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The Role of the Archives in Research

By: N.W. Fedha (Chief Archivist) 1972 [handwritten]

The history of archival development has been a tortuous and difficult one. The first recorded attempts to secure the provision of facilities for the preservation of the Public Archives of Kenya (and indeed, of other British Colonies) were made between 1914 and 1948 in five d[i]spatches from the Secretary of state for the Colonies in London to the British Governor of the then East African Protectorate and later the Colony and Protectorate of Kenya. The reactions of the Colonial Kenya Government to these dispatches give us a gloomy picture of the way the public records were being kept or disposed of in Kenya Government offices at the time.

It will be necessary to examine in minor detail only one of the despatches and the responses – if any – it evoked. The Colonial office d[i]spatch dated 16th October, 1936 outlined the procedures for “the examination of records with a view to destruction of out of date documents”, and, illustrating with the ex[e]mplary procedures adopted in Ceylon and Mauritius, it suggested that the examination of records with a view to determining those that should be destroyed should be adequately supervised by a responsible authority so as to ensure that careful regard had been taken “not only to their official utility but to their actual or potential historical interest, for if this was not done, records of considerable historical interest might be destroyed. The d[i]spatch then proceeded to remind Colonial Governments of their responsibility to protect their records against the ravages of climate and insects, a subject of an earlier despatch in 1929. “The preservation of its records in a satisfactory state, the Colonial Secretary, Mr. Ormsby Gore (late Lord Harlech) pontificated to his erring subordinates in the Colonies, “must be regarded as one of the first duties of a Colonial Government, a duty which derives greater urgency from the fact that delay in the institution of suitable protective measures may and does lead to the inevitable loss of documents of value.” It advised the governments to examine the state of their old records to ensure that arrangements for their preservation were adequate, and where these arrangements were unsatisfactory to remedy the situation “by way of renovation of records in a bad state of repair and by measures for the suitable housing and preservation of these documents in future,” it concluded by suggesting that if local facilities for the preservation of records were inadequate on account of climatic conditions, consideration should be given to transferring such records to the Public Record Office in London.

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Before official reaction in Kenya to this d[i]spatch was made known, a fire broke out in September, 1939 which destroyed the Secretariat offices in Nairobi and caused great damage

to the records which had been centralised there. Most of the records were completely destroyed with only a few being salvaged.

Following the destruction of essential records in 1939 by fire, one would expect all care to be taken to nurse and develop some new records which could supplement the partially destroyed ones. On the contrary, the Administration in Kenya still displayed lack of concern in doing this. In fact the colonial office d[i]spatch of 1936 did not receive anyone's attention. Another d[i]spatch was released by the Colonial Office in 1948 stressing again the desirability of preserving records of historical interest. It was ignored again by the Administration. The whole Administration continued to be indifferent towards the question of developing an archival institution in the country. Even the Governor of Kenya himself admitted in 1948, that to "examine adequately the field of official archives in Kenya is quite beyond our present resources. To undertake a comprehensive survey would employ skilled staff over a lengthy period."

In 1954, the Colonial Government suddenly declared that emergency measures be taken to preserve records of importance which had accumulated over the last sixty years of Colonial Rule. Consequently, some type of an archives service was started in 1956 and placed under a qualified archivist. This service did not develop into a proper Archives service due to lack of interest in Government. It was more of a 'limbo' organization, (an extension of registry services) rather than an Archives Service proper. As a result, Government Departments looked upon it as a dumping ground for material they could no longer house.

By 1959, the small Archives Service which was developing in a slow way, suffered its first set back when the Archivist was deprived of his clerical staff and himself retired, with all his duties being placed under the Controller of Office Services. This was done, paradoxically, as some 'economy measures.'

As the finishing touches to this infamous drama, in the early 1960s the Colonial Government began ravaging for any of the useful documents available for transfer to London and in the same year, some thitherto unseen bonfires flared in Nairobi. It was the Nairobi based correspondent of the 'Guardian' who commented adversely on these fires in Nairobi pointing out that the Colonial Government officials were – burning secret papers and getting rid of documents of historical interest.

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By 1962, the situation then, with regard to Archives in Kenya was that " Whilst the Government was very conscious of the need to take all steps necessary to preserve and classify material it was not regarded as a service which should take precedence in the Budget over more important and urgent services – the situation could always be retrieved at some later date, if and when staff were provided – (so contented the Chief Secretary in July 1962).

After the Lancaster House Constitution Conference, things took a different turn as independence was about to be granted to Kenya Africans. The Colonial Administrators suddenly became extremely anxious that the more important historical records be copied so that the copies would be available for future historians. The Colonial Government pointed out that it was difficult to forecast the attitude likely to be adopted by African Government in Kenya towards the records of the Colonial Administration accumulated over a period of seventy years.

The Colonial Government suddenly recommended that funds and a trained archivist be made available to enable the archivist to set about the task of making microfilm copies for keeping overseas as a record of the Government and administration of the Colony under British Colonial rule.

With events moving too fast, the expert Archivist arrived just on the eve of independence. He was however too late to undertake his original assignment of making microfilm copies of the records for safe keeping overseas, first because his microfilm camera arrived in Kenya after independence and secondly because the country was now independent under the African Government who would not allow him to microfilm records and ship them to the U.K. He therefore had to decide what to do during the next 12 months that he was to remain in the country. He decided instead to set up and establish a proper National Archives to look after all the records in the country.

The coming of independence in 1963 posed the question of the fate of all the Public records which had accumulated under the 60-70 years of Kenya's Colonial administration, some of which will be of tremendous historical value to posterity.

