Recovering Yemen's Cultural Heritage: The Stookey Microfilms[1]

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Abstract: In 1973, recent PhD and newly-affiliated Research Associate at the University of Texas at Austin, Robert W. Stookey, made microfilm copies of a number of Arabic manuscripts in Yemen on a variety of subjects. Stookey was not himself a manuscripts expert, but was instead invested in preserving and making available for research the intellectual tradition of Yemen, a country in which he had spent considerable time as a researcher and member of the Foreign Service. Stookey's microfilms were accessioned to the UT Libraries' Middle East collection in 1980, and digitized starting in 2014. This article discusses the importance of the Stookey microfilms as an early post-custodial arrangement for preserving, making accessible, and ultimately recovering the intellectual heritage of Zaydism in Yemen. Through their inclusion in the Zaydi Manuscript Tradition portal, these microfilms will be made freely and openly available for anyone to discover and study on the Internet. While the destruction of life, property, and cultural memory continues in Yemen, this is an example of a way for North American library collections to help to recover Yemen's precious heritage.

Keywords: post-custodial archiving, microfilm, Zaydism, Robert W. Stookey, The Zaydi Manuscript Tradition project, cultural heritage, preservation, recovery

In 1973, on a Fulbright Hays grant following the successful defense of his dissertation at the University of Texas at Austin, Robert W. Stookey, PhD (1917-1998), pursued a project to microfilm manuscripts at several private libraries in Sana'a, Yemen. Stookey had been a Foreign

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Service Officer in Yemen, serving as chargé d'affaires, directing the U.S. Legation in Yemen during the final months of what was then the old regime, through the 1962 revolution and the inception of the republic, and into the early phase of the civil war.[2] As such, he witnessed some of the key transitional moments in recent Yemeni history, and was very invested in the country himself. His dissertation is titled, "Political Change in Yemen: A Study of Values and Legitimacy," and it covers political change in Yemen from the pre-Islamic polities to the national reconciliation in 1970.[3] Although Stookey filmed the manuscripts at private libraries in Sana'a in 1973, the microfilms were not accessioned to the University of Texas Libraries' collections until 1980.

Stookey's publications after his dissertation are primarily on the contemporary Middle East, particularly Yemen,[4] and so it is noteworthy that he would return to Yemen and choose to microfilm manuscripts written hundreds of years ago. The primary explanation that we can offer is that he recognized the significance of these private libraries and manuscripts as Yemen's cultural heritage, and understood–as shown through his dissertation–how the past has the power to inform the present. I would argue that Stookey was interested in preserving and making accessible the cultural heritage of Yemen, and that he created a post-custodial arrangement with Sayyid Muḥammad al-Manṣūr–the owner and custodian of a vast private library that has been of considerable scholarly interest–in order to film the manuscripts. He accomplished this well before it became fashionable to pursue post-custodial projects. Furthermore, these microfilms have now become an essential source for recovering the increasingly lost Yemeni cultural heritage, particularly for private Zaydi libraries.

Post-custodial (or non-custodial) collaborations–often between a North American or European institution and an institution in the Middle East, for example–are a response to concerns about the significance of removing cultural heritage materials from their home location, what that

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[2] Robert W. Stookey, "Political change in Yemen: a study of values and legitimacy" (doctoral thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 1972), viii.

[3] Idem, xi-xiii.

[4] "Robert W. Stookey, 1917-1998," *Center for Middle Eastern Studies Newsletter* 24 (Spring 1998), 11.

removal means to the home location, and to the materials. A post-custodial relationship today could mean that the physical materials remain in the custody of the home institution, and digital surrogates of the materials are created with the assistance of a foreign institution. Copies of the digital surrogates are usually provided to the home institution and hosted as well by the foreign institution, where there is a special effort to focus on preservation. In the long term, there is much to gain from post-custodial relationships for the recovery of cultural heritage.

