

PRESERVING THE AFRICAN MEMORY: CRITICAL CHALLENGES FOR ESARBICA ARCHIVAL ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is on identifying challenges related to preservation of archives faced by member states of ESARBICA. A survey questionnaire was sent out to all. The research indicates that archival preservation measures are not a top priority for regional archival organizations. Records management and access to information contained in archives are given attention ahead of preservation. This is in contrast to the recommended practice of ensuring preservation of records through integration of preservation measures in the overall policies of archival organizations.

The paper identifies various challenges which are common in the region and brings to the fore some of the consequences of continued neglect of preservation. It submits that without deliberate efforts of archival organizations to deal with the challenges identified, some of Africa's earliest documentary memory will be lost over time.

Keywords: Archival Institutions, ESARBICA, Access, Preservation

Introduction

Archival institutions, including those in the ESARBICA region, house some of Africa's earliest cultural memory in the form of archives. This is because governments in the region have acknowledged the importance of preserving our documentary cultural heritage and hence set up these institutions. The institutions have been given a mandate through the strongest instruments of government, (archival) legislations, to manage this valuable cultural resource.

Archival legislations generally outline the responsibilities of the archival institutions at a high level and the onus is then on them to

take up this task by developing and implementing policies for the attainment of the set mandate - Preservation. However, many organizations operate without any documented policies and rely mainly on individual decisions based on professional training and the organizations 'culture'.

Archival institutions in the region have focused on archives research and records management services. The preservation aspect, which is seen as a support function, though not completely neglected has generally been relegated to the background. However, integration of preservation issues into the overall policy of any organization is crucial to the attainment of any goals related to the preservation of the archival collection. Implementation of this responsibility remains a great challenge to institutions in the region as can be demonstrated by lack of documented policies and limited implementation of standard archives preservation practices.

The challenges

National Archives in the region are faced with several challenges in their effort to preserve archives, namely:

- budgetary limitations
- organizational structures
- inadequate or lack operational policies
- inadequate infrastructural developments
- lack of specialist equipment/ material procurement
- lack of detailed national preservation surveys
- lack of a regional forum for preservation professionals.

Each of these aspects is discussed in detail below.

Budgetary limitations

Financial resources have a direct impact on the effective implementation of any policy. Low financial resources generally lead to organizations making very little impact on their mandate. The issue of limited financial resources is a well-documented problem not only for archival organizations but across all government departments. Governments in the developing world are faced with numerous problems and limited funds, therefore cost saving measures are implemented across all sectors.

The size of a preservation budget generally depends on the size and nature of the collection, aspects covered by the preservation program and staffing levels. But archival institutions find themselves caught between increasing responsibilities (continuous acquisition) and diminishing resources, therefore they need to strike a balance between the two. It is no doubt that archival organizations will have to make 'smart' decisions on how to spend the limited financial resources allocated to them to be able to implement relevant preservation strategies. It is acknowledged, however, that this is a matter on which archival organizations have no direct control, and like all other government departments, just have to live with.

Organizational structures

The level, calibre and number of staff responsible for preservation is determined by the organizations management. Ideally, organizations should have preservation professionals at all levels, or at least the organizational structure should be such that it gives such professionals a chance to progress to top managerial positions just like the records managers or archivists. Having preservation specialists at senior management positions will enable them to influence decisions and in the process facilitate preservation of the archival documents. The ratio of preservation professionals to the whole staff should be indicative of the preservation needs of the organization. It is important that organizations recognize this and take deliberate actions to deploy staff accordingly.

Indications are that most ESARBICA conservation units are staffed with people at the lower end of the structure of organizations. Most of the staff in the countries surveyed are at technicians level, having been trained on the job or through various short courses. Though these efforts are commendable since such training is not readily available in mainstream training institutions, the lack of trained professionals at undergraduate and postgraduate level is a cause for concern. Though there are simple and very basic preservation processes, there are, like in all other professions, more complicated processes that require analysis and understanding of theory. These individuals would be in a position to analyse problems and ensure systematic operation of conservation units and integration of preservation strategies into overall organizational policies.

Staffing levels for conservation units where they exist, have been found to be among the lowest in the divisions of archival organizations. Conservation being generally a slow manual process requires a sizeable crew to deal with the mostly over used, low quality paper documents held in our respective archives repositories. Low staffing levels create huge backlogs of archival documents needing restoration. Where rates of deterioration are very high there will come a point where organizations will be helpless and have to watch as Africa's valuable cultural heritage is lost for good.

