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Safeguarding plantation records of Malawi

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Abstract

The paper on safeguarding plantation records of Malawi is a case study of a digitisation project that was carried out in 2018. The purpose of the study was to identify the most endangered plantation records and examine their storage conditions. Fifteen tea and tobacco plantations, namely Angoniland estates, Chimphamba Estate, Katondo Chizinga kandaula Estates, Likabula Tea Estates, Lusingwe Estates, Malosa Estates, Mbumba Estates, Mchenga and Falls Dairy, Mfumba Estates, Mgweritsi Estates, Monjesi Estates, Nachambo Estates, Nyasa Tobacco Estates and Rusa Estates, were purposefully sampled as the earliest plantations having been established in the 1800s. The data were collected through field visits to the estates and interviews with the estate owners. In terms of the implementation, about 600 images were digitised as samples and are accessible on the EAP website. The study concluded that the plantations were in the custody of valuable records, which have historical significance to the nation but the records were degrading slowly to poor storage conditions. Therefore, the study recommended that a major project had to be carried out with the aim of developing proper records rooms in the plantations and digitising the most endangered records. In addition, the National Archives of Malawi should work closely with the plantation owners to institute a deliberate programme of management of records in the estates.

Key words: digitisation, endangered archives programme, plantations records

Introduction

This paper focuses on the safeguarding of the plantation records in Malawi. This was a pilot project carried out by the Department of National Archives of Malawi (NAM) with the financial support of the endangered archives programme (EAP). The project sought to locate and safeguard plantation records from the 1880s to 1964. These records were located in various tea and tobacco plantations. The main activities were to locate the records, develop an inventory and digitise samples of the records. At the end of the project, a one-day workshop was conducted to disseminate the results of the project with various stakeholders, especially the farm owners. The project was conducted in a period of 40 days covering plantations in southern and central regions of Malawi.

The EAP, which supported this project, facilitates the digitisation of archives around the world that are in danger of destruction, neglect or physical deterioration. The programme is funded by Arcadia, a charitable fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin. Since its inception in 2004, the

programme has aided in the digitisation of over 11 000 000 images and 35 000 soundtracks, which include rare, printed sources, manuscripts, visual records and audio recordings. This continually expanding online collection is available freely through local archival partners, the EAP website and it is discoverable via the British Library catalogue for research, inspiration and enjoyment.

Problem statement

Digitisation has provided an opportunity to safeguard the most endangered plantation records. In addition, it has provided wide access to the public of the digitised collection. Tea and tobacco plantations were the focus for this study because the plantations were established in the 1880s way before the colonial period. This entailed that the records that were being created in the course of the operations of the plantations could be at a great risk of degradation due to the longevity of the period of their existence if no proper care was applied on the records. Very little was known on the type and condition of the records created by the plantations, how secure the records were, storage conditions of the records in the plantations as well as the capacity of the plantation owners in the management of the records. As such, this study identified all the tea and tobacco plantations with the goal of assessing the conditions of records and developing mechanism to reduce their degradation. The two strategies identified were to re-organise the records and create a conducive environment for the records and, at the same time, ascertain the volume of the most endangered records and relocate them to the NAM for safe custody and to be digitised.

Objectives

The aim of the study was to examine the safeguarding of plantation records as a pilot project for digitisation of records. Specifically, the study aimed to:

1. Identify the nature and conditions of records
2. Assess and isolate the most endangered records for digitisation
3. Examine the implementation process of the digitisation activity

Methodology

The paper on safeguarding of plantation records is a case study of the digitisation project that was carried out in 2018. Tea and tobacco plantations were the earliest in Malawi, having been established in the 1800s. As such, 15 estates were identified and purposefully sampled for the study. Data were collected through field visits to the estates. A checklist was used to obtain information on the nature and condition of records. In addition, interviews were conducted with the estate owners to appreciate how the records were being managed. Permission was also sought from the estate owners to relocate the most endangered records and digitise them. The collected data were qualitatively analysed and themes that emerged were the nature and condition of the records as well as details for development of the inventory of the records.

