to preserve cultural heritage. The labour of documentation—typically conducted by memory professionals, community activists, or engaged volunteers—has an audit function: by recording the heritage we have, we can better manage that heritage and pass on that management to our successors. But preservation is also achieved by providing access to cultural heritage and to knowledge about it, and so this documentation has an access function as well: for communities and outsiders, for descendant communities and collectors, for

education and research.¹ Taken together then, the documentation of cultural heritage attempts to ensure the survival of cultural heritage by pushing back against the entropic forces of forgetting and neglect, by allowing cultural heritage to evolve alongside communities as they select and identify with the practices that have continued meaning for them.

These entropic forces are particularly acute for cultural heritage that does not exist in tangible form, for which capricious selection, preservation despite neglect, is unsuited. As a result, the preservation of intangible cultural heritage—defined by UNESCO as “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills [...] that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage” (UNESCO, 2003)—has received increased attention in recent years.² This emphasis on capturing intangible cultural heritage has coincided with the widespread adoption of digital technologies in society and culture, including in those fragile and conflict-affected settings where—for reasons of displacement of people, fracturing of communities, and destruction of tangible heritage—preserving intangible cultural heritage is most critical.³ This results in a double bind: intangible heritage preserved in an intangible form.⁴

Over the last three decades, professionals from across the ‘memory’ professions have responded to this challenge of the intangibility of the digital by coalescing around the field of digital preservation.⁵ Surveys, guides, practical handbooks, and treatise have followed (Digital Preservation Coalition 2015; Harvey and Weatherburn 2018; Millar 2019; Owens 2018; Witness 2015). Concurrently, documentation practices in memory professions have been updated and revised to produce resources that accommodate the technical, legal, and ethical requirements of this new category of material (Bergis et al. 2018; Bunn 2021; Collections Trust, 2017; Pledge and Dickens 2017; Sloyan 2018). These practices are not neutral, grounded as they are in the long

¹ For a recent critique of how colonial power has and continues to determine who gets to choose what is accessed and accessible, see Agostinho (2019).

² Since the 2003 UNESCO Convention on Safeguarding Intangible Heritage there has been increasing recognition of cultural rights and practices that lack physical form and of the ways in which tangible and intangible heritage reinforce and constitute one another. However, critics have argued that such conventions do not account for the nuanced and adaptive role of heritage which may also seek to essentialise particular cultures and practices (Byrne 2014; Kurin 2004; Stefano 2012).

³ Heritage is increasingly becoming a direct target in conflict, as an assault on cultural diversity and religious pluralism. In these instances, the ability of communities to preserve, access and practice their tangible and intangible cultural heritage becomes increasingly important as a means of situating identities amidst displacement and intense precarity, maintaining connections to place and peoples, and staving off eradication through physical and cultural genocide (Shahab. 2021).

⁴ Strictly speaking digital data is not intangible, but exists in various computational strata from magnetic charges on solid state drives to their representation as pixels on a screen (Lee, 2012). For our purposes, however, it is prudent to conceive of intangible cultural heritage held by digital files as always performed by a combination of hardware and software, and thereby only existing—intangibly—in those moments of performance (Harvey and Weatherburn, 2018).

⁵ For the variety of professions engaged in this work—from archivists and libraries, to law courts and broadcasters—see the membership of the Digital Preservation Coalition.

history of enlightenment memory work intertwined with imperial bureaucracy (Cohn 1996; Odumosu 2020), colonial imaginaries (Perez 1999), rituals of civility (Duncan 1995), and intuition dressed up as reason (Stoler 2016; Thylstrup et al. 2021), and appearing in everything from the finding aids of sixteenth century Simancas or the nineteenth century Smithsonian (Delsalle 2017; Greene 2016), to the documentation of late-colonial Sumatra or Franco-Algerian conflict (Brozgal 2014; Stoler 2009).⁶ For individuals or communities looking to develop knowledge of and expertise in using computational technologies to preserve their intangible cultural heritage, these resources are important sources of best practice. And whilst these best practice resources have begun—in response both to changes in professional practice and the work of critical heritage scholars and information theorists (Bowker and Star 2000; Cook and Schwartz 2002; Fowler 2021; Hall 1999; McKemmish et al. 2020; Sutherland 2017; Yakel 2003)—to step back from attempting to create models that represent all possible preservation scenarios,⁷ to resist making claims to their universality, those best practices still rest on a series of foundational assumptions: that things are worth looking after, that it takes effort to look after things, and that that effort is best directed towards documenting things in structured form.⁸

But what happens when best practice resources produced by enlightenment memory work encounter contexts in which these foundational assumptions are not shared? Contexts where the value of looking after things is contested, where the labour of remembering is made invisible or not seen as requiring substantial effort, or where documenting things is unfamiliar or a potential source of harm?⁹ This is the situation we found ourselves in when working with ‘heritage gatherers’ in Egypt and Iraq as part of a series of overlapping activities that sought to create positive change by fostering among young people in fragile and conflict-affected settings the skills and expertise needed to capture their intangible cultural heritage. Because, whilst the participants were selected, in part, as they were motivated by a desire to protect their heritage

⁶ Indeed as Stoler (2009) argues, there is a history of records being made to fit archival genres, and those archival genres having in turn defined the systems produced to look after those records.