Organizational policies

Most archival organizations in the region have established conservation units and staffed them as indication that they do recognize as a matter of 'policy' that these units are an important component of the organization. But this alone is not sufficient, there is need for an official guiding instrument (policy) to facilitate decision making in their daily operations.

For any organization to operate effectively in discharging its duties, there have to be common guiding principles in the form of a policy. A policy is generally a documented and approved goals statement meant to guide program planning and implementation. It outlines areas of concern, provides a philosophical framework of operation and indicates institutional commitment to preservation. It has been observed that though policies exist on the operation of archives, most are silent on preservation issues and where these may be covered there is no subsequent detailed policy on preservation. Ideally, preservation should be integrated into the overall organizational policy and then like all other areas of responsibility for the organization, a preservation policy should be developed.

This lack of institutional policy on preservation is clear indication of management's priorities regarding the functions of the organization. A case in point is the non-existence of disaster management plans in the majority of archival institutions in the region. Though preventive measures in the form of equipment such as fire alarms are in place, there is still a huge risk of loss of our archival memory in cases of disaster. National Archives need to develop, document and rehearse disaster management plans to avoid this. Considerable damage and

loss will occur as a result of slow and uncoordinated reaction to disasters if this is not done.

Basically then without policies, decisions on preservation and conservation are made on an ad hoc basis and in most cases made by relatively junior staff.

Infrastructure development (archives buildings and conservation laboratories)

The building housing archival documents goes a long way in determining their continuing survival. Purpose built archival buildings will ensure prolonged survival of documents due to the strength of their structure, safety and security features built into them and environmental monitoring and control equipment. Another crucial part of such archival buildings will be suitably designed conservation laboratories.

Observations however indicate that not all ESARBICA members operate from purpose built structures and hence some documents could be at risk. Fortunately, in some cases such a risk is reduced by town planning legislation which requires that buildings be inspected before occupation (and in some countries periodically) to ensure that health and safety standards are met. Though this is done mainly to safeguard human lives, whether it is always sufficient to ensure the continued existence (safety) of archival documents against disasters is a matter for the organizations to evaluate.

Structurally sound building will not easily succumb to earth tremors or small earthquakes, and therefore as the building survives such disasters, so do the documents housed in it. Other safety features recommended for purpose built archives such as fire alarms, smoke detectors, gas sprinkler systems etc are also a preservation measure. Therefore purpose built archives are a good preservation measure as disasters such as earthquakes, fires and floods can cause considerable damage or complete loss of some of our past memory. It is therefore imperative that in cases where new buildings are planned, appropriate standards for archival buildings are taken into account.

The environment is known to have considerable impact on the lifespan of archival documents hence this is an area that any organization would like to have control over. Fluctuations in temperature and

relative humidity have an adverse effect on documents. For example, high temperatures and relative humidity result in the growth of mould which weakens the structure of paper. The observation made is that most archival institutions in the region cannot sustain air conditioning systems rerunning continuously for over six months and very rarely for over a year. Use of High Voltage air conditioning is the best way to control temperature and humidity, therefore if the systems are out of order for most of the year then some level of deterioration of archives is taking place. Such deterioration by environmental factors is cumulative and will in future result in loss of archival documents. Therefore appropriate equipment and fittings maintenance are crucial for archives preservation.

Conservation units in most Archives in the region operate from customized buildings and in a few cases the rooms are not even customized. Such a work environment limits the type of conservation processes that can be undertaken. This can result in the choice of unsuitable treatment options just because they are manageable under the circumstances, which will be detrimental to the preservation of the documents. Therefore some archival documents remain at risk because they cannot be treated within the limitations in which organizations operate. Space limitations can also lead to backlogs of untreated documents as only a few documents can be attended to at a time.

Lack of equipment/ materials supplies

The availability (& suitability) of equipment for undertaking any task has a bearing on the quality and efficiency with which the said task is carried out. Problems encountered by organizations relate to budgetary constraints which are a common feature in the developing world. It is a challenge therefore for archival organizations with low allocation of funding to procure and maintain appropriate preservation equipment.

In most ESARBICA countries conservation equipment is imported which (escalates prices and) leads to fewer pieces of equipment being acquired. This results in most institutions being ill-equipped to deal with the demanding preservation requirements and hence huge backlogs of deteriorated documents needing conservation treatment. Equipment like hard-bed presses and leaf casting machines are not

readily available in the region. Only those which are used by the wider scientific community like microscopes and guillotines can be readily obtained.