Digitisation

Mnjama (2017) defines digitisation as the art of converting the contents of a document from hard copy into machine-readable format. In an archival environment, it includes taking photos of a physical object or analogue item, such as an art object, a tape recording, a map or correspondence from a collection that is rare or unique, often extremely fragile and transferring these photographs to a digital medium. The end result of digitisation is the production of digital images that can be accessed electronically. Furthermore, Kominko (2015) states that there are several advantages of digitisation and these include the improvement of access to library resources, which means that collections and information are accessible to as many people or researchers as possible. Furthermore, several users can access the same records at the same time without hindrance. Digitisation also removes the problem of distance, as users do not have to travel to libraries or information centres that possess the hard copies. Another advantage is the reduction in the handling and use of fragile and heavily used original records.

As stated above, one of the key advantages of digitisation is increased accessibility of collection. Ling and Mclean (2004) provide a case of the National Archives of Australia that to increase the accessibility of its collection, the National Archives introduced a digitisation on demand service from April 2001. The service delivers low resolution digital images of collection records via the archives website. In the three years since the introduction of the service, nearly 3 500 000 images have been made available over the internet, which has been a delight to the archives' diverse range of clients. Furthermore, Casablanco, Holtman, Strlič and Grau-Bové (2022) provided a report on accessibility of digitised archives at Amsterdam City Archives (SAA). These scholars argue that information on the use of the original archival documents (access requests) is automatically generated and stored by collection management systems. The usage data of the SAA shows that since 2006, there has been a steady downward trend in the number of access requests in the reading room: a decrease of 36%, from 24.782 requests in 2006 to 15.769 requests in 2018.

Digitisation has some challenges in the African context, Sigauke (2017) presented a report of the case study carried out at the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) where digitisation was to be carried out on newspapers. It was discovered that newspapers in their original form are historical records and are particularly susceptible to natural paper degradation. The prospects of digitising newspapers at the Bulawayo provincial centre of the NAZ were important because it meant improvement in the conservation of the original newspapers and increasing access to the public through the use of online platforms. However, digitisation is a costly exercise, and therefore the success of this programme was affected by budget limitations. Other challenges as noted by Netshakhuma (2016) at Makerere University (digital music) were a lack of technical training, a lack of a plan for managing the transition from paper to digital environment, a backlog in un-digitised records and inadequate records management on the digitisation of records, and erratic electricity supply.

Endangered archives programme

In her work “From dust to digital: Ten years of the endangered archives programme”, Kominko (2015) argues that the programme’s aim is to contribute to the preservation of archival records that are in danger of destruction, neglect or physical deterioration worldwide. In addition, in his paper on preserving endangered archives titled “The Role of the Endangered Archives Program in Africa”, Mnjama (2017) states that specific objectives of the endangered archives programme are to:

1. facilitate scholarship and research by identifying and preserving important records at risk of neglect, physical deterioration, destruction or irresponsible care
2. copy and relocate existing archival records that would generate records to supplement existing archives, provided the focus is not on the general nature of oral history recordings
3. safeguard archival records relating to societies usually at an early stage of development
4. where possible, relocate endangered collections into established local archives. For instance, archives in the country in which they are currently located. (Note that EAP in principle does not support the relocation of endangered records from their countries of origin. The only exception to this is where the records are being temporarily removed from the country of origin for the purposes of copying)
5. only records that can be made available online should be digitised. If there are any copyright or privacy restrictions preventing this, the programme cannot fund the digitisation of such records
6. the copy of the records kept at the British Library will not be the master copy, but will be made available for the types of use and access specified in the award conditions. The responsibility for creating and keeping archival masters of collections normally rests with the country of origin
7. training and building local capacity through copying and digitisation of endangered archives.

Historical context of the pilot project

The colonial planters created various categories of records in the course of their work, especially in the tea and tobacco plantations. The economy of Malawi from time immemorial has been based on agriculture, hence the emphasis on the preservation of records created in this sector because of the fiscal and historical value of the records. The targeted records covered the colonial period when Nyasaland (Malawi) was under the British rule (1891 to 1964), including correspondences, industrial relations records, ordinances, deeds, crops grown, diseases that attacked these crops, the pesticides, conditions of services of the workers, tax remittance notices and native associations records.