⁷ As Trever Owens (2018) writes with apparently uncontroversial confidence ‘all models are wrong’ (p. 80). This position makes memory professionals a positive check on now dominant paradigms in socio-technical system design. As Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2012) notes, a modern instinct towards designing systems that scale means in turn designing systems that actively ignore plurality and difference.

⁸ There is some geographical and chronological variability in when these three assumptions became central to the work of memory professionals. For example, in the case of anglophone museums, the institutional prioritisation and professionalisation of cataloguing practice that accelerated after 1950 in US-based museums (Turner 2020) was not evident in UK-based museums until the early-1980s (Roberts and Light 1980). In this context, William Kilbride’s (2018) recent enquiry into ‘whether casually unsustainable assumptions embedded themselves into our [the digital preservation community’s] plans for digital preservation in the early 2000s’, and the ripple effects of these assumptions, is to be welcomed.

⁹ For people in low resource settings and their unfamiliarity with memory institutions, with how those memory institutions are structured and organised see Ngulube et al. (2017). For the erasure and scattering of documentary heritage as a method of community self-protection, see Qato (2019), especially p. 314.

from loss,¹⁰ to bring into their communities skills and expertise the young people did not have ready or consistent access to, we found best practice resources for heritage preservation—especially the preservation of digital materials—ill-suited to the participants’ worldviews, cultural practices, educational experience, and learning models.

This paper describes the delivery of workshops, training, support, and resources between 2018 and 2021 by an interdisciplinary and multi-sectoral collective of academics, practitioners, community leaders, and community participants. It focuses on the provision of expertise in the preservation of intangible cultural heritage in digital form, what we describe in this paper as ‘digital archiving’.¹¹ This expertise was (and is) steeped in enlightenment paradigms, and so the delivery of activities and the production of materials were framed as acts of enquiry as much as they were acts of knowledge transfer or pedagogy. In turn the work required a constant troubling of our practice: Are digital archiving paradigms fit for purpose? In what ways do the assumptions that underpin digital archiving paradigms inhibit work outside centres of archival power?¹² How can digital archiving resources become more equitable, justice-driven and responsive to emerging and unexpected problematiques?

Asking these questions during the planning and delivery of digital archiving activities and the production of digital archiving resources does not mean that the work was merely an academic exercise that reflected on the limits of current practice. Rather, it blended digital archiving with participatory action research,¹³ and in so doing was able to approach a number of community heritage goals identified in comparable work: to better embed change in the participant communities (Balestrini 2014); to create a sense of ownership of preserved materials within participant communities (McKemmish et al. 2020; Mitchell 2013); to move the decision regarding what should and should not be preserved to participant communities (Langford 1983). Further, we were able to investigate the assumptions about cultural heritage preservation that exist within the participant communities, to act when difficulties emerged,¹⁴ and to consider how those assumptions and difficulties can and should be responded to by memory professions and professionals. Here we were driven by the conviction that if digital archiving best practice is ill-

¹⁰ Other selection criteria for heritage gathers were that they were under-35, lived in their communities, and were active in voluntary work that involves “connecting with people”. A gender balance was also sought during the selection process.

¹¹ Our use of the word ‘archiving’ is not intended to indicate that our work and reflections are those of archival professionals or intended as critiques of the archival profession. We are not archival professionals, though we do routinely draw on their work and find ourselves inspired by their practice. Instead, we use ‘archiving’ in the popular sense of the term: to refer to work that seeks to preserve and maintain material of various kinds using both formal and informal ‘archiving’ processes.

¹² We draw here on concepts of archival power developed by Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995).

¹³ In so doing, we build on comparable research, including Johnston and Marwood (2017) and Patrick Ngulube (2018).

¹⁴ Such as resistances to digital archiving processes, socio-economic barriers to using and maintaining equipment, or community specific concerns over data sharing and reuse.

suited to the worldviews, cultural practices, and learning models of all communities of preservation, that best practice must be sufficiently humble to investigate and explain its narrow application: because whilst it may not be possible to decolonise the memory institution (Kassim 2017; Tuck and Tang 2012), anti-colonial work is not served by claims—deliberate or unthinking—to universality (Hicks 2020), but rather by the acknowledgement of the provincialism of its enlightenment project of archival power (Chakrabarty 2007).

The paper proceeds in three parts. The first part, 'Making the Case for Caring', describes our work with participant communities around the value and purpose of looking after cultural heritage. We observe that whilst the participants were motivated by a desire to protect their heritage from loss, making the case for caring needed to be fostered. We describe approaches to this that used a blend of conventional (a workbook) and unconventional (participatory theatre) tools. We argue that these contexts and communities show the value to digital archiving work of peeling back and better explicating the assumption that heritage is worth looking after. The second part, 'Describing how to describe', examines the gap in digital archiving best practice around how object descriptions are written, and the consequences of that gap when working in contexts where the values of descriptions to the preservation of cultural heritage is either not shared or at odds with community values: for example, in contexts where the use of speech and song as a means of doing memory work protects communities against persecution or violence from the state that may follow from leaving written documentary traces (Qato 2019).¹⁵ Here we argue that whilst the postmodern turn in memory work usefully dismantled the notion of the objective curator or cataloguer, a lack of guidance on how to describe items of cultural heritage can inhibit memory work outside the memory professions. The final part, 'Remaking vocabularies', describes the limits of the formal and structured vocabularies developed within digital archiving best practice. By creating new vocabularies for 'metadata', 'workflow', and 'digital archiving', we were able both to begin fostering a greater sense of ownership for memory work within our participant communities and to reflect on the assumptions and knowledges baked into the terminology used in digital archiving best practice.