Theresa Polk, Post-Custodial Archivist at the Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin, has written recently on post-custodial archiving in a Latin American context that "removing archival records can be disruptive to immediate programming and operational needs [for a local partner], let alone larger societal processes concerning transition, recuperation of historic memory, and reconciliation."[5] Rather than remove records from their home location, the post-custodial approach encourages archivists and librarians to "provide management oversight for records that will remain in the custody of the record creators."[6] Indeed, post-custodial practices encourage international collaboration that benefits all parties involved, albeit in different ways. It behooves us to consider a successful example of a post-custodial collaboration in the era of digitization in order to understand better the subject of this short notice, the Stookey microfilm collection of Yemeni manuscripts at the UT Libraries.

In 2008, the Human Rights Documentation Initiative (HRDI) at the University of Texas Libraries launched a partnership with the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre in Rwanda with the help of the Bridgeway Foundation. The partnership was intended to provide preservation and access support for the 1,500 DV (digital video) format tapes at the KGMC's documentation center

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[5] Theresa Polk, "Archiving Human Rights Documentation: The Promise of the Post-Custodial Approach in Latin America," *Portal: Web Magazine of LLILAS Benson Latin American Studies and Collections*, August 5, 2016, https://llilasbensonmagazine.org/2016/08/05/archiving-human-rights-documentation-the-promise-of-the-post-custodial-approach-in-latin-america/.

[6] Richard Pearce-Moses, *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*, s.v. "postcustodial theory of archives," 2005, https://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms/p/postcustodial-theory-of-archives.

which were at particular risk of degradation due to environmental conditions.[7] Furthermore, "KGMC [could not] fulfill their mission if their archives remained undiscoverable and accessible solely on-site in Kigali."[8] The HRDI and KGMC came to an agreement that would provide "technical knowledge and infrastructure" for KGMC, and "historical, cultural, and scholarly content" for UT Libraries' constituents (including the Rapoport Center for Human Rights and Justice at the University of Texas School of Law).[9] The administrators of the HRDI explain this partnership in more detail:

> UTL and KGMC utilize a non-custodial archival model as a basis for their collaboration. The traditional repository requirement of physical ownership of information resources fragments the documentary record and alienates records creators from the preservation and research environments of their records. Under the traditional model, active or recent records remain solely in the custody of their record creators and outside of the preservation and access environment that an archival repository provides. If records survive long enough and are deposited within a repository, they may have lost immediacy as well as culture or national context. The non-custodial repository recognizes that information is distinct from its physical form.[10]

The UT Libraries' HRDI team proceeded to contract digital processing of some of the materials in Rwanda, while digital capture of DV tape recordings was performed in the United States.[11] The team checked in regularly with their partner KGMC in Kigali, making presentations to a number of local stakeholders on the digital video collection after the first year of work.[12] The team made a particular effort to respond to local conditions–such as reduced network bandwidth–and designed a means of providing access to the proof of concept digital video collection without Internet access.[13] The continued maintenance of UT Libraries' relationship with KGMC, and outreach to local stakeholders, resulted in an increase in financial and material support for the project that allowed for all digitization to be completed "in Rwanda and [the]

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[7] Christian Kelleher et al., "The Human Rights Documentation Initiative at the University of Texas Libraries," *New Review of Information Networking* 15:2 (2010), 102.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Idem, 103.

[10] Idem, 103-104.

[11] Idem, 105.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

transfer [of] files to Texas on portable hard drives. Concurrently, [UT Libraries] archivists provided ongoing training on indexing and cataloging to KGMC staff."[14] Eventually, the KGMC pursued the development of a National Genocide Archive, inspired by the work that they had undertaken with the UT Libraries. The partnership thus resulted in the realization of KGMC's goals of preservation and access, and an increase in human rights documentation sources at the UT Libraries, as the latter would continue to serve as a "secondary digital repository for Rwandan materials."[15]

The mutual benefits that accrue from such a post-custodial relationship have been essential to establishing UT Libraries' goals for the Stookey microfilms. I would also argue that Stookey himself recognized that this kind of relationship would be beneficial to Sayyid Muḥammad al-Manṣūr, other private library custodians, and to the preservation of and access to Yemen's cultural heritage writ large. It was this kind of partnership that would allow for the microfilming of the manuscripts at all, as there was an understandable local wariness regarding partnerships with foreign institutions interested in Yemeni cultural heritage at the time.[16] The UT Libraries' project to digitize the Stookey manuscripts carries forward the post-custodial relationships that Stookey cultivated by making more widespread and open access to the microfilmed manuscripts. The preservation of and access to the works on these microfilms is essential to the recovery of lost Zaydi cultural heritage in Yemen.

