



**The Fund of Rare Books, Old Books and Manuscripts  
of the National Library of Science and Technology  
of the Republic of Cuba**

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**Meeting:**

**121 — Rare and special collections depending on history: Latin America and the Caribbean — Rare Books and Manuscripts Section with Latin America and the Caribbean**

**Abstract:**

*A brief overview on the beginnings of the National Library of Science and Technology (BNCT, Spanish acronym) is given. This institution belongs to the Institute of Scientific and Technological Information (IDICT, Spanish acronym) of the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment of the Republic of Cuba (CITMA, Spanish acronym). A description of the first funds available since its inauguration as well as of those subsequently incorporated until nowadays is made. On 2001, it was established by the Conservation Commission created for this purpose and integrated by specialists from the different departments adscript to the BNCT, together with the conservation specialist, that a segment of the collection of the BNCT could form part of the documents, that according to their bibliographic value could be part of the technical, scientific, historical and cultural heritage and that according to their degree of importance for the sponsoring institution and the country could be part of the analysis carried out. Taking this into account, the Commission established to this purpose determined that documents becoming part of its bibliographic heritage would be formed by the Fund of Scientific and Technical Manuscripts of historical and cultural character, consisting of the PhD theses of Cubans who have defended their work in Cuba and abroad and of foreigners who have defended their work in Cuba, the annual prizes awarded to outstanding works by the Cuban Academy of Sciences, the annual prizes awarded to outstanding works by the Forum of Science and Technology throughout the country, the articles of serial publications ruled by the 60-92 Resolution issued by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment, and finally the collection of books of "Mirtha Aguirre" library that existed in the Capitol building. The "Mirtha Aguirre" collection will be the object of our study in order to determine why it was considered as BNCT's heritage, and which part of this collection could be considered as rare books due to their antiquity and some other concepts that were considered to name them, such as the year of edition. Graphics are offered where it is determined which part of this "Mirtha Aguirre" collection, written by Cuban and foreign authors refers to Cuban issues and which one refers to works of universal character. These are contained in graphics covering 50 years periods of the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries because these are closed collections allowing no growth. This work also describes the headings used to order them according to Dewey classification, as well as*

*their degree of conservation according to a study carried out to all collections and specifically to that of “Mirtha Aguirre” library. The degree of deterioration observed and the level of circulation of loans are briefly described. Likewise, the concepts of rare, old books, manuscripts and incunabulum offered by the international literature are analyzed. The consulted bibliography is described at the end of the work.*

**Key words:** Rare books, manuscripts, ancient books, conservation of documents, heritage collection, Cuba.

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The National Library of Science and Technology (BNCT) was founded on July 18<sup>th</sup>, 1988, in the Lost Steps hall of Havana’s Capitol, located in the historic section of the city (declared World Heritage by UNESCO on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 1982). Founded as a division of the Institute of Scientific and Technological Information, IDICT, (established on April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1963 by virtue of the 1107 Act of April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1963), it belongs to the Ministry of Science Technology and Environment (CITMA). CITMA was established by virtue of Decree Law Nr 147 of April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1994. (Slide 2)

The BNCT was created from the library already existing at IDICT keeping technical and scientific materials on research activity of the biological front which also existed at IDICT and that of the “Mirtha Aguirre” library which already was at the Capitol building at the time of its creation. (Slide 3)

The Heritage Conservation Commission was established on 2001 to continue the work of collections conservation and also for identifying within their collections which part could integrate the Heritage Collection of the BNCT taking into account its cultural, historical and scientific value for the Cuban nation.

According to the decision made by the Commission established for the purpose, it was determined that the documents that would form part of the heritage collection would be the following:

1. The PhD theses defended by Cubans in Cuba and abroad and those of foreigners defended in Cuba, all of them approved by the Ministry of Higher Education of the Republic of Cuba, which once accepted by the commission become part of the library’s collections and can be retrieved in the CUBACIENCIAS data base of the BNCT. This data base is in charge of registering the entire scientific, technical, historical and cultural production of the Cuban nation forming part of the BNCT collection.
2. The outputs of scientific research in the country, which have been awarded with prizes by the different commissions established by the Academy of Sciences of Cuba (ACC) and have received the ACC annual award by its high scientific value and innovation, as well as for its contribution to the different branches of scientific knowledge. The above mentioned works become part of the collection of the BNCT and are registered in the CUBACIENCIAS data base.
3. The recipients of annual prizes awarded by the innovation movement of our country. The works submitted are passed through different sieves at schools, factories,

municipalities and provinces and the best are selected (those very innovative which could represent significant savings for the national economy as important applications in the different fields of human knowledge) to be assessed by the National Forum of Science and Technology. The winners are known as Annual Award of the Forum of Science and Technology becoming part of the BNCT collection being registered by the FORUM data base. The winners at municipal and provincial levels of the whole country will also be registered by this data base.