A snap survey at one of the plantations (Wallace Estate) had shown that records are indeed endangered due to various factors. The first factor is the age of records; the records in question were created as early as 1890s and the paper has been losing its value over the years and becoming brittle. Secondly, the issues of record preservation through technology are still a new phenomenon in the country and as such the records has never been subjected to any preservation mechanisms. The third issue is the unfriendly environment where the records are kept such as wet rooms, unventilated stores, dilapidated warehouses that end up becoming breeding grounds of mice, termites, insects, spiders and rats. All these make endanger the records. These plantations have no

records rooms, hence the records are mixed with other non-record records that weaken their life span.

Justification for safeguarding plantation records

Historically, Malawi had no exploitable minerals as was the case with Southern and Northern Rhodesia. The economic activities were discovered by Dr David Livingstone, an explorer, who exposed Nyasaland's exploitable worth to Europe. He called for Christianity and commerce to be established in the country. In response to his call, British missionaries, traders and settler farmers penetrated Nyasaland. The British government intervened to protect the interests of these adventurers who were threatened by the advancing slavers and the Portuguese. It was this context that drove the British Government into colonisation of Nyasaland.

This precedence made Harry Johnston resort to having the land alienated to aristocratic European settlers and planters who, in turn, opened plantations for cultivation of cash crops for export. These settlers and planters created records worth preserving while they managed their respective companies and estates. These records were dumped in their offices/registries with no one in charge of their care despite being wells of economic history in the colonial era.

Later on, the plights of natives on these farms were chiefly reflected in the native associations that were formed. These included the North Nyasa Native Association (1912), West Nyasa Native Association (1914), Mombera Native Association (1920), Southern Province Native Association (1923), Central Province Native Association (1927) and Chiradzulu District Native Association (1929). These associations were a mouthpiece of natives' social, economic and political concerns. They were the platforms for the betterment and welfare of the local people, especially those on the estates of white planters. These associations culminated and merged into Nyasaland African Congress (NAC), which is currently known as Malawi Congress Party (MCP).

As stated above, there was a need to identify, organise, relocate, digitise and preserve these records and store them in a more conducive environment such as the NAM. The purpose was to make the records obtainable and accessible to the general public. From a scholarly perspective, the records are instrumental as the primary source of information about the settler planters and their management of the plantations and companies in line with the colonial government's economic drive. These records reflect critical information about the early African political economy during colonialism. These records are fundamental to the economic history of Malawi in the sense that they represent the foundation of the country's economy. Most importantly, these records reveal the strategies adopted and adapted by the colonial masters to ably manage the landlocked and mineral-lacking country. If the records had not been saved and preserved, the legacy of the country's political economy history would ultimately have been lost.

Project implementation

Equipment

The records were copied using a NIKON Camera D7200 into Tiff format. This camera was chosen because it produces the images with the minimum required standards by the EAP coping

guidelines. Further to this, there was no requirement to procure this camera as well as the laptops and the servers because it had already been procured from the previous EAP projects and were still in usable condition.

Visits to the plantations and collection of the records

The pilot project was carried out from November 2018 to January 2019. A total of 15 plantations were visited across the country. These were Angoniland Estates, Chimpamba Estate, Katondo_Chizinga_kandaula Estates, Likabula Tea Estates, Lusingwe Estates, Malosa Estates, Mbumba Estates, Mchenga and Falls Dairy, Mfumba Estates, Mgweritsi Estates, Monjesi Estates, Nachambo Estates, Nyasa Tobacco Estates and Rusa Estates. During the visits, some records were collected as samples for digitisation at the NAM.

Capturing of the records

A team of three officers were involved in the capturing of the records. These were archives staff and they were officers who had attended some digitisation training locally. This was necessary because the aim was to finalise the activity within the specified period and produce quality work. Since a camera was being used, the officers shared the responsibilities as follows: one officer was on the document assessment and preparation, which involved straightening the paper and removal of pins; a second officer was on the camera to capture the prepared records and the third officer was providing quality control on the captured records on the computer, which involved naming the files accordingly. Netshakhuma (2016) argues that the success of digitisation rests on having a proper plan. The scholar cited some challenges facing the Makerere University Digital Music Archives in Uganda as a lack of proper planning and a lack of risk management and correct infrastructure.

