

## THE VALUE OF ARCHIVES/WRITTEN SOURCES TO A RESEARCHER AND HOW TO APPROACH THEM

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*"Written documents are a crucial source, but they too must be interrogated by minds that do not take things for granted" (Tosh, 1984)*

This article attempts to assess the validity of the above assertion made by a prominent historian, Professor John Tosh. In a way, the article takes a historical perspective to assess the value that is attached to archives as a source of historical information. It begins by briefly giving an explanation as to what sources are. This is followed by an account that attempts to explain why archives, or better still, written documents, are very crucial to the writing of history. But they present challenges to researchers. After addressing the challenges, the article ends by elaborating on how one (a researcher in any archival institution) subjects archival sources to a reasonable amount of criticism before their full potential is successfully exploited.

To begin with, it should be noted that in historiography sources are simply those raw materials from which relevant information for the reconstruction of the human past can be derived. In their crude form they exist as archives, oral traditions, archaeological artifacts, linguistic and ethnographic materials, etc. Of all these, archival (written) documents are the most conventional ones and as a result they are widely used by historians and researchers of other disciplines more especially within the humanities and social sciences. Shafer argues that the writing of history is no more than the judgement and manipulation of the information that is contained in written documents.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Professor John Tosh has it that "ever since historical research was placed on a professional footing... the emphasis has fallen almost exclusively on the written rather than the spoken word..."<sup>2</sup> These assertions amount to saying that archives (written documents) are a crucial source for reconstructing the past.

In view of the importance of archives in historical research it is also important to point out here that archives are a crucial source because they have immense advantage over the other sources. First, apart from academic conservatism, from the middle ages onward, the written word survives in greater abundance such that for instance archival institutions and other information resource centres are overwhelmed by paper. This situation is unlike that of other sources. This scenario was largely due to the rapid spread of printing in Europe, which encouraged literate production of all kinds.<sup>3</sup> According to Hrbeck, written sources are also in abundance in South Africa. This is particularly with regard to the nineteenth century, when sources became plentiful and more autochthonous in character.<sup>4</sup> Missionaries and explorers like Dr. David Livingstone, Dr. Robert Laws and many more learnt African languages and thus produced better documented works. At the same time, Africans

themselves became educated in mission schools and started to express their views directly in written works as active proponents and witnesses of their own history. A good example of these “new men” in Malawi were Levi Z. Mumba, Philemon Chirwa, Elliot Kamwana Chirwa, Charles Domingo, Charles Chinula, Yesaya Z. Mwase, Josiah Nthala, George Simeone Mwase and Tobias Dossi, just to mention these. Written works of these men are held in the National Archives of Malawi. The same development also occurred in other countries within the Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (ESARBICA). Works of such men were crucial in the development of nationalistic feelings that brought about independence movements in all countries in the region. These archives are therefore crucial to the writing of a country’s history.

Secondly, written documents are usually precise as regards time, place of production and authorship. In terms of time, archives make a considerable contribution to the chronological framework of an account and this is the weak point of oral tradition.<sup>5</sup> For instance, Livingstone’s dating of a meeting with let us say Chief Malenga Mzoma of Nkhata-Bay (Malawi) may make it possible to reconstitute the chronological pattern underlying the history of that part of Malawi. In addition, archives also reveal the thoughts and actions of individuals better than any other sources can do. Thoughts and actions of men and women, ‘manners and customs’ such as ritual practices, production techniques, and war strategies are well described in archives especially by Europeans who were well placed to describe them in spite of the fact that they often looked at things superficially from outside.<sup>6</sup>