1. Making the case for caring

In a workshop held in August 2019, we found ourselves attempting to convince a group of 'heritage gatherers' that how intangible cultural heritage is stored and preserved is just as important as collecting it in the first place. The young people were struggling to grasp the idea that all their hard work in identifying the right people to interview, undertaking interviews, and creating audio-recordings and photographs may be lost in an instant if due process for digital archiving was not followed. So we divided the heritage gatherers into small groups and asked them to imagine scenarios in which the heritage they had gathered was lost forever. They were asked to draw on their own experiences to consider the circumstances, situations, or events that could lead to the heritage they had gathered being lost and to imagine the consequences of that loss for the communities that had entrusted them with collecting their heritage and for the project as a whole. The heritage gatherers developed a number of scenarios: a memory stick left

¹⁵ These everyday concerns resonate with recent theoretical work on digital infrastructures as enablers of states sponsored securitisation (Agostinho et al. 2021).

in a pair of jeans, being accidentally put in the washing machine before any data had been backed up; a laptop falling in the middle of a muddy field in a rural community; the accidental deletion of a recent interview compounded by the failure to coordinate the safe transfer of audio recordings to a backup hard drive. The heritage gatherers then acted their scenarios out, performing the imagined loss of heritage with energy, humour, and pathos, in doing so drawing on the experience many had in using performance for community awareness and mobilisation.

These role plays—or 'skits'—took place roughly two-thirds into a multi-day digital archiving workshop. They were creative, loosely scripted, and instinctive. Pedagogically, the performances represented the unlocking of a situation in which the value and purpose of looking after cultural heritage had not been settled, hindering the engagement of the heritage gatherers with the practices and mindset needed to look after their intangible cultural heritage, to mitigate against loss without approaching the task in a technocratic manner, whereby—in time—corners may be cut or only minimum requirements met. It had not been part of the workshop plan to reinforce learning through 'skits', but rather the approach emerged from the learning environment, from the responses of the learners to that environment, and from a sense that making the case for caring needed greater attention. We write:

We noted that while [the heritage gatherers] can faithfully follow instructions on what to do with an audio-recording taken on the phone or recorder to the point of saving it on the laptop, it did not really click with them why this process is so integral to the preservation of their data. Steps were done mechanically without much thought. Then the idea came to me why not capitalize on popular ways in which Coptic youth are accustomed to express their ideas and issues: skits. Young people were delegated in groups to prepare skits on what happens if you don't save and store your data properly [...] It suddenly clicked: the passion, the urgency, the relevance of archiving had literally hit home because it was made relevant to the preservation of heritage that mattered to them. (Baker and Shahab 2021).

Participatory theatre worked then because it encouraged learners to step back from the detail and to build scenarios around cultural heritage production as it occurs in their particular contexts, around scenarios grounded in community experience, and to share those scenarios with peers in a format that inspired and enriched understanding, that connected the conceptual with the experiential. Scenarios—though rarely as performative as these—are routinely used in the digital archiving literature to reinforce and contextualise learning, and this change in pedagogical agency, towards a mode of learner production that fits the learner's own cultural contexts—here, a strong oral storytelling tradition—is recognized as best practice. Where the 'skits' diverged from best practice was as a focal point for testing the value and purpose of looking after cultural heritage, for asking if a case needed to be made for caring. What was assumed in the literature and in turn in the workshop design was then peeled back, from which the heritage gatherers could assert their rationale for looking after their cultural heritage: because conflict had demonstrated its fragility, because the hard work of their community deserves to be captured, because they were proud of who they were, because they didn't want to let down their peers.

Having established this need during our workshops, fostering the case for caring was then built into the design of a later activity: a workbook for heritage gatherers (Baker and Shahab 2021). In turn, one of the first questions the workbook seeks to answer is why the workbook is needed. This is answered in part with reference to wider societal change: 'new technologies and

urban migration', the workbook begins, 'are changing the way we live'. But from there, the workbook moves into a scenario that is threaded throughout: of Sara, a young woman from rural Egypt, who wants to ensure that 'the practices that were once part of the everyday lives of her grandparents are remembered' and who has learnt that the interviews and photographs 'she is collecting [in digital form] are as fragile as the ancient buildings within her village'. Each time learners encounter Sara they discover a little more about why she values digital archiving and how she justifies to herself the case for caring: the time Sara dropped her mobile phone in the sink and nearly lost the interview she'd recorded that day;¹⁶ the time she and her brother weren't sure how best to photograph her grandmother cooking their favourite dish; the time when a conversation with her uncle inspired Sara to write descriptions of heritage in a different way.