Copyright and digitisation

Copyright issues are an essential component of the digitisation. Netshakhuma (2016) states that in 2004, the Makerere University Digital Music Archives of Uganda embarked on a digitisation project of music. However, the selection of archival records for digitisation was not based on a clear understanding of copyright law and rights of ownerships. Netshakhuma (2021) agrees that it is important to understand the importance of international copyright laws as they relate to the digitisation of records created in different countries. For instance, a study on compliance with the principles of copyright related to the digitisation of the African National Congress Archives, such as the international copyright laws or the South Africa Copyright Act (No. 98 of 1978), revealed that the African National Congress (ANC) adhered to some of the principles of copyright laws during the digitisation process. The study concludes that any organisation that embarked on the

digitisation project should comply with copyright legislation. Furthermore, the implementation of digitisation requires partnerships between project owners and technological companies.

In the case of this pilot project of safeguarding plantation records, adherence was placed on the copyright law. This was done by ensuring that the records do not contain personal information of people, and the records that were targeted were from the pre-industrial period, which provided for a greater chance that the records did not have the copyright restrictions. Furthermore, the creators of the records were adequately informed of how the copied information will be used. In addition, the copying of the records was done in accordance with the National Archives of Malawi Act regarding the acquisition of such records so that copyright issues are properly adhered to.

Project contribution to the professional development of local staff and the institution

The project contributed to the professional development in the sense that members of staff, mainly the research assistants from this institution, underwent training in digitisation and are now more equipped in digitisation than before. The members of staff have become more acquainted with knowledge and skills in digitisation. On the part of the institution, there has been a gain on the equipment such as laptops and cameras, which will be used and, in the long run, support the activities of the institution.

Summary of the records

This summary provides the name of the plantation and the description of the kind of files that were found in each of the plantations.

Name of plantation	Summary of the nature and scope of the records
Lusingwe _Estates	Copy of the title deed plan for the estate showing the size of the estate, inspection report of the estate by conservator of forests, correspondence between government officials and estate owners on tenancy issues and contains a map of Lisungwi Estate and copies of indenture for 1955 and 1960, budgets for buildings and other improvements and agriculture reports for the estates.
Monjesi _Estates	The plan for the development of the estate, copy of the title deed, a copy of the indenture made on 6 November 1960 between His Excellency Sir Harold Baxter Kittermaster and Arthur Falconer Barron. The file also contains a duplicate of the agreement of land occupancy of 1 400 acres at a yearly rent of 35 British pounds, general correspondence between various officers in the agriculture sector about Monjesi Estate on issues of inspection of the estate and also extension.
Nyasa_Tobacco_Estates	The file is a composition of the estates' Certificate of Incorporation under the Companies Act of 1908 and 1913. The estate was established in 1949 with registration number 234 as a limited company. Other documents include a list of persons holding shares in the Nyasa Tobacco Estate in 1950, 1951, 1952, 1953, 1955, 1957, minutes of meetings of the directors of the estate, annual returns showing a summary of shares and capital shares and the list of names of the directors of the company for 1953, 1954 and 1957.
Rusa _Estates	The file contains map of the estate, which is about 5 440 acres of land, inspection report covering information on the conservation improvements and the names of the management team and the kind of crops grown on the farm, which, in this case, was tobacco and maize. The file also had the certificate of occupancy from the Nyasaland Protectorate, which was made in August 1943. The certificate was for the occupancy period of 99 years at a yearly fee of 136 pounds. There are also general correspondences between the estate and government officials.
Mfumba _Estates	The file contains information such as the list of directors for the estate from 1928, the list of persons holding shares and information on the share capital and shares for the company. The file also contains information on the liquidation of the company in 1937. This includes minutes of meetings and liquidator's statements of accounts. The information in this file shows that the estate owners voluntarily wound up the company.