Thirdly, the written word has always served different purposes - information, propaganda, personal communication, private reflection; all of which may have relevance for the historian. For instance, newspapers, a recent historical source but one that has become in many ways the historian’s most important font of information, has three main functions. They act as a medium of advertisement. They act as chroniclers of daily events. They are also a medium of propaganda and partisan objectives, although they can be honest moulders of public opinion.<sup>7</sup> This is true considering the fact that a good number of papers in the ESARBICA countries belong to prominent politicians who are very much aligned with major political parties. Despite this fact, they have enduring historical value, and as such archivists and librarians are duty bound to see to it that a comprehensive stock of newspapers is kept in their repositories. Furthermore, confidential documents like letters, diaries, etc are also crucial for reconstructing the past. Owners of these documents may have recorded their informed decisions, discussions and sometimes their innermost thoughts, very unmindful of the eyes of future historians and other researchers<sup>8</sup>. A careful study of such sources may reveal a very different message from the confident generalisation of contemporary observers. For example, Ben Pimlott, quoted in Tosh, says that “...the diary acted both as a sounding board of ideas and as a safety valve for...very strong instinct towards political self-destruction, being fullest.... when he was consumed by feelings of resentment against his closest political associates”.<sup>9</sup> It is for this noble reason that researchers have to use diaries in their ongoing work.

What is also notable about archives, especially those authored by Africans, is that they display a certain bias when they discuss counter-racist, political or religious issues, but they are nevertheless of overwhelming importance. For instance, Yesaya Z. Mwase’s<sup>10</sup> “My Essential and Fundamental Reasons for Working Independently” is a very good text for studying why independent church movements rose in

Southern Africa. One can learn from it many sentiments Mwase had against white missionaries in Malawi. Such archives are thus crucial because they “represent the hidden face of the moon or the submerged mass of the iceberg, the other facet of history overshadowed by the disquieting produced by the strangers to the continent.”<sup>11</sup> A historian or even an archivist, by studying such archives, can come up with a true picture of African societies, unlike that which is presented in Eurocentric accounts only.

Which brings me to the challenges posed by written records. Firstly, archives are enormously abundant and scattered all over the world in different places including libraries, archives and documentation centres. Furthermore, a vast amount of valuable writings is still at large in offices and homes probably gathering dust and waiting to be shredded or cremated or given away for wrapping fish and other commodities in the market. This mass of documentation despite being a boon is a problem since it cannot readily be marshalled to produce a comprehensive view.<sup>12</sup> Suffice to say that if an objective picture of the past is to be produced by researchers, both Librarians and Archivists need to perform their duties with diligence. First, they have to collect all documentation that is idly lying elsewhere, that is if it is of enduring historical value. Secondly, they must make such documents readily available/accessible to researchers.

Another challenge (to which I have already referred) is that posed by bias. Some written documents, for example those produced by European travellers in Africa, are biased on account of the western attitudes of their authors. The problem here is that the authors of these documents had difficulties in understanding what they wrote about concerning the life and culture of Africa. They wrote with an imperfect understanding of the people (Africans). Consequently, such early documents tell us more about the minds of those who wrote them than they tell us about the African societies they wrote about. For instance, they describe some particular features of African beliefs as of lesser or no importance. Archivists need to know about this. Researchers have to check for this type of weakness in archives if they are going to produce an evenly balanced account of what they are researching.

Of course written documents can be frauds. For instance, nine years ago a certain magazine is said to have serialised six editions of what it claimed to be Adolf Hitler's diaries. But this was discovered to be false. These diaries were just productions of an imposter. They were falsifications or forgeries. Such a thing can also happen in our region, because " a network of.... falsifiers so clever and some not, are (still) busily peddling allegedly secret documents to... newspaper correspondents."<sup>13</sup> Such spurious documents have plagued historians for generations and the present generation is no exception. If they are not checked they can easily militate against what would have been a true picture of the past. We should therefore guard ourselves against such fraudulent sources. In addition, some archival sources may be corrupt, i.e. additions or deletions in the original text may be deliberately or inadvertently made. These additions or deletions may mean a substantial change. Henceforth, the meaning of the text may substantially change. Therefore, this danger should be deeply impressed on both researchers and archivists if a good history is to be produced.<sup>14</sup> For instance, changes made by authors in their own diaries and journals are bothersome. The much-needed original entry expressing contemporary opinions and observations is tampered with long after the event. In this case, what appears to be an opinion at the time of the event is in reality the considered judgment of the writer in the light of succeeding events and

public reaction to the event.