4. The articles written by Cuban scientists and specialists not published at the moment of their release due to the country's economical constrains. The inclusion of these articles is covered by the Res. 60-92 of the late Minister of Science, Technology and Environment, which among its postulates stated that articles not published in hard copy due to the economic situation prevailing in the country at the moment of their release and selected by the corresponding editorial staff would become part of the BNCT collection (our library classified them as Documents to be published, and are also registered in the CUBACIENCIA DB acquiring the same status of a published article. The same applies to provincial serial scientific and technical publications whose articles are deposited at the IDICT's provincial branch offices and are registered in the CUBACIENCIA DB. (Slide 4. Photography from the collection, thesis, PACC, PF, D.)
5. Lastly, the "Mirtha Aguirre" library collection which was at Havana Capitol and became part of the BNCT's collection. Given the cultural and historical value of these very old books published during the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries it was determined that this collection were not increased anymore being designated as heritage collection of the BNCT. (Slide 5)

Mirtha Aguirre Carrera, Cuban intellectual, poet, essayist, journalist, dramaturgist and university professor, born in Havana on October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1912. Daughter of Ercilio Aguirre and Aida Carrera, she wrote textbooks, essays and other texts for different levels of teaching. She imparted lectures in various countries and had a very active intellectual life. She occupied important positions in the National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC, Spanish acronym). She also had important responsibilities in the National Commission for Culture, and between 1976 and 1980 she was the Director of the Institute of literature and linguistics of the Academy of Sciences of Cuba. She received numerous decorations throughout her life. She died in Havana on August 8, 1980. (Slides 6 and 7)

This collection which will be the object of our study has 11,800 titles and has been classified according to Dewey decimal system which not only allows to identify their subjects, but also to locate the collection elements on bookshelves. (Slide 8)

The books that could to be considered rare or ancient taking into account their edition date are shown.

This collection was divided into two parts for its study:

\* Cuban collection: This collection includes everything published in Cuba or about Cuba and its native inhabitants living in any part of the world showing date or language of publication, as well as the work of Cuban authors published abroad.

\* Foreign collection: This includes material from all geographical areas of the world and works representative of the universal culture. (Slides 9 and 10, photo of the most ancient book of the collection published in 1793).

Taking into account certain criteria found in Cuban and international literature in relation to what is considered as rare books, old books, manuscripts, incunabula etc., we have been able to infer the following:

Much of the literature consulted agrees that rare and valuable books are those published between the years 1780 and 1850. Starting from this criterion we could say that our collection possesses book titles not only rare and valuable for this reason, but also because they could be unique books. The rest of collection titles published between 1850 and 1958 and even those published in 1959 shall be object of study because due to the number of years passed since their publication they could be considered as ancient and/or unique taking into account their publication dates range between 160 and more than 50 years, respectively. These titles could be considered as an integrating part of the future historical heritage of the Cuban nation. This book collection could be the object of a deeper study because until now it has been only assessed from the point of view of their classification and year of publication. (See in the table the amount of titles of both collections considered as rare and valuable due to their year of publication.)

Resolution Nr 41-2009 issued on March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009 in our country (known as HISTORICAL MEMORY of the Cuban nation) establishes an ACTION PLAN FOR THE CONSERVATION OF DOCUMENTAL HERITAGE OF THE CUBAN NATION.

#### MISSION:

Contributing to the conservation of the Documental Heritage of the nation by implementing a strategy allowing the mitigation of damage and ensuring the sustainability of the documental collections and of the Cuban historical memory.

#### VISION:

The conservation of the Documental Heritage of the nation as an indispensable need for assuring the management, the safeguard of citizens rights, the strengthening of the Cuban identity and the guarantee of national security.

To this effect the laws were passed:

Archives Act (Decree Law Nr. 221 of February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2002).

Libraries Act (Decree Law Nr. 271 of August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010).

The statements of each of these acts encourage to the preservation of the collections kept by their respective institutions throughout the country, which together with the Historical Memory are proposed as an objective of the preservation of the historical legacy of the documents of the scientific, cultural and historical heritage of the Cuban nation. (Slides 11 and 12)

Act Nr. 1 for the Protection of the Cultural Heritage. "Decree 118... Article 28:

•... "Every owner, possessor, user or holder by any title of an asset declared as part of the Cultural Heritage of the nation or as a museum piece, registered or not on the National

Registry of Cultural Assets of the Republic of Cuba, is obliged to guarantee its preservation and absolute integrity."