Angoniland_Estates	The file contains general correspondence between the estate and other institutions, including the government. The estate was established in 1924 in Ncheu and wound up its activities in 1934. The file also contains minutes of meetings of the shareholders. The estate was deemed completely dissolved by January 1936 after all procedures of winding up were completed and its properties and assets were disposed of.
Likabula_Tea_Estates	The file contains important information of the estate from 1942 to 1950. The correspondence between the estate and the Registrar of Companies had to do with payments of stamp duties and payments of registration fees. Other information includes reminders from the Registrar of Companies for the estate to submit updated documents of its annual returns. The file also shows information that Likabula Tea Estate was purchased by Sayama Tea Estates in 1949.
Katondo_Chizinga_kandaula_Estates	The file contains important information of the estate which is located in Kasungu such as the agreement for the right of occupancy, which was entered into on 24 September 1940 between the lands officer on behalf of the government and Arther Falconer Baron. The land in question was 94 acres with yearly rent of one pound three shillings and six pence. Some of the attachments to the agreement are maps showing boundaries of the estate. The file also contains correspondence between the Estate Manager Arther Baron, who was also at that time the owner of Mbadzi in Lilongwe, and various government officials.
Malosa_Estates	The file contains general correspondence between the estate and various government offices. The subjects of communication include letters of acknowledgement of annual summaries and acknowledgements of payments of registration fees from the Registrar of Companies. Other important information in this file is the list of persons holding shares in the estate from 1922 to 1923. Other folios contain covering letters for summaries of capital and shares of the Estate.

Lusingwe _Estates	The files contained copies of the title deed plan for the estate showing its size, inspection report of the estate by conservator of forests, correspondence between government officials and estate owners on tenancy issues, a map of Lisungwi Estate, copies of indenture for 1955 and 1960, budgets for buildings and other improvements, Agriculture reports for estates.
Mchenga_and_Falls_Dairy	The records contain correspondence between the Commissioner of Lands and Regional Agriculture Officer on the lease of farmland, farm inspection report by the livestock officer explaining diseases that attacked crops and animals, income and expenditure, and recommendations. Other records found at the estate were correspondence from the geological survey and agricultural officer on rock samples at the farm site. Also included is a detailed farm description of Mchenga Estate which talks about physical data such as topography, communication and markets, developments, farm plan, history of farm and summary of land use. A map of the farm, chemical lab test results of the soil composition at the farm and a copy of Indenture for 1954.
Chimpamba_Estate	The records found at the estate were correspondence between the commissioner of lands and the director of agriculture on the lease of farmland, farm inspection report by the provincial agricultural officer and provincial forest officer explaining that the state of the farm is worsening and why there is a need to take action on the matter. Correspondence between the chief secretary and the director of agriculture on clearance to plant tobacco on the land, and copies of Indenture of 1952 and 1954 as well as map of Chimpamba Estate.
Nachambo_Estates_Limited	The file contains the 1920 memorandum and articles of association of Nachambo Estate, a company limited by shares and accounts reports detailing liabilities, expenditure, profit and loss. Minutes of the annual general meeting of shareholders.

The elements of the inventory

An inventory was developed which is also called the listing template. The template had the following elements:

- Location of the original records
- The name of the files
- The content of the records and their description
- Custodial history
- System of arrangement (this is a description of the records according to a particular classification system)
- Dates of the original records
- Language
- Access conditions to the records
- Copy right and data collection issues
- Information about digital surrogate collections (digital folder name, digital file name, creation dates for digital copies, extent and format of digital copies, location of copies)

The project outcome

The following had been achieved in the pilot project:

- About 600 selected very old administrative and operational plantation images were digitised as samples
- Identified records were organised and relocated to a more conducive environment within the estates
- An inventory of the records was developed
- Copies of the digitised samples have been made available to the British Library
- A survey report has been developed and presented to the British Library, which describes the content, volumes and feasibility of digitising the identified collection

Conclusion and recommendations

This paper discussed the pilot project under the endangered archives programme. The project was about safeguarding the plantation's records from 1891 to 1964. The plantation's records are critical to the economic history of Malawi because, from time immemorial, the economy of Malawi is agriculture based. A total of 15 tobacco and tea plantations were visited. It was observed in the plantations that the records were not being kept properly, as evidenced by a high accumulation of dust, mixed with non-record records and poor storage conditions. Some of the most vulnerable records were relocated from the plantations to the National Archives where the records were digitised and the hard copies were accessioned and have become part of the archival collections.

The study further recommends that since this was a pilot project, there was a need to develop this project into a major project. The focus for the major project should be to improve the storage conditions of the records at the plantations and relocate the most endangered records to the NAM for safe custody and digitisation. In addition, the NAM should work closely with the estate owners

to institute a deliberate programme of development of storage rooms and training for the management of such records.

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