Language is another problem that users of archives face. First, ancient documents pose a serious problem in that the language used may be so archaic that the present reader may find it difficult to translate or understand. This is so because words transform meaning as time goes on. Also, some foreign researchers who come to work in our institutions may come across documents written in local dialects. They may thus delay their research work whilst trying to consult local linguists to translate the text into either English or Portuguese or French. Archivists must be prepared to assist foreign researchers should this happen.

It is also evident that archival sources in whichever form are very fragile. Most of them have weathered the hazards of fire, flood and sheer neglect. For instance, in the National Archives of Malawi few files of the secretariat correspondence prior to 1919 remain because of the disastrous fire that ravaged the secretariat building. Nevertheless, this gap is complemented with sister files from sister departments. Needless to say that in lieu of the above development, archivists in Malawi and elsewhere are duty bound to advise registry personnel in various government departments to take care of both semi-current and non-current records to prevent them from being lost.

Need we say that people, especially politicians, to destroy archival materials deliberately. Personal files of prominent officials have tended to be destroyed for fear that sensitive materials would fall into the hands of successors and even historians.<sup>15</sup> Hence, it is important for archivists to question and appraise in a thorough manner those files uncovered in offices or other places - documents/evidence may have been removed from the files.

Finally, unless the press enjoyed considerable freedom, newspapers are of little worth as reliable historical material. They can be good (or bad) examples of media propaganda.<sup>16</sup> Even where the press is free, as is the case in Malawi today, newspapers may be primarily political organs for advancing partisan views. The common thing about newspapers in Malawi and in other neighbouring countries is that most of them, if not all, are owned by politicians. This implies that they are biased in their news coverage towards what is considered good by the proprietors.

All the above problems, though not exhaustive, lead to the conclusion that before written documents are used no matter how spontaneous and unproblematic they may seem, they should be subjected to a certain amount of criticism or critical evaluation. The guiding principal should read as follows: "No document, however, authoritative is beyond question; the evidence must be interrogated by minds trained in a discipline of attentive disbelief."<sup>17</sup> Archivists as researchers in their own right and other general researchers ought to know this.

To begin with, documents may not be what they seem to be; they may signify very much more than is immediately apparent. In the words of Tosh,<sup>18</sup> they may be "couched in obscure and antiquated forms which are meaningless to the untutored eye." Hence, before a historian can properly assess the significance of any document, he/she must find out how, when, and why it came into existence. This requires the application of supporting knowledge, and skeptical intelligence. It is after this appraisal of documents that one has to analyse them carefully. There are two ways of analysing documents, namely external and internal criticism.

External criticism is an investigation of the origin of the source. It primarily examines the source itself and not the content (testimony) contained therein. The aim is to discover if the source has been tampered with at any time since it was

created. Such an exercise demands thorough investigation into the origin of any source to be used in research. The first task here is to determine whether the document was written by the person purporting to have written it and in the period as claimed. The aim here is to know the following: author of the document; date of publication; condition of composition; and whether the document is dependent or independent of other sources. This is crucial because if the above conditions are not met, forgery or any other fraud may not be detected in a particular document. Assuming the document satisfies the above conditions, then it is a genuine one. If not, it is spurious and may only be used with great care and caution. For instance, hand-written documents should be judged as to whether they are right for the period and place specified. In general, external criticism involves asking the following questions: When was the document produced? Who produced it? For what purpose was it produced? How has it survived to the present day?<sup>19</sup>

Having completed external criticism, a researcher must proceed to evaluating the testimony (content of the documents). This is called internal criticism. The aim now is to establish the credibility and reliability of the testimony. To do this one must first discover the actual meaning of the testimony.<sup>20</sup> This involves more than simply translating from a foreign, archaic language the real meaning of a written word. Thus researchers require not merely linguistic fluency but also command of the historical context, which can help to show what the words in the source actually refer to. This is so because often old words have been known to pass out of currency, while others acquire new meaning and significance. Therefore, we have to be on our guard against reading modern meanings of certain words into the past.<sup>21</sup>

Once the meaning of the text has been established, one should then set out to establish the reliability of the testimony (content) because "no source can be used for historic reconstruction until some estimate of its standing... has been made."<sup>22</sup> This calls for knowledge of historical context and an insight into human nature. A rational mind capable of reasoning in an independent manner is wanted here. For example, where a document is a report of let us say what had been seen, heard, and said, one needs to ask whether the writer was in a position to give a faithful account or not. If yes, the testimony can be said to be reliable.