### Weather conditions in Cuba.

The climate is subtropical and humid. Annual average temperature is 25° C, the peaks of heat and RH which in summer reaches 27° C and 80%, respectively, are caused by the prevailing winds from northwest. The island lies in a region affected by the trade winds and is frequently hit by violent hurricanes or tropical cyclones developing between June and November, being the months of September and October the most dangerous ones due to their frequency and intensity. Conditions associated with climate change, the occurrence of acid rain and the arrival of dust from the Sahara desert affecting the island during the months of July and August turn our situation even less favorable for the preservation of our collections. (Slide 13)

### The “Mirtha Aguirre” collection of the BNCT. Conservation state.

The conservation state of this collection goes from regular to poor. It has been submitted to several changes of location within the facility throughout its history with inadequate handling.

Cuba is located in the Caribbean, a tropical area, and this fact makes that our climatic conditions don't be good for the conservation of documents collections in any format. On the other hand, the Capitol building is located in downtown, where the confluence of pollution caused by the surrounding industries and heavy traffic, the overhaul of buildings which form part of the historic section heritage, the surrounding air contaminated with sand and dust, the conditions associated with climate change, the occurrence of acid rain and the arrival of dust from the Sahara desert affecting the island during the months of July and August contribute all to worsen the situation.

Binding conditions goes from regular to poor due to inadequate handling undergone over time. During certain time it was even unknown which was the correct handling for this type of document according to their binding and the way of placing them in the bookshelves, which not always have the right conditions because they are embedded in the wall at inadequate height and with poor lighting. (Slide 14)

The presence of foxing, paper yellowness, brittle paper, ink paleness and insects and rodents attacks can be observed in these documents.

Taking into account the above mentioned facts, we consider that the collection conservation state goes from regular to poor. (Slide 15. Picture of an unbound book)

This collection, rich in information, still lacks a digitized database allowing a better recovery and use in the network of Cuban libraries. At present, despite recovery can only be manual, through the catalog of the BNCT reading room; it is very requested by scholars and researchers visiting the library.

A project between Cuban institutions hosting Cuban books from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and American institutions will be launched very soon. This project will be managed by the “José Martí” National Library (it will be coordinated by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) of the United States and has as objective the completion of existing collections in

both countries through the digitization of these materials so as to ensure their preservation and access to their information). Not only the collections of the institutions mentioned above will take part in this project, but also those of other Cuban institutions hosting Cuban books of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (Slide 16)

### Cuban libraries holding rare and valuable books

In Cuba, the “José Martí” National Library of Cuba (BNCJM, Spanish acronym), founded on October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1901, as well as the provincial public libraries hold collections of rare and valuable books and some of them even hold incunabula. These collections are located in rooms created to the effect which are visited by researchers, university professors and students and others interested parties in the topic. The specialists in charge of these rooms also perform studies on the collections kept. (Slide 17)

The Central library of Havana University (the University was founded on January 5<sup>th</sup>, 1728), as well as other university libraries of the country count on rich collections of incunabula, rare and valuable books. (Slide 18)

In the National Archives of Cuba, founded on January 28<sup>th</sup>, 1848, and in the nationwide System of Provincial Archives, we can also find a rich collection of valuable incunabulum and rare books. (Slide 19)

The library of the Institute of Literature and Linguistics also holds a rich collection of incunabulum, rare and old books. This library is considered the oldest of Cuba and was founded in 1793 by the Country Fellows Economic Society (SEAP, Spanish acronym). (Slide 20)

The library of Casa de las Americas, founded on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1959, with barely a hundred of books considered as incunabula, rare, valuable and ancient. (Diapositiva21)

The libraries of the Cultural Heritage Directorate belonging to the Office of the Historian of Havana and the libraries of the different offices of the historian of the rest of the cities of the country. (Slide 22)

The libraries of museums and cultural centers throughout the country.

In private collections throughout the country.

All we have been stating until this moment in relation to rare and valuable books of the BNCT leads us to make the following considerations: (Slide 23)

To study in more details the collection of the “Mirtha Aguirre” library based on the following recommendations:

- To start with the collection we have defined as integrated by rare and valuable books.
- To continue studies with the rest of the collection.
- To analyze the deterioration state of the collection, starting with the oldest collection that requiring to be restored.

- To create an automated database with the information kept at “Mirtha Aguirre” library in order to provide information recovery services right at the BNCT and at the same time to exchange and share this information with other Cuban and foreign libraries. (Slide 24)

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