

# Preservation of Archives in Tropical Climates

Both bibliography and manual, *Preservation of Archives in Tropical Climates* deserves a wide readership among all who recognize the importance of preserving the cultural heritage in the tropics. This first-class reference work treats the reality of Asian electricity bills and why Quito is the place to be for a piece of paper...

Review >  
General

By Roger Tol

What makes life difficult in the tropics is first and foremost the hot and humid climate, with its destructive effects on humans and archives alike. But apart from and due to the heat and moisture high quantities of gases, pollutants, sunlight, dust, sand, fungi, bacteria, insects, and rodents also pose threats. It has been argued that every 10-degree Celsius rise in temperature cuts the life of a book in half. However, these are not the only problems encountered in tropical areas, which are situated mostly in so-called developing countries. In most cases there is also political instability, unrest, or even war; preservation and conservation of the cultural heritage are not placed high on the government's priority list; technical facilities are limited; and the necessary training opportunities are not always available. Problems in the tropics abound and are varied. Indeed, it is necessary to set apart the issue of preservation in the tropics by devoting a specific study to it.

Usually reading a bibliography is not a very exciting undertaking. There are, however, some pleasant exceptions, and the bibliography compiled by René Teygeler certainly falls into this category. It was a very astute choice of the compiler to present the work in two parts.

Part two consists of a 'traditional' bibliography and contains lists of relevant titles arranged according to seven main topics, each constituting a chapter: 'basic concepts', 'preservation and conservation', 'books and writing materials', 'building', 'storage', 'disaster preparedness', and 'integrated pest management'. Part one, annotating and discussing the publications listed in part two, makes excellent and informative reading. It has the same division into chapters as the second part with the notion that each chapter is subdivided into several sections. For example, the chapter on storage is subdivided into eight sections (introduction, internal climate control, sunlight, dust, shelving, handling, packaging, and good housekeeping), while some sections are again subdivided into smaller sections, for example in this case 'internal climate control' is subdivided into air-conditioning, simple mechanical provisions, and air pollution. In this way each topic – large or minute – is dealt with in a narrative fashion, with summaries and quotes from the listed texts and with comments and remarks by René Teygeler.

Personally, I really appreciate this approach, which is of immediate use to librarians working in the tropics. There is

a wealth of practical tips, thoughts, guidelines, projects and initiatives, and just plain facts. Who knew that Quito in Ecuador seems to have the well-nigh perfect climate for preservation purposes? Although located near the equator, its high altitude provides the city with a dry and cool climate and low atmospheric pressure. As is mentioned in the book (p.98), this is the place where masses of documents collected by religious orders and the Spanish colonial administration remained for a long time in good condition. More importantly, some sections of the book can almost be read and used as a manual with immediate benefit in the field. Librarians in the tropics will undoubtedly find much to their advantage among all kinds of subjects raised in the chapters. Generally, the book has a sympathetic flavour in that it does not try to impose solutions that are suitable for Western countries upon non-Western countries. This pragmatic attitude becomes evident in, for example, the chapter on building and the section on air-conditioning. Regarding the latter, the compiler states realistically that 'air-conditioning is very often not an option for archives in developing countries. That's why passive climate control becomes a more attractive way to control the physical environment. Air-conditioning could be an answer to control excessive heat and relative humidity, but not one that many can afford. It is not just the cost of installation; there is the need to maintain the system and the running costs, i.e. the electricity bill. [...] Often archivists hold the mistaken belief that if a comprehensive air-conditioning system is installed all would be well. It is now understood that this view is entirely erroneous' (pp.89–90). The appendix, mentioning around a hundred addresses of contacts and institutes involved in preservation activities in the tropics, comes in very handy.

Evidently the compiler has opted for a discussion of preservation of traditional media such as palm-leaf, bark, and of course paper, paying no attention to other media such as microfilm (already in use for more than half a century), tape, disk, CD-ROM, or other electronic media. Because of the rapid expansion of these media in the libraries and archives in developing countries, the preservation of microfilm, for example, is currently becoming an extremely urgent matter in the tropics. Microfilm and probably other modern media as well are in far more immediate danger of destruction as a result of the fatal combination of high temperature and high humidity than are the traditional media. Indeed, destruction of films is taking place at a much higher pace than that of

paper. Thus the very results of huge microfilming projects, set up in order to save the contents of deteriorating manuscripts, are endangered. Ironically, the films have in some cases become unusable whereas the manuscripts are still readable.

Some other relevant 'digital' issues are not dealt with in the book. For example, there is the encouraging initiative from Southeast Asian professionals to set up a Southeast Asian Consortium for Access and Preservation (SEACAP). This consortium, which was set up in 2000, has already succeeded in publishing a collection of conference papers and maintains a website. To my mind real omissions in the bibliography are the two authoritative, free online databases for conservation professionals. These are AATA Online, a comprehensive database of more than 100,000 abstracts of literature related to the preservation and conservation of material cultural heritage, and the BCIN database, which is managed by the Canadian Heritage Information Network and brings together bibliographic holdings and abstracts produced by several of the world's major conservation centres. Both databases are accessible through the Getty Conservation Institute. It is to be hoped that a future edition of this bibliography will take these matters into account. <

– Teygeler, René, et al., *Preservation of Archives in Tropical Climates: An Annotated Bibliography*, Paris: International Council on Archives; The Hague: National Archives of the Netherlands; Jakarta: National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia (2001), pp. 328, ISBN 90-74920-14-4.

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Info >

**Southeast Asian Consortium for Access and Preservation (SEACAP)**

[www.seacap.chiangmai.ac.th](http://www.seacap.chiangmai.ac.th)

**Getty Conservation Institute**

[www.getty.edu/conservation](http://www.getty.edu/conservation)