Government decided to set up a nucleus archives services as a Department in the Prime Minister's Office. It is worth mentioning here that Mr. Joseph Murumbi who was Minister of State in the Prime Minister's office played a big roll in setting up the Archives service as he had immense interest in Archives and books. He had been a book collector in U.K. for many years before independence and if I may say he has now today the finest collection of African books in this country and perhaps in the whole of East Africa.

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With the establishment of the Archives, it became necessary to pass proper legislation outlining in detail the functions of the service. This was done by Parliament in 1965 under the Public Archives Act No.32 of 1965 which was forms Chapter 19 Laws of Kenya. The main function of the Department as outlined by law, is to preserve and care for all public records transferred to the National Archives and scheduled for permanent preservation for their own intrinsic, historical or administrative value. The Department is housed in Jogoo House and the Search Room and Library in Jeevanjee Street.

What then is the role of the Archives in Research? The Philosophy of the late Sir Hillary Jenkinson, the former keeper of the Public Record office, London is appropriate here. "There are two responsibilities laid upon the Archivist, one towards the preservation of the archives and the other towards his reader or researcher." The Archivist has to provide to the best of his ability for the needs of the historians and other research workers.

Before the National Archives was established, researchers spent months and months looking for records all over the country, for these were scattered all over the District and Provinces of this country (cases of six months have been known). By the time the researcher started using the material his time in Kenya was up.

Time and money were wasted. No proper facilities were provided in the Districts or Provinces to handle the requests of researchers.

With the establishment of a centralised National Archives in Nairobi, so of all the records from the Districts and Provinces have been preserved in one place. We have built up

proper findings aids for researchers by way of catalogues of what we hold. We have provided a Search Room where all research is conducted. Researcher can no longer waste time roaming the country in search of material, because most of the material is now in one place – the National Archives here in Nairobi.

We serve at least ten researchers everyday in our Search Room from all over the world. Many papers, diss[e]rtations, books, etc have now been published by researchers on various subjects concerning this country. Some of these research papers have been very helpful to Government in formulating planning policies.

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Attached to my paper, you will see the list of papers and diss[e]rtations published using the National Archives. This list is by no means exhaustive, it simply represents what has been published by people using the National Archives.

Most people all over the world have now become aware of the work of our National Archives as a centre for Research.

The National Archives is really a store of all the history of this country. A country without history is like a tree without roots. But then how can a country hope to preserve its history without a proper National Archives. It is my submission that resolutions passed in such conferences like this one, can go a long way to help our Government to set up National Archives and Library Services.

N.W. Fedha
Chief Archivist
25th September, 1972.

THE ROLE OF THE ARCHIVES IN RESEARCH

By N.W. Feather
Classy Archivist. 1972

KENYA NATIONAL ARCHIVES
CENTRAL GOVERNMENT LIBRARY

84-128/025-171

The history of archival development in Kenya has been a tortuous and difficult one. The first recorded attempts to secure the provision of facilities for the preservation of the Public Archives of Kenya (and indeed, of other British Colonies) were made between 1914 and 1948 in five despatches from the Secretary of State for the Colonies in London to the British Governor of the then East African Protectorate and later the Colony and Protectorate of Kenya. The reactions of the Colonial Kenya Government to these despatches give us a gloomy picture of the way the public records were being kept or disposed of in Kenya Government offices at the time.

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Before official reaction in Kenya to this despatch was made known, a fire broke out in September, 1939 which destroyed the Secretariat offices in Nairobi and caused great damage to the records which had been centralised there. Most of the records were completely destroyed with only a few being salvaged.

Following the destruction of essential records in 1939 by fire, one would expect all care to be taken to nurse and develop some new records which could supplement the partially destroyed ones. On the contrary, the Administration in Kenya still displayed lack of concern in doing this. In fact the colonial office despatch of 1936 did not receive anyone's attention. Another despatch was released by the Colonial Office in 1948 stressing again the desirability of preserving records of historical interest. It was ignored again by the Administration. The whole Administration continued to be indifferent towards the question of developing an archival institution in the country. Even the Governor of Kenya himself admitted in 1948, that to "examine adequately the field of official archives in Kenya is quite beyond our present resources. To undertake a comprehensive survey would employ skilled staff over a lengthy period."

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N.W. FEDHA
CHIEF ARCHIVIST

25th September, 1972.

PAPERS AND DISSERTATIONS PRODUCED BY RESEARCHERS WHO USED
THE KENYA NATIONAL ARCHIVES FOR RESEARCH 1963 - 1972

T.H.R. Cashmore

Studies in District Administration in
the East African Protectorate 1895-1918

Ph.D. Dissertation University of
Cambridge. Nov. 1965

Anthony E. Thomas

Adaptation to Modern Medicine in Lowland
Machakos Kenya. A controlled comparison
of two Kamba Communities.

A Dissertation submitted to the Department
of Anthropology and the Committee on
Graduate studies of Stanford University in
Partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
December, 1970.

Hay Margaret Jean

Economic Change in Luoland, Kowe, 1890-1945

(pp. 1972)

A Ph.D. Dissertation in History, University
of Wisconsin, U.S.A. 1972, PP.

Maxon Robert Mead

British Rule in Gusiiland, 1907-1963

(August 1971)

A Ph.D. Dissertation in History for the
University of Syracuse, U.S.A. August,
1971, pp.

Ember Carol Ruchlis

Effects of Feminine Task Assignment
on Social Behaviour of Boys.

(1971, 157 pp.

Thomas Anthony E.

Adaptation to Modern Medicine in Lowland
Machakos, Kenya: A Controlled Comparison
of two Kamba Communities

A Ph.D. Dissertation for the University
of Stanford, U.S.A. 1970, 275 pp.