Furthermore, if the reliability of a document is to be established, the question of motive is thus extremely important. A researcher has to grasp the motive that made a writer to produce a particular document. For instance, if the written work was a commissioned one, there must have been aims for sponsoring or commissioning it. In such work it is more likely that the contents will be biased simply because "no sane person bites the hand that feeds him." For instance, the pre-multiparty election newspapers and other documents in Malawi tended to castigate either the political party or its leadership. Not all that was said was true. Even the writings of Dr. David Livingstone, who was sponsored by London Missionary Society, are full of sensationalism and propaganda. Dr. Livingstone tended to exaggerate in his writings. His accounts tend to overgeneralise about the effects of the slave trade in general. This was mainly intended to attract the attention of the interested parties in Europe to help combat all forms of servitude that were in existence in Southern Africa. However, having determined the motive one can establish whether a document is reliable or not. Even when the document was spontaneously produced, effort should be made to establish the inherent motive by taking into account where the writer's stand was in relation to the events that were being reported on. The position and the status of the writer in society can also guide a researcher to

establish the motive.

If the full significance of documents is to be determined, researchers must also study them in their original documentary context. Ideally, they should be studied in their entirety. In this case an effort should be made to study the documents in series in order to minimize the danger of misinterpreting particular items out of context.<sup>23</sup> What is noteworthy here is that custodians of documents also have a part to play. They must ensure that the principles of provenance and original order are applied to make sure that documents kept in their custody are not haphazardly processed for future research.

In the final analysis, once bias has been detected, however, the offending documents need not be thrown away. It can be of significance. In the case of a public document, it may account for a consistent misleading of certain situations, with disastrous effects on policy. In published documents, bias may explain an important shift in public opinion.<sup>24</sup>

In general, the foregoing discussion amounts to saying that a researcher should not be a passive observer in approaching sources. Of each type of source, he/she has to ask why and how it came into existence. Divergent sources have to be weighed against each other; forgeries and gaps in the testimony must be accounted for. No document should be taken for granted.

In conclusion, this essay has attempted to explain some of the advantages that archival sources have. For instance, it has been clearly shown herein that even today when our definition of sources has been broadened, many researchers particularly historians regard archival sources as the main source. This implies that other sources are regarded as supplements. They come as additional to archival sources. It is common knowledge that the archival sources have their own shortfalls. In view of both the advantages and disadvantages that archives have, an effort has been made in this essay to give a simple guideline on how all researchers must approach written works, be it published or unpublished.

## Endnotes

1. R. Shafer (ed.), *A Guide to History Method* (London, Dorsey Press, 1974).
2. J. Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (London, Longman, 1984), p.28.
3. *Ibid.*, p.28.
4. I. Hrbek, "Written Sources for African History from the 15th Century Onwards", in J. Ki-Zerbo (ed), *General History of Africa*, Vol. 1 (London, James Currey Ltd, 1989), p. 46.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
7. W.L. Lucey, *History: Method and Interpretation* (Chicago, Loyola University Press, 1958), p. 32.
8. Tosh, *op.cit.*, p.33.
9. *Ibid.*, p.36.
10. Y.Z. Mwase broke away from the mainstream Livingstone Mission and started his own independent church movement known as the Blackman's Church of Africa.
11. Hrbek, *op.cit.*, p.50.
12. Hrbek, *op.cit.*, 52.

13. Lucey, op.cit., 56.
14. Ibid., p. 63.
15. Tosh, op.cit., pp.41-42.
16. A. Nevins, *The Gateway to History* (New York, D. Appleton-Century Co, 1939), passim.
17. Tosh, op. cit., p. 62.
18. Ibid., p. 50.
19. Lucey, op.cit, p. 28.
20. G.R. Elton, *The Pursuit of History* (London, Collins, 1967), p.81.
21. Tosh, op.cit., p.53.
22. Elton, op.cit., p.54.
23. Tosh, op.cit., p.54.
24. Ibid., p. 56.