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# DISPROPORTIONS IN ARCHIVAL COLLECTIONS USAGE IN MALAWI

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## Abstract

While the ultimate goal of preserving archives is that they should be used, their usage is not uniform. Using data from interviews, records analysis and observation guides, this study examined the use of archival materials at the National Records and Archives Services of Malawi by exploring the collections, users and usage of the facility. The study established that some archival materials are heavily used while others are rarely used or not used at all. It recommends intensive preservation of heavily used materials and promotion of those that are rarely used or unused.

**Key words:** Archives, archives use, preservation, National Records and Archives Services of Malawi

## Introduction

Archives and some cultural centres exist to preserve archival materials and to make them available for use. In their collections, they hold volumes of materials that are supposed to be accessed and used by the society. According to the International Council on Archives (2019), archival materials are a documentary by-product of human activity retained for their long-term value. They are contemporary records created by individuals and organisations in pursuit of their business and, therefore, provide a direct view on past events. They are actually non-current records of individuals, groups, institutions and governments that contain information of enduring value. These materials exist in different formats ranging from paper and other traditional materials, photographic and micrographic materials, mechanical carriers, magnetic materials to optical materials (Boston 1998).

Although archival institutions are well known for preservation, the concepts of access and use are also considered as one of the most important aspect of archival administration. Abioye (2009) describes access in archival context as the availability of archives or records for consultation as a result of legal authorisation and the existence of finding aids. This signifies making archival materials available to users through the provision of archival services. It is certainly beyond argument that the preservation of archival records, whether on paper or the more modern form of information, cannot in any way serve a meaningful purpose without the provision of access to the records. The purpose of selecting, acquiring and preserving archives is to make them available for use. Intellectual and physical accessibility are all vital components of managing these important information resources (Jimerson 2003).

In order to properly provide access to archival materials in Malawi, the National Records and Archives Services of Malawi was established in 1947 (National Archives of Malawi, 2010). At that time, it was a regional branch of the then Central African Archives. When the administrative links of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland were cut in December

1963, the Zomba Branch was declared the National Archives of Malawi in January 1964 (National Archives of Malawi, 2010). Currently, the National Records and Archives Services of Malawi operates through several service points comprising records management services with regional records centres in Zomba, Lilongwe and Mzuzu. The other service points are the public archives, historical manuscripts, the legal deposit library, the conservation centre, and administration and support services whose offices are all located at the headquarters in Zomba (National Archives of Malawi, 2010). Access to archival materials is only available in Zomba.

## **Statement of the problem**

Although archival materials are meant for use, some can rarely be used, while others are used repeatedly. Materials that are not used thwart the functions of these institutions. This study examined the use of archival materials at the National Records and Archives Services of Malawi by exploring the collections, users and usage of the facility.

## **Purpose and objectives of the study**

The purpose of the study was to explore the usage of archival materials in the National Archives of Malawi. The specific objectives of the study were to:

- establish archival collections at the National Records and Archives Services of Malawi
- determine users of the collections at the National Records and Archives Services of Malawi
- find out how the collections are used.

## **Significance of the study**

The findings from this study will give the National Records and Archives Services of Malawi and other archival institutions an overview of the usage of archival materials. It will also help institutions to keep the balance between access and preservation by singling out materials that require promotion and those that require proper preservation.

## **Literature review**

Archival institutions are the keepers of archival resources. Their collections include books, papers, maps, photographs and machine-readable materials, regardless of physical form or characteristics, which are generated because of the information value in them (Evsborokhai 1990). These archival materials are kept in repositories, including college and university archives, corporate archives, government archives, historical societies, museums, religious archives and special collections archives (Society of American Archivists, 2016). Kamatula, Mnkeni-Saurombe and Mosweu (2013), on the other hand, state that archival collections include public and private papers. The archival collection is based on the purpose of the repository.

Archival collections are not supposed to be merely stored, as one function of archival institutions is to provide access to them. There are a number of reasons why society would want to access them. According to Boston (1998), archival materials are sources of information for self-education, entertainment and general interest. Boston (1998) also

explains that no evaluation of politics, history, everyday life, music and performing arts would be possible without these materials. Roper (1979) views archival materials as important for public administrators, as they provide important elements to the machinery of government, contributing to its efficiency and playing a role in national development. Sahoo and Mohanty (2015) further state that archival materials are packed with information to satisfy scholars' information needs. Kamatula et al (2013) mention that common users of documentary heritage include historians, students, professional researchers, genealogists, public administrators, journalists, politicians and the general public.