Until two years ago, most of our knowledge about the Stookey microfilms was contained in the library catalog record for the films and in a handful of mentions by scholars who had worked with the microfilms.[17] The collection consists of 16 reels of 16 mm microfilm with over 50,000

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[14] Idem, 106.

[15] Idem, 106-107.

[16] A. Kevin Reinhart, "Manuscript Research in the Yemen [Arab Republic]," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 14:2 (December 1980), 23.

[17] See UT Libraries' catalog record: http://catalog.lib.utexas.edu/record=b4802988~S29; Reinhart, "Manuscript Research in the Yemen [Arab Republic]," 24; Anne Regourd, "La collection de manuscrits microfilmés réunie par Robert W. Stookey," *Chroniques du manuscrit au Yémen* 8 (2009), DOI : 10.4000/cmy.1882.

pages of manuscripts from private Zaydi libraries in Yemen. The microfilms are accompanied by a handlist, prepared by Stookey, giving the titles of works that mark major divisions in each of the manuscripts (and thus, the films). It is not an exhaustive bibliography, however–something that, as it turns out, Stookey himself laments.
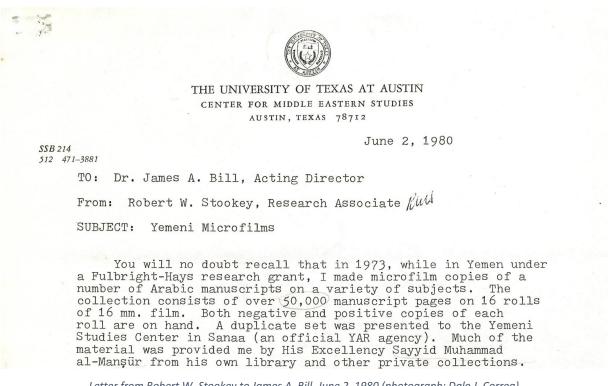
However, during the move of UT Libraries' Technical Services for the construction of the Perry Castañeda Library Learning Commons, a letter that Stookey had written to the acting director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, James A. Bill, upon the occasion of his donation of the microfilms was uncovered. That letter details a series of stipulations for the filming of the manuscripts and the accessioning of the microfilms to the UT Libraries that not only explain the time gap between filming in 1973 and accessioning to in 1980, but also serve as an exemplar of the post-custodial archiving ethos well before the concept took off with electronic records management in the 1990s.[18]

Stookey could not have simply walked into a private library in Yemen with a camera and asked to film manuscripts. He had to build relationships with the library custodians and local scholars–relationships that, in all likelihood, he had been building for a long time as a foreign service officer. Stookey cultivated these relationships that opened the doors to private libraries and helped him to build a mutually beneficial arrangement for the filming of the manuscripts. The stipulations for filming would explain where the films are going, what is going to happen to them, and what is going to happen to the intellectual material in them. It would also describe the benefits and obligations to his local partners that would transfer from Stookey to the UT Libraries and any scholars who make use of the microfilms. Stookey was obviously deeply invested in his relationships with al-Manṣūr and other private library custodians, and took the conditions of their microfilming agreement quite seriously.

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[18] For a summary of the "new paradigm" approaches to archiving, including post-custodialism, and responses to them, see Linda J. Henry, "Schellenberg in Cyberspace," *American Archivist* 61:2 (Fall 1998), 309-327.