Sara is a fictional character, but one with a basis in reality, for she is an amalgamation of responses to our work with heritage gatherers, to the skits performed, the stories told, and the examples provided when prompted to consider why looking after cultural heritage is worth the effort to master. Some of these motivating scenarios were negative in character: the ill-health or recent death of community members, the loss of heritage during conflict, the forced displacement of individuals from their homes, a belief that traces of community heritage had become disordered. But many more were positive in character: to learn about and connect their community, to create knowledge that can be shared, to demonstrate the wealth and breadth of their heritage, to develop and foster expertise. And so, Sara's appearances in the workbook are structured around making positive change in the context of adversity, around agency and self-motivation, around a case for caring that is situated within her own experiences and her own community.

That this case for caring lacks prominence in the digital archiving literature, foregrounded for us that a foundational assumption of digital archiving best practice is its inseparability from a wider societal belief in the value of looking after cultural heritage that exists in centres of archival power. In these centres, steeped as they are in enlightenment paradigms of memory work, there is a demand that the preservation of heritage is given attention and investment. As citizens, we mourn the loss of global heritage from afar (El Deed, 2017). We give to generously to the preservation of 'our' cultural sites (Adamson 2019). We worry about loss when new media come around (Rosenzweig 2003). We create initiatives to record the under-represented and oppressed.¹⁷ We applaud activist archiving and its formalization (Ishmael and Waters 2017; Waters 2019). And we jump into action when ephemera meets representation meets power (Bergis et al. 2018). Many of us undertake these actions fully aware both that memory work is always misguided, presentist, and positional, and of the ideologies that shape and constrain what memory work is considered normative and what memory work is considered—pejoratively—'political'. And so the question becomes what this belief, refracted through even the most justice-oriented digital archiving best practice, does to how digital archiving is enacted outside of

¹⁶ This scenario is a quotidian example of the need, especially in communities threatened by conflict, to look after and preserve storage mechanisms and systems on which representations of tangible and intangible heritage may be recorded.

¹⁷ See for example the UK-based Community Archives and Heritage Groups, 'Interactive map' <https://www.communityarchives.org.uk/interactive-map> (n.d., accessed 11 May 2021).

centres of archival power. Does it become the core of best practice, replacing, overpowering, even doing harm to existing ways of doing? Does it become an adjacent system of doing that is adjusted and modified to fit? Or is it too misaligned to work effectively without peeling back this foundational assumption? In the case of communities in Egypt and Iraq, the authors found that without foregrounding and reframing the assumption that cultural heritage is worth looking after, activities and resources based on the digital archiving literature could struggle to find purchase, could alienate as much as they supported the development of skills and expertise, could—as is discussed in the section that follows—encourage a technocratic approach to the preservation of heritage that lacked the emotional investment needed to sustain that activity over time. In turn, it may well be that all learners would benefit from this foregrounding and reframing.

2. Describing how to describe

If digital archiving best practice is quiet on why cultural heritage needs looking after, it can be all but silent on how to undertake a crucial act of care: writing a descriptions of cultural heritage, describing what they look like and why they exist, their content and their context. Indeed, a remarkable continuity in sectoral best practice resources is a lack of guidance on how to describe an item of cultural heritage.¹⁸ This lack is not new. For example, in early-1980s Britain, at a time when museums were, in the face of computerisation, coalescing around the need for more accurate and interoperable documentation, sectoral guides like the *Manual of Curatorship* only briefly outlined what might constitute ‘non-intrinsic information about an object’ and had little to say on how to describe the intrinsic features of an object (Stone 1984).¹⁹ Today the Collections Trust’s SPECTRUM standard describes its ‘Content - description’ field as ‘A general description of a depiction in an object, or description of an object without making interpretation’ (Collections Trust 2017). That is, whilst digital archiving best practice—of which a museum documentation standard like SPECTRUM is one—will tease out how data such as time should be recorded (in a YYYY-MM-DD format) and the rationale for doing so (to enable filtering, faceting, and cross-collection search), comparable advice on how to write an object description is more often than not oblique, obscure, and presumptive, a straightforward extension of the overall rationale of documentation: for audit, for discovery, for understanding.²⁰

¹⁸ Where these do exist, they tend to be orientated towards art institutions, for example Baca et al. (2006).

¹⁹ There is an echo here of the integration of computing and documentation practices at the Smithsonian in the 1960s, at which time—according to Turner (2020, pp. 133-138)—there was a drive towards replacing prose descriptions with extensive categorisation.