When it comes to access to archival materials, some improvement is visible as, in the past, access was restricted to the creators and their legitimate successors, but now, they are open to the public (Abioye, 2009). In order to access these materials, well-described finding aids are used. Michalko (2015) established that archives and cultural institutions hold millions of items that have never been adequately described and that are all unknown and unused. This represents a staggering volume of items of potentially substantive intellectual value that are unknown and inaccessible to possible users. Zhou also (2008) notes that most undergraduate students rely first on an instructor's lectures in the classroom and textbooks to obtain subject knowledge for their archival research. This also has effects on the potential of use of archival materials.

## **Methodology**

The study followed a multi-method design to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data was collected to provide in-depth knowledge while quantitative data was collected to provide magnitude. The main reason for using the mixed methods research was that it provided a better understanding of the research problem than either one approach alone could have done (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007). The study also followed a realism philosophical paradigm to be both objective and subjective in interpreting the findings, as there could be plasticity in reality.

Data was collected from the National Records and Archives Services of Malawi using interviews, records analysis and an observation guide. One archival staff member and one user were interviewed. The archival staff member was asked questions relating to the collection, users and usage while the user was asked questions relating to usage, more specifically why some materials are used frequently and others rarely. All the participants were selected purposively based on the researcher's perception of the respondents' knowledge of the subject matter as experts. Records analysis was also used to provide information about the collection, users and usage. The observation was actually used to ascertain collections, users and usage. The instruments were pre-tested and challenges that respondents faced were dealt accordingly.

Permission to conduct the study at the selected institution was sought from the authorities. Ethical issues that surrounded this research such as confidentiality, privacy and informed consent were observed. Qualitative data collected were analysed inductively from interviews, records analysis and observation while quantitative data were analysed deductively from records analysis.

## **Findings**

Findings are categorised according to the objectives of the study.

### **Collections at the National Records and Archives Services of Malawi**

The study established that the National Records and Archives Services of Malawi collects archival materials that are categorised into:

- Public archives
- Historical manuscripts
- Printed and published works deposited with the National Records and Archives Services of Malawi

The public archives' collection includes records of enduring value from public institutions such as minutes, standing orders, agreements, licences, regulations, policies, reports, correspondences, court cases, notices and photographs. Only materials that are historic in nature and are of enduring value are collected. Material in this collection are 25 years old or more. According to the Society of American Archivists (2016), this collection is also categorised as government archives as these materials relate to government. Kamatula et al (2013) in their study also recognised records of enduring value from public institutions as archival collection. This collection is kept in accordance with the National Archives Act (1979), which empowers the National Records and Archives Services of Malawi to collect, classify, conserve, store, control and dispose of certain public, judicial, historical and general records. The public archives collection is further grouped into 24 sub-collections which are described according to their origin. There are also other public archives materials that are not described that form part of the public archives backlog. Access to undescribed materials is based on the user's requisition for other materials outside the inventories list. The public archives collection can be accessed at a fee.

The collection of historical manuscripts includes historical papers and works from private organisations and individuals who are connected to the country's endeavours. They include writings belonging to missionaries, religious institutions, traders and renowned individuals connected with Malawi's history in one way or another. Only materials that are historic in nature and of enduring value are collected. Materials included are older than 25 years. The collection is kept in accordance with the National Archives Act (1979) to complement the public archives. This historical manuscript collection covers corporate archives, historical societies and religious archives that were also identified by the Society of American Archivists (2016). Historical manuscript collection is further grouped into 164 sub-collections according to their origin. From these collections, 11 sub-collections were not described, which creates a problem for users to access these materials. Kamatula et al (2013) also recognise records of enduring value from private individuals and institutions as part of the archival collection. These materials are available for access at a fee.

The printed and published collection includes a comprehensive collection of published literature on Malawi, which includes books, magazines, newsletters, newspapers, government gazettes, Hansards, reports, maps and cinematography. The collection is preserved in accordance with the Printed Publications Act (1975) which empowers the institution to collect published materials. According to the Society of American Archivists' (2016) categorisation of archives, this repository is a special collection. Although in a related study conducted in South Africa, Botswana and Tanzania, Kamatula et al (2013) identified public archives and historical manuscript collections as part of the documentary heritage in those countries, but they did not find printed and published works as part of archival materials in national archives. This is due to differences in legal powers given to archival institutions.