In the letter–dated June 2, 1980–Stookey explains that one of his primary obligations was to provide print-out copies of the filmed manuscripts to al-Manṣūr, the private library owner and custodian with whom Stookey primarily worked. Additionally, any full or partial Arabic editions of the works contained in the manuscripts should be made available to al-Manṣūr for his own collection and for distribution among libraries and educational centers throughout the Middle East, and any commercial use of Arabic text needs to be approved by al-Manṣūr himself. Furthermore, UT was to receive three copies of any research completed using the microfilms (one for the main library, one for the Vernacular Collection, and one for the Center for Middle Eastern Studies reading room–only two of these collections now remain at UT Austin, after the Vernacular Collection was folded into the main collections at the Perry-Castañeda Library).

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June 2, 1980

TO: Dr. James A. Bill, Acting Director

From: Robert W. Stookey, Research Associate

SUBJECT: Yemeni Microfilms

        You will no doubt recall that in 1973, while in Yemen under a Fulbright-Hays research grant, I made microfilm copies of a number of Arabic manuscripts on a variety of subjects. The collection consists of over 50,000 manuscript pages on 16 rolls of 16 mm. film. Both negative and positive copies of each roll are on hand. A duplicate set was presented to the Yemeni Studies Center in Sanaa (an official YAR agency). Much of the material was provided me by His Excellency Sayyid Muhammad al-Manṣūr from his own library and other private collections.

Letter from Robert W. Stookey to James A. Bill, June 2, 1980 (photograph: Dale J. Correa)

The letter also reveals that Stookey was faced with a major hiccup in fulfilling the first of these conditions: to send print-out copies of the filmed manuscripts to al-Manṣūr in Yemen. Stookey writes in the letter:

> Among the obligations I assumed was to provide print-out copies of the manuscripts Sayyid Muhammad made available. I had these made at my own expense. The Center [for Middle Eastern Studies at the

University of Texas at Austin], however, paid the costs of their shipment to Yemen, on the understanding that the films will be placed on permanent deposit in the U/T library's Middle East vernacular collection. I have delayed delivery of the films to the library thus far, in large part because our Embassy in Sanaa, in care of which the print-out copies were shipped, delivered them to someone other than Sayyid Muhammad, and it may thus prove necessary to have another set made and shipped to him.

Unfortunately, the print-outs of the microfilms were shipped and delivered to the wrong person. At the time of letter, Stookey was still awaiting confirmation, thereby honoring the agreement that he had reached with al-Manṣūr. This is significant because it may have been easy for Stookey to simply ignore his side of the bargain. Post-custodial relationships bring a number of ethical questions for the partners involved, and loyalty to the agreement built with a local partner is essential to any post-custodial relationship. Successful post-custodial relationships work through and respond to those questions in a way that honors the established conditions and seeks maximum mutual benefit. Although Stookey could have turned over the microfilms several years earlier, he chose to follow both the letter and the spirit of his agreement with al-Manṣūr. To do otherwise would have endangered the relationship.

Early in my tenure with the UT Libraries, I recognized that the Stookey microfilms bear particular relevance for projects such as the Yemeni Manuscript Digitization Initiative (YMDI) that seek to preserve, recover, and increase access to Zaydi and Yemeni cultural heritage.[19] In order to connect the Stookey collection with others such as the YMDI, the UT Libraries moved to digitize the microfilms in late 2014. The hope was that the digital surrogates of the microfilms would increase access to the manuscripts contained therein.

The digitization of the Stookey microfilms was not without its challenges. The first obstacle was an intellectual one: why digitize material that already existed in a stable preservation medium

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[19] The YMDI was a collaboration among The University of Oregon, Princeton University Library, Free University Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Berlin, and Centre Français d'Archéologie et de Sciences Sociales de Sanaa: https://ymdi.uoregon.edu.

(microfilm)? When digitization is seen primarily as a tool for preservation, this logic prevails.[20] However, when we consider the benefits of wider access to the images on the microfilms, and what that could mean for expanding the source base for academic work on Zaydism and for exposing UT Libraries' collections, the Stookey microfilms' case becomes more clear and compelling.