²⁰ For example, we observe similar phenomena in the domain of archival description. In ISAD(G)—the General International Standard Archival Description, the second and most recent edition of which was published by the International Council on Archives in 2000—description is presented as a series of statements about scope and content (pp. 22-23) for the purpose of identifying, contextualising, and accessing archival materials. The production of such descriptions is assumed to be neutral, universal (p. 2), and based on ‘accepted theoretical principles’ (p. 8), with variability created by the object being described and not by the producers (individual and/or institutional) of descriptions (p. 9). *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*, the United States implementation of ISAD(G) often

Of course, memory professionals do have a sense of how to write an object description: what it should contain, how it should be ordered, and—increasingly—that their vocabulary cannot hope to avoid positional distortions, cannot hope to describe ‘without making interpretation’ (Yakel 2003). Shaped by the nature and media of the heritage in their care, these professionals have built local cultures of description buttressed by institutional memory and inherited ways of doing. And in place of describing how to describe these professionals have chosen, shared, and published exemplar descriptions, thus enabling a myriad of routes by which local cultures of description are transmitted over time and across space to become shared ways of doing: overt transmission by the publication of model descriptions (ISAD(G) 2000);²¹ haphazard transmission by the use of canonical catalogues as both a source of and inspiration for descriptions;²² indirect transmission through a bricolage of previously used phrasing and forms.²³ The cumulative controlling effect of these local exemplars and collective ways of doing are online collection catalogues that—for all the turmoil their custodians often see in them—exude consistency, clarity, and calm, that feel objective and authoritative, that embody professional rigour, that are projections of infrastructural power in ways that can be intimidating to imitate.

Our development of digital archiving workshops, training, support, and resources was framed by this reality: a lack of instruction on how to write object descriptions and a surfeit of high-quality objects descriptions produced by opaque infrastructures of practice. Inspired by Bowker and Star’s (2000) approach of reading against a standard to unpick its motivations, in preparation for our initial workshops in 2018 we sought to reverse-engineer guidelines for writing descriptions of heritage objects: that a description should record the form and extent of a heritage object (e.g. a three-minute audio recording, eight photographs), the activity it relates to (e.g. an interview, a festival), the principal people or things it contains, features of interest, and when and by whom it was created. From this we asked the heritage gatherers to write descriptions, first of dummy objects (e.g. their chair or a song), later of the intangible cultural heritage they had collected. The results were workmanlike, formulaic and uninspiring. The descriptions produced failed to capture the energy and enthusiasm of the young people towards their heritage, and—crucially—the work lacked that intangible quality of a ‘good’ object

referred to as DACS (2004), is a notable exception in that its element ‘3.1 Scope & Content’ does provide some guidance and rules, for example that known gaps in records should be recorded.

²¹ It is notable that the model descriptions on pages 22-24 are overwhelmingly from institutions in the US, UK, Canada, France, and Italy, with a single example from Brazil. The same pattern is found throughout the examples provided by ISAD(G).

²² For example, the use of the *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires Preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum* by the Lewis Walpole Library (USA) during the cataloguing of their print collections (Lewis 1968, pp. 446–57).

²³ For example, the National Gallery (UK) web text for William Hogarth’s 1743 painting *Marriage A-la-Mode: 1, The Marriage Settlement* (<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/william-hogarth-marriage-a-la-mode-1-the-marriage-settlement> (n.d., accessed 11 May 2021)) is a heavily reduced, less judgmental, and uncited version of Judy Egerton’s description of the painting in her catalogue *The British School* (1998).

description: its capacity to convince the reader that what the description is describing is important and worth looking after.

As our work with the heritage gatherers progressed, a number of challenges inhibiting their descriptive labour became clear. First, many had little experience of describing things in textual form. Second, with regards to cultural heritage, many of their inherited ways of doing were oral rather than textual.²⁴ And third, there was a belief among the heritage gatherers that there must be a ‘correct’ way to describe cultural heritage.

To unlock the situation, we again turned to storytelling. In particular we drew on material culture studies and methods of source analysis pioneered by Jules Prown in the early-1980s (Hannah and Longair 2017). Here, source analysis begins with observation-based description (e.g. materials, size, features), moves onto sensorial deduction (e.g. what the object does), before concluding with speculative assessment of its value and purpose. As Hannah and Longair (2017) write, Prown’s procedure ‘forc[es] the researcher through a process of close looking and describing before allowing consideration of the object’s context to come to the fore’ (p. 122). For us, this approach spoke directly to the challenges the heritage gatherers had faced when asked to produce descriptions of cultural heritage: it encouraged their expertise and experience, it prompted a conversational approach to description, it underscored the role of the always-imperfect individual in the production of object descriptions. To implement this approach, we drew again on Prown’s model, and created exercises in which heritage gatherers were encouraged to write descriptions for someone who lacks—fully or partially—one or more senses, such that they could not see a photograph or hear an interview. Over time, we iteratively adapted the method to produce a workshop exercise:

- A heritage capturer (Person A) is asked to verbally describe a photograph that depicts an item of cultural heritage to a second heritage capturer (Person B) who cannot see that photograph.
- Whilst listening to the description, Person B produces a drawing based on what they hear.
- The pair compare the drawing and the photograph and compile a list of features that are missing from the drawing.
- Finally, the pair discuss whether or not the missing features would be worth including in a description of the cultural heritage.

This approach, and its associated encouragement to think of writing a description as a creative task, provoked the hoped-for response in the heritage gatherers: the production of more personal descriptions; diminished concern with whether or not they had produced ‘correct’ descriptions; individuals who appeared better able to make value judgements about worth and importance.