The unavailability of archival quality repair materials like Japanese papers and pure wheat starch in local markets leads to the use of non-archival quality repair products. The consequences of such actions though not visible today, will be revealed in time as the materials begin to age and documents deteriorate. This will result in loss of archives materials in the long term.

The level of technology of preservation equipment available in these organizations is in most cases outdated. In some cases there is no monitoring equipment. A case in point is the lack of data loggers or continuous environmental monitoring systems. It has been observed that only spot checks are done for temperature and relative humidity, therefore trends cannot be established which are more informative and can facilitate informed decision making.

Lack of detailed national preservation surveys

Though National Archives in the region hold large amounts of historical documents, some dating as far back as the 18th century, detailed information on the conservation status of these materials is not available. It is critical for the long term preservation of these materials that institutions in the region undertake detailed national surveys both in the National Archives and other related organizations. These surveys will not only establish the extent of deterioration of the collection, the types of media and causes of deterioration, but will also identify possible solutions. In this way a systematic national approach to solving the problem will be followed instead of small individual preservation programs. Without this information preservation planning will remain a difficult task for Archives in the region.

Lack of a regional forum for preservation professionals

Information sharing among preservation professionals in the region is non-existent due to lack of a regional forum. Though preservation matters are discussed at ESARBICA conferences, there is insufficient time at such forums for in depth discussions on any specific preservation issues. There is therefore need for a regional body under the auspices of ESARBICA through which preservation professionals can

have the chance to deliberate on issues and take resolutions that will be helpful to member countries.

A regional forum will also enable sharing of information on conservation best practices and the latest developments in the field. Such organizations exist in other regions like the United Kingdom Institute of Conservation (UKIC) and others. Subscription to Conservation Journals is also another means of gaining access to information in the preservation area especially where regional forums don't exist. Indications are that very few Archives in the region subscribe to such journals.

What is the way forward for ESARBICA region?

ESARBICA can still salvage most of the documentary cultural heritage in its possession and preserve whatever we collect in future. Following are some measures which will make a great impact. In this regard, regional archives must:

- Integrate preservation aspects into their policies, and where policies do not exist they should be formulated as a matter of urgency.
- Recruit graduates for conservation units and equip them with the necessary skills to enable them to make an impact on the job. Senior positions should also be created for progression of these individuals.
- Construct purpose built structures with suitable preservation equipment where new buildings are undertaken. Appropriate customization should also be undertaken where existing buildings are to be used.
- Conduct national surveys of their collections and related organizations for effective preservation planning.
- Establish centres for storage and preservation of different media e.g. film archives, photographic archives etc, rather than trying to accomplish all this under one roof.
- ESARBICA member states should consider supporting a regional training institution specializing in preservation training as currently there is no such specialized training in the region.

Conclusion

Integrating appropriate preservation decisions in the overall operational policies of organizations remains a challenge for Archives in the region. Making the wrong decisions and indeed not making any decisions at all (in some cases) regarding preservation of the archival collection will without a doubt lead to loss of our cultural memory. When a fundamental function for which archives institutions were created (preservation) is relegated to the background and addressed as a side issue, Africa will pay a heavy price - the irreversible loss of our earliest recorded memory due to deterioration and disasters.

This will leave our continent, and especially the ESARBICA region with mostly contemporary materials and no past. And as can be noted from the words of one of Africa's finest statesmen, Sir Seretse Khama, the first president of the Republic of Botswana, 'A Nation without a past is a lost Nation, and a people without a past is a people without a soul'.

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Appendix 1: Consolidated Results of Survey

A questionnaire was distributed to all 12 ESARBICA member countries and 7 responded. The results of the survey are consolidated as follows:

1. Institutions with a documented conservation/preservation policy: **0/7** (all 7 have no policy).
2. Institutions with purpose built conservation lab: **3/7** (others operate in customised/ ordinary office space).
3. Institutions undertaking Continuous Environmental Monitoring & Control: **2/7** (others do spot checks or no monitoring at all).
4. Institutions with repository air conditioning operational continuously for the last 6 months: **2/7** (the rest were not).
5. Number of professional conservators (1st degree & above): **4/13** (5 were trained in short courses and 3 countries have no conservators).
6. The earliest document: **18th century** – Zanzibar (others range from 1853-1895, some of these have already been treated).
7. Suppliers of conservation materials: **4/7** from both abroad & locally.
8. Suppliers of conservation equipment: **5/7** from abroad.

Total spent by countries on conservation equipment in the last equipment order made: **US\$136,386.000**