The microfilms are also fraught with their own quality issues. The images of the manuscripts on the films are not always clear, let alone legible. Digitizing the films only captures this quality, and cannot improve upon it. Furthermore, the scanner that was available in the UT Libraries' Digitization department was less than optimal for this particular set of films. Digitization collaborated with the InterLibrary Services department to use a microfilm scanner there that allowed a higher degree of quality.

The remaining hurdles are common to most digitization projects. With over 50,000 pages of manuscripts composed in classical Arabic and concerning issues specific to the Zaydi tradition, who would be able to do quality control checks of the images and create accurate and robust metadata for the collection? One full-time employee (the Middle Eastern Studies Librarian) with an expertise in Arabic manuscript studies and the premodern Islamic intellectual tradition, but not specifically in the Zaydi tradition, was insufficient for the project. Additionally, the UT Libraries' digital repository, Texas ScholarWorks, was a safe, but ultimately less effective, means of hosting and providing access to the digitized microfilms. The microfilms would be better served among similar content, or at least linked to similar content. These three issues— quality control, metadata, and hosting/access—were acknowledged before digitization began. However, as the timing of the digitization worked well with the current flow of digitization projects, it was decided that those bridges would be crossed later.

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[20] See my article on digitization and its risks/benefits for more on this line of argumentation: Dale J. Correa, "Digitization: Does It Always Improve Access to Rare Books and Special Collections?" *Preservation, Digital Technology & Culture* 45:4 (2017), 177-179, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/pdtc-2016-0026.

Serendipity–friend and foe of the scholar librarian–has allowed the UT Libraries to realize the quality control, description, and hosting of the digitized microfilms. Through a network of librarians and scholars, Sabine Schmidtke (Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton) and I came into conversation regarding the Stookey collection. We both hoped that Schmidtke's latest project–The Zaydi Manuscript Tradition (ZMT): A Digital Portal,[21] hosted on the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library's virtual reading room vHMML–could be a digital home for the Stookey microfilms. Schmidtke was able to visit the UT Libraries in June 2017 and review the Stookey microfilms for inclusion in the Zaydi Manuscript Tradition portal. She is currently leading the effort to produce a concordance of the manuscripts on the microfilms. Those manuscripts on the Stookey microfilms that have not already been digitized by a partner in the Zaydi Manuscript Tradition portal will be added over the coming years. The process will include quality control, descriptive metadata, and hosting of the images–solving the last of the concerns that the UT Libraries faced in digitizing the microfilms. The Hill Museum and Manuscript Library of St. John's University, which manages the vHMML virtual reading room, will provide a seasoned and tested platform from which to access material from the Stookey microfilms. All of the materials in the Zaydi Manuscript Tradition portal will be freely available for anyone to discover and study on the Internet.[22]

The most important takeaway from the history of the Stookey microfilms and their digitization is the positive role that they have for cultural heritage preservation and recovery. As they will be openly and freely available on the Internet, anyone around the world can access the digitized Stookey microfilms and other Zaydi manuscripts. This project recovers and returns–in a similar spirit to that of Stookey himself–Yemeni cultural heritage to the people to whom it belongs. Works long held at UT Austin and other collections outside of the Middle East, and that may be damaged or destroyed now in Yemen, will be accessible in their digital form to all.

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[21] The Zaydi Manuscript Tradition: A Digital Portal is available at http://projects.ias.edu/zmt/.

[22] Schmidtke discusses the democratization of access to Yemeni cultural heritage through the Zaydi Manuscript Tradition digital portal in her 2017 article: Sabine Schmidtke, "Preserving, Studying, and Democratizing Access to the World Heritage of Islamic Manuscripts: The Zaydī Tradition," *Chroniques du manuscrit au Yémen* 23 (2017), 103-166.

As scholars and librarians, we have an obligation to cultural heritage, human knowledge, the Middle East, Yemen, fellow scholars and librarians, and users of these collections to help recover material such as that contained in the Stookey microfilms. It is one of the most powerful things that humans can do as witnesses to oppression. While the destruction of life, property, and cultural memory continues in Yemen, the Stookey microfilms and the Zaydi Manuscript Tradition project are examples of ways for collections outside of the Middle East to help to recover Yemen's precious heritage.

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