Some archival institutions are given powers to collect only public archives and historical manuscripts, but the National Archives of Malawi also has powers to collect published literature as part of its collection. This collection is further grouped into seven sub-collections and the grouping and description of these materials are different from the other collections. There are also differences in the descriptions in sub-collections. These descriptions also can be accessed together with printed and published materials is free of charge.

### **Users of the collections**

The study looked further into the users of the collections. The following user categories were identified:

- Historians
- Students
- Professional researchers
- Genealogists
- Public administrators
- Journalists
- Politicians
- The general public

Historians include all users who consulted archival materials with the aim of seeking and extracting past evidence. They treat archival materials as the primary sources of information about the past. They also analyse, interpret and communicate their findings with authority and aim to pass past knowledge to the next generations. They mostly use public archives' collections when their focus is related to government, but when their focus is on private individuals and institutions they use historical manuscripts. Printed and published materials are also used by historians to determine the possible materials they can use that were also used by other prolific authors and historians. Kamatula et al (2013) and Boston (1998) identify them as users of archival materials.

Students as archival users include all the scholars who consulted archival materials in order to fulfil academic endeavours. To them, archives are packed with information for learning. They are affiliated to colleges and universities and are mostly directed by the lecturer to do their studies. Most of these students are majoring in history mostly from Chancellor College, Mzuzu University, University of Livingstonia and at times the Catholic University. They mostly use the public archives collection when their focus is related to government, but when their focus is on private individuals and institutions they use historical manuscripts. Printed and published materials are also used by historians to determine the possible materials they can use that were used by other prolific authors and historians. Kamatula et al (2013) and Sahoo and Mohanty (2015) agree that these materials are packed with information to satisfy scholars' information needs.

Professional researchers also use archival materials to discover new information. Kamatula et al (2013) also identify this category of users. To them, archival materials are packed with information to help the society discover new knowledge. Professionals from different fields use the archival materials with no boundaries in terms of collections.

Genealogists also form another group of users in archival institutions. They use archives to trace bloodlines. To them, archives are sources of information for social equity whereby these materials are used to solve chieftaincy disputes. Kamatula et al (2013) also report this value.

Genealogists mostly rely on public archives collections although they sometimes consult other collections.

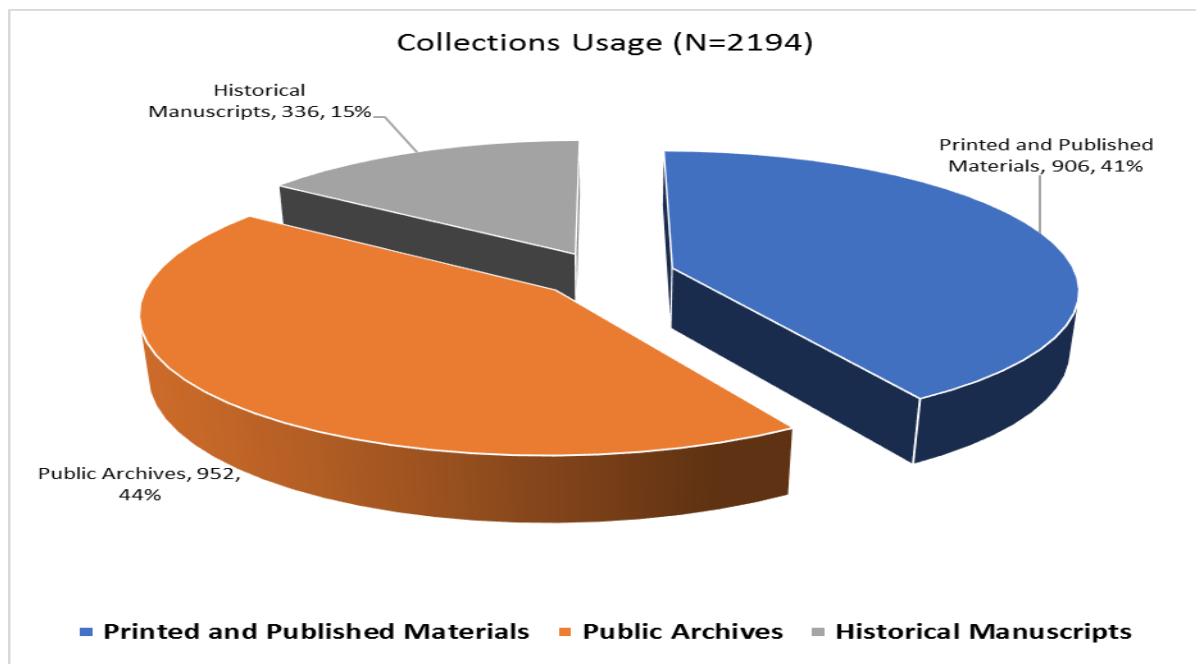
For public administrators, archival materials are sources of information for economic prosperity. To them, these materials can enhance people's lives. Kamatula et al (2013) and Roper (1979) also report this value. Roper (1979) further observes that archival materials provide a significant part of government operations, contributing to its efficiency and playing a role in national development. They mostly rely on public archives collection.