²⁴ In both contexts—Egypt and Iraq—we note that until very recently, intangible cultural heritage was passed on intergenerationally in the form of orally transmitted stories. For the Egyptian heritage gatherers in particular, there was also a major disconnect between the vernacular Egyptian Arabic through which they shared their intangible cultural heritage and the written texts which as the basis of formal educational instruction, requiring that they only write in formal ‘official’ Arabic, with which many struggled.

In our workbook we then developed the approach further and presented a scenario based on our protagonist, Sara:

Sara is sitting down trying to think of how to describe the marriage she recently captured in photographs and videos. She has some general notes on where she was, the people who were there, and the sounds she heard, but she isn't sure where to start with her description. Then she has an idea! Taking her camera with her, she goes to Uncle Yusuf's house, who lives close by. Uncle Yusuf has poor eyesight, and loves hearing his nieces and nephews telling him stories of their adventures. Sara sits down with her Uncle and starts talking about some of the pictures and videos she has taken. Her descriptions are full of colour and convey the excitement and joy of those who were at the event. Sara notes down the parts of the descriptions that her Uncle is most interested in, and when she gets home Sara uses them as the starting point for her filling in the 'Description' field on the Heritage Harvest Summary Sheet.

When given a task that is unfamiliar, learners often ask for example responses. In response, educators typically provide guidance on how to complete the task by providing insight into the purpose of the task, how to approach it, frameworks in which to work, and—if appropriate—example responses. The digital archiving literature provides example responses to the task of writing object descriptions but rarely explains the purpose of the task, how to approach it, and the frameworks in which to work. In our case, we found that this lack inhibited the production of descriptions that could support the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. In response we replaced exemplar descriptions with stories about memory work, the outputs of description with a process of description that centered on its inevitable creativity and basis in personal expression. In response, the heritage gatherers began to develop the confidence to write descriptions of their cultural heritage.

The vagaries of the descriptive process, the undocumented stuff of institutional memory and local ways of doing, is a normative assumption of heritage management. If a vital function of heritage management is to describe that heritage, we argue—based on our work with the heritage gatherers—that digital archiving best practice should do more to document those ways of doing, to tell stories that describe how to describe.

3. Remaking vocabularies

In Sara's story of the wedding and of describing it to Uncle Yusuf, she concludes by mentioning her use of a 'Heritage Harvest Summary Sheet'. This is not vocabulary we encountered in the digital archiving best practice, rather it is vocabulary we introduced as our work with the heritage gatherers developed. In the initial stage of our work with the heritage gatherers, we used a series of vocabularies familiar to memory professionals as a basis for communicating concepts important to the preservation of cultural heritage. For example, 'digital preservation' was used as the vocabulary to describe the end-to-end process of creating, managing, and maintaining digital objects containing cultural heritage; 'metadata' was used to describe all information about a digital object containing cultural heritage that was created during the course of digital archiving; and 'workflow' was used to describe the steps required to undertake digital archiving. In our preparation for our 2018 workshop, delivered in English via an interpreter for learners whose first language is Egyptian vernacular Arabic, we reflected on the fact that most

learning experiences involve introducing concepts to learners and helping them to make sense of those concepts, and that good pedagogy combines a number of approaches to achieve this: recognising and responding to the learning models familiar to learners; creating opportunities to measure and reinforce understanding through formative exercises; explaining vocabulary choices and using those vocabulary with precision.

Formative exercises during workshops in 2018 and 2019 suggested that whilst learners were developing the confidence to use vocabularies familiar to memory professionals, understanding of the concepts these vocabularies embodied was inconsistent across the group and fragile among many learners, suggesting a misalignment with their learning models. Conversations with our interpreter suggested a potential source of this misalignment. The interpreter was interpreting our precise vocabulary *contextually*, that is, reworking phrases like 'digital archiving', 'metadata' and 'workflow' in such a way so as to find common ground with the experiences and backgrounds of the heritage gatherers. Whilst this practice is common within interpretation, it also suggested that the approach of using the vocabulary familiar to memory professionals was the wrong approach, because we—as those leading the learning experience—did not have sufficient control over how the concepts loaded into a word like 'metadata' were being communicated through interpretation.

To resolve this, we suggested inventing new words. That is, rather than use only digital archiving vocabulary known to those leading the learning experience, including their implicit and unconscious meanings, and try to communicate those meanings to learners, we would instead construct new vocabularies for important terminology. This vocabulary would have a number of features: first, the vocabulary would be both common to us and the heritage gatherers, and not commonly used in the context of heritage management; second, the vocabulary would be designed to be closer to the learning models of the heritage gatherers than it was to our own, reflecting their knowledges and experiences; and third, a precise meaning of the vocabulary would—ideally—not be unavailable to an interpreter or translator, such that the meaning of the vocabulary had to be negotiated in partnership between us and the heritage gatherers, thereby fostering shared ownership and control over the concepts used.