Journalists represent all users from media houses who consult archival materials with the aim of broadcasting them to the public. Printed and published materials are their favourite materials. Most of their requests are in the form of audio-visuals. They request them to take back the society to past events like holiday celebrations. Kamatula et al (2013) also report this user group. Politicians are also patrons of archival institutions. They include people holding political posts as well as political ambitions in order to have a political advantage. They normally consult published materials such as newspapers and public archives. This category is also identified by Kamatula et al (2013).

This general public user category includes ordinary people in the society who are not members of a particular organisation and have no special request. This category views archival materials as sources of information for enjoyment and inspiration. They use them for fun and for motivation. Kamatula et al (2013), Boston (1998) and Sahoo and Mohanty (2015) all agree on this user category. The general public normally consults published materials.

### Collection usage

The study also looked at how the collections are used. The following figure depicts usage in terms of collection and requests made in those collections in 2018.



From the study, it was established that public archives materials are the most used material with a usage of 44%, followed by printed and published materials with 41% usage while historical manuscripts collection has 15% usage.

While public archives had the highest usage, usage within sub-collection is not uniform. The secretariat and provincial administration sub-collections are used most. Secretariat records were used often because their finding aid covers a wide range of topics and it was not much, which makes it more user-friendly, while provincial administration records were used due to their geographic comprehensiveness. These sub-collections have also been cited many times in previous research outputs, making them more visible. The education, geographical survey, Office of the Governor, King's African Rifles, market and supply, and veterinary sub-collections were not used at all. These sub-collections are embedded in a bulky finding aid, making them difficult to locate. If materials do not have finding aids, they are very difficult to access. Michalko (2015) notes that the lack of finding aids is a challenge to provide access to archival materials.

Printed and published materials were second in terms of usage, as most users know the National Records and Archives Services of Malawi as a place to find old newspapers. Within the collection, their usage was not uniform among sub-collections as periodicals were used most. Users mostly prefer newspapers and the *Society of Malawi Journal*. The high usage of newspapers was because users were familiar with them while the high usage of the *Society of Malawi Journal* was because the journal has its own inventory with each article listed, making it more relevant for users to find specific articles to suit their information needs. The whole collection also had an advantage as the finding aids relate to most libraries that users are familiar with and access to this is free.

Historical manuscripts collection rated the lowest in terms of usage, as most users did not expect to find collections from private individuals and institutions. Although there are many sub-collections in this category, those used most related to religion, but there are many disciplines covered in the historical manuscripts collection such as languages and literature, arts and fashion, medicine, agriculture, geography and general history, to mention just a few.

In all the collections materials that are heavily used are worn out, while those that are not used are gathering dust. These two situations are not good for an archival institution. The worn out materials are supposed to be mended, digitised, microfilmed or laminated, while those gathering dust have to be cleaned so that they could withstand the test of time. Those that are rarely used or not used at all have to be promoted to potential users to ensure that they have value.

## **Conclusion**

Archival institutions are the information banks as they are packed with archival resources in the form of public archives, historical manuscripts, and printed and published works. These resources are important to the society as they supply the information needs of historians, students, genealogists, public administrators, journalists, politicians and the general public. While archives serve a range of users, some are rarely used to the extent that some are unknown and unused due to a lack of descriptions. For those materials that are heavily used, proper preservation is required to ensure continued use, while those that are rarely used should be promoted to possible users and for those that cannot be accessed due to a lack of description finding aids should be created.



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