The most significant example of this was the decision to describe the overall activity as a 'Heritage Harvest'. In our survey of the literature, we found 'digital archiving', 'digital preservation lifecycle' or 'data collection' to be preferred vocabularies for the work of the heritage gatherers. In our initial training we used 'digital archiving' with some success, but we found it had two flaws. First, by foregrounding 'digital' it created anxieties about the skillsets heritage gatherers needed to master, anxieties that appeared to be gendered to the disadvantage of women. Second, 'archiving' had little resonance, despite our attempts to assert its similarity to everyday tasks such as household management, running a business, or looking after provisions. 'Heritage Harvest' was arrived at during preparation for the workbook and was chosen because it deemphasised the 'digital' aspects of the heritage gatherers' work, because 'harvesting' was an activity that resonated with the heritage gatherers, and because 'harvesting' evoked the need for preparation and long-term care. In turn, our introduction to 'Heritage Harvests' in the workbook framed this activity as aligned with practices familiar to the heritage gatherers, giving them ownership of the concept and its development

Imagine you are a farmer. If you harvest your crops before you start preparing your silos or barns in which to store those crops, then after harvest you would have nowhere to put your crops before taking them to market. As a farmer, silos and barns have two functions: first, they ensure your crops last for longer (because they are out of the sun and less likely to get eaten by pests), and second, they keep your crops safe (ensuring they don't get lost or stolen). As a result, if you harvest your crops before preparing your silos or barns, your crops might go bad in the sun, get eaten by mice, or stolen before you have a chance to sell them at market. To avoid this, a farmer must make a plan for harvest that begins with preparing their silos or barns, transporting the crops to the silos or barns, and for looking after their crops whilst they are in the silos or barns.

Heritage harvests are just like this. You will be collecting a great deal of materials - interviews, photographs, videos from your communities - these are your heritage crops. To ensure these heritage crops are harvested properly and are kept safely and securely, we make a plan that includes doing things before we begin to harvest the crop, whilst we are reaping them, and after we have created a storage system for the harvest.²⁵

Our second example of remaking vocabularies was the removal of the word 'metadata' from our workshops, training, support and resources. Although commonly used in the digital archiving literature as a catch all term for documentation about data (Baca 2016), in our initial workshops the term proved too technical and too detached from the experiences of the heritage gatherers. We gradually downplayed the term in subsequent work, and for the workbook replaced 'metadata' with the phrase 'Heritage Harvest Summary', with an accompanying 'Heritage Harvest Summary Sheet' used for its capture.²⁶ Using terminology not found in the digital archiving literature and without technical connotations enabled us to make 'metadata' more relatable. In turn, the workbook connects the generation of metadata with everyday experience:

Completing the Heritage Harvest Summary Sheet creates information about your heritage harvest. You encounter this kind of information every day: it is similar to the author's name on the spine of a book, the ingredients list on a bar of chocolate, or the tag on your coat telling you what it is made of. This information is important because it tells you who wrote the book in your hand, if the chocolate bar contains nuts, or how to wash your coat so that it isn't damaged. The Heritage Harvest Summary Sheet fulfils a similar purpose: it tells the person reading it who made the heritage capture, when it was made, and why it is important to look after.

A third significant vocabulary change related to the processes by which heritage gatherers produced a Heritage Harvest. Our initial work with the heritage gatherers suggested a preference for step-by-step instruction and that their pedagogical experiences were based on structure and repetition. In our initial workshops we described the process by which heritage harvests were produced as a 'workflow', a phrase commonly used in the digital archiving literature. We found that in contextual interpretation 'workflow' overemphasised a need for precision and was aligned with learning models we were keen not to replicate, becoming a source anxiety when heritage gatherers thought a step was not clear or could not be followed exactly. Gradually, we began to introduce the idea that heritage gatherers were following a 'recipe' rather than a

²⁵ This is one example of the 'Think About it Like This' sections that punctuate the workbook.

²⁶ This is effectively a table with metadata fields (e.g. 'The location of your harvest'), descriptions of why that metadata is needed, and descriptions of what heritage gatherers should do when filling in each field.

workflow. Unlike 'workflow', the concept of a 'recipe' could communicate the fact that for many tasks there is not a 'correct' way to complete them, and that all tasks needed adapting to local circumstances and over time. As we write in the workbook:

A step-by-step plan for a heritage harvest such as the one you are reaping is like a recipe for a meal found in a cookbook: it includes a number of steps, it is designed to be repeated and shared, and if something goes wrong we can usually identify at which point we went wrong, and make notes in the cookbook so the recipe is better next time. But a recipe does not tell you what your kitchen should look like, exactly what type of oven to use, or the shop at which you should buy your ingredients. This is because a recipe must be adaptable to your homes and your communities, and it must be usable in the real world where kitchens, ovens and food brands change. The step-by-step plan for your heritage harvest in this workbook is like a recipe in a recipe book. It contains a series of steps that cover all the main things you need to do with space for you to annotate the steps to fit your equipment and your preferences, but - like a recipe - it doesn't tell you what the room in which you interview someone should look like, exactly what mobile phone to use to make a recording, or where to buy your camera charger.

This 'recipe' ethos was echoed in design elements of the workbook, including a generous use of empty space and the encouragement to write and doodle within boxes provided in 'Over to you!' sections (e.g. 'Write here all the things you take on your heritage harvests'). Remaking vocabularies was then about more than using different words. Rather it was about remaking the learning environments we constructed, it was about taking the 'recipe' ethos of iterative learning, engagement, and contextualization and using that to design a workbook that could intentionally be adapted by heritage gatherers according to their own experiences and needs. For our heritage gatherers, young people whose learning models are not represented in the digital archiving literature and whose pedagogical experiences are very different to our own, such remakings were vital.

Development work is about creating positive change in people's lives (Chambers 2004), enabling people to master new skills and take control of the challenges they face. In turn when working with people in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, reflecting on language use is crucial (Tadros 2020). In our case, we want the heritage gatherers to draw on our expertise and to redeploy that in their communities for years to come, to foster ownership of the process of digital archiving such that young people who capture intangible cultural heritage see digital archiving as not just an "add on" activity but as intrinsic to their dreams and aspirations for protecting and passing on their heritage to generations to come. Encouraging them to adapt to their own needs the knowledge they encounter in a workshop or workbook only partially achieves that goal. A much greater chance of achieving that goal comes from reframing workshops and workbooks around concepts they know—harvests, summaries, recipes—and in turn encouraging ownership of and a sense of mastery over digital archiving practice.

Conclusion

In the artefactual frame, we attempt to extend the life of physical media. It is the historical contiguity of the artefact that is the focus of preservation. In the informational frame, we work to clearly establish criteria for copying encoded information from one media forward to the next. In this case, the physical medium is simply a carrier or host for the encoded information. In the folkloric frame, variability and hybridity of information play a

key role in how stories and sequences of information preserve but also change and adapt to new circumstances. In this case, approaches to documentation that illustrate that variation are part of the core preservation approach, but at the same time, cultural or biological ecosystems themselves serve as preservation systems, carrying forward the information that is most useful to their contemporary needs (Owens 2018, p. 33)

This paper has reported research at the intersection of development studies, heritage management, and digital preservation. Within the cultural and biological ecosystems we encountered, the carriers of heritage are people like the heritage gatherers, their communities, and their collective identity. Operating in a folkloric frame, they are the soul of cultural heritage preservation, the will that pushes back against the entropic forces of forgetting and neglect. But in the digital age, and particularly in the case intangible cultural heritage preserved in intangible form, in the case of materials less amenable to capricious selection and produced in fragile and conflicted-affected cultural/biological ecosystems, that soul and that will needs to intersect with artefactual and information thinking to give cultural heritage the best chance of surviving.

This paper has reported on our attempts to develop artefactual and information thinking among heritage gatherers, to foster greater resilience among the carriers of heritage, to enable them—where appropriate—to document cultural heritage to preserve cultural heritage. This paper has also reported on the ways in which the enlightenment paradigms that underpin memory work, the dominant 'ways of knowing of the sociocultural and political mainstream' identified by McKemmish et al, can inhibit attempts to preserve cultural heritage. We have reported on particular work in specific contexts, how we sought to understand need by working with communities, and how we produced resources intended to support those needs. In so doing, we identified three areas where 'digital archiving' best practice resources (broadly conceived) fell short: first, in assuming that the value of looking after heritage is settled and shared; second, in a lack of guidance on how to describe cultural heritage; and third, in amplifying and normalising formal and structured vocabularies.

These are specific findings that emerged from working as a collective of academics, practitioners, community leaders, and community participants to preserve intangible cultural heritage produced by heritage gatherers in Egypt and Iraq. A more general, but hardly unanticipated finding, was that some foundational 'digital archiving' assumptions were found wanting: after all, the best practice was not made for these heritage gatherers, by them, or with their learning models in mind. As a result, the delivery of workshops, training, and support and the production of resources were framed as acts of enquiry as much as they were acts of knowledge transfer or pedagogy. And yet we were still surprised how quickly the basics broke down, how a literature increasingly wary of creating models to represent all possible preservation scenarios, increasingly resistant of claims to its universality, could still feel so misaligned when working in these cultural and biological ecosystems, and among their carriers of heritage.

Taken together, our findings suggest a need to continue to amplify work that explicates, investigates, and reflects on the positional distortions of best practice resources produced by enlightenment memory work, by professional bodies, institutions, and individuals located in centres of archival power. Our 'Workbook' is intended as one such resource: it is inevitably place based, time bound, and context sensitive; it will not and ought not generalize, indeed by emphasising the need for it to be continuously adapted by the very communities it was made

with, it openly rejects claims to its universality.²⁷ In turn, we hope that community heritage activities draw on, engage with, react to, differentiate from, remodel, tackle, even subvert our example, that heritage gatherers working in many different contexts will develop further iterations of the workbook as they themselves use it in peer-to-peer learning processes. This is critical for the sustainability of the knowledge sharing process. And so whilst there remains a place for canonical classification schemes, descriptive systems, guides, and standards, we argue that memory work—even humble, positionally aware, reflexive memory work—is weakened by the dominance of systems, schema, and standards at the expense of particular, place-based, and contingent work that peels back the provincialism of the canons of enlightenment memory work.

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²⁷ See Liboiron (2021, pp. 146-155) for important anti-colonial reflections on the generalizability, or otherwise, of research practice and findings.

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