

## RECOLLECTIONS OF A KENYAN ARCHIVIST

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### Abstract

*This article outlines the career of one of the few African archivists who joined the profession as a trainee archivist in the mid 1970s. It shows how this pioneer archivist has been engaged with archival work, first as a young archivist involved with the retrieval of Kenya's migrated archives in early 1980s, then as one of the prominent archival educators at Moi University in Kenya and later at the University of Botswana where the institution is regarded as one the centre's of archival excellence in the training of archivists and records managers. The article also provides insights into the links the archivist had with the International Records Management Trust (IRMT) and the various archival missions he was engaged in as part of the IRMT's team of consultants.*

**Keywords:** Archivists, Education and Training, Kenya, Migrated Archives, Moi University, University of Botswana

### Introduction

Rarely do professionals write their memoirs when they are still in active life. While this may be the case, the author is of the opinion that after working for a period of over twenty five years, first as a practicing archivist and then an educator in the field of archives and records management it is necessary to share my experiences with the young emerging archivists. This article reviews the experiences gained by one of the pioneer archivists in Kenya and covers the period from 1977 to 2002. The article demonstrates how the profession has changed over the years and the direction that it is taking in the wake of the penetration of information technologies.

## **The early years**

I joined the Kenya National Archives in October 1977 as a Trainee Archivist Grade III. At that time I knew very little about the activities of the national archives. While writing a project paper during my undergraduate days, I visited the National Archives at the then Jogoo House "A" in Nairobi to look at colonial records pertaining to some political incidents in my district. To my disappointment, the department was undergoing some major re-organization, and thus I was unable to obtain any help from there. After graduating with 3.1.1 degree in history, (three subjects in first year and specializing history in the last two years) interest was to pursue a master's degree and become a history lecturer. Unfortunately, the History Department of the University of Nairobi declined to offer the course and I had no option but to seek employment. I was offered a job as district Officer, but that was the last thing I wanted to become. Being aware of my interest in historical inquiry, the Head of History Department, Prof Godfrey Muriuki advised me to apply for a job with the Kenya National Archives. To my surprise I was offered the job and straight away began to work. At that time there were only two Kenyan professional archivists Mr Musila Musembi and Mr Festus Khayundi who had just completed their post-graduate diploma's in archival studies from the University of Ghana. The other professional archivist, the late Mr Robert Kukubo had been suspended from service for reasons as a new recruit I was unaware of. The Kenya National Archives at that stage was a relatively small and unknown department and I remember most of my friends referring to it as "the graveyard for administrative records". To many of my friends, who had opted for administrative positions in the civil service, I had chosen the wrong career, which lacked prestige and a defined future. Had it not been for the encouragement I received from the then Chief Archivist, Dr Maina Kagombe, I would have resigned like some of my colleagues who left the archives service for administrative work.

## **Survey of audio-visual materials in Kenya 1977/1978**

The first assignment that I was given together with David and Peggy Giltrow, two American researchers who were then researching on film making in Kenya, was to conduct a survey of audio-visual materials held in Kenya from the colonial days to 1977. This was a very exciting

work as we spent several months at the Voice of Kenya (now Kenya Broadcasting Corporation) viewing and cataloguing archival films which had hitherto not been catalogued. Visits were also made to the Department of Information, research institutes, embassies, churches, quasi-governmental organizations etc. Before long, I had gained considerable experience in processing audio-visual materials and along with other colleagues had compiled a guide to films in Kenya. My experience with audio-visual materials had also revealed the major challenges facing the preservation and conservation of audio-visual materials in the country. At that time two views were put forward. The option was to collect and bring all audio-visual materials under one umbrella - the National Archives. This idea was good, but the National Archives being a relatively new institution lacked competent personnel as well as specialized equipment needed to manage such records.

The second view, and one, which prevailed, was to leave the audio-visual records with their creators and develop standards and procedures for managing them. This also required the Chief Archivist to declare those institutions "places of deposit for public records." Unfortunately no such declaration was ever made and the records have remained with their creators to date. As a reward for a job well done, I was asked to represent the Department in a UNESCO conference on the preservation of moving images in Argentina in 1978. I must confess I was among the youngest professionals in that conference. This encouraged me more and showed that the career I had embarked on had a bright future ahead.

### **Acquisition of the Murumbi Africana Collection**

In 1978, the government purchased one of the most comprehensive African Collections held privately in Kenya from the late Joseph Murumbi who had served the government in various capacities including serving as the Vice President of country. The late Joseph Murumbi was of a mixed origin - between a Goan man and a Masai woman. He was one of the freedom fighters and through his travels and contacts together with his English wife Sheilla had collected vast quantities of artifacts, memorabilia newspapers, pamphlets, books etc. He corresponded with virtually all pan-Africans and freedom fighters across the continent. When the West showed interest in his

Africana collection the government moved swiftly and declared it part and parcel of Kenya's cultural heritage which meant the collection would not be allowed at any stage to leave the country. The Murumbi's sold the collection to the Kenya government and I was asked ensure that all the items that had been purchased as indicated in the sale agreement were transferred to the Kenya National Archives. It was at this point that I met Dr Anne Thurston, the present founder of the International Records Management Trust, a well-known records management consultancy firm based in the United Kingdom. In order to manage the collection effectively, it was organized under three categories - the manuscripts, library collection and art gallery materials. To date this is the largest private collection ever acquired by the national archives.

### **Training at the University of Ghana Legon**

Early in 1979, Mr Ichagichu Mwangi and I were offered sponsorship under the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation programme to pursue a one year post graduate diploma programme at the School of Library and Archival, University of Ghana, Legon. It must be remembered that at that time a post graduate diploma in archives and records management was the highest academic qualification one could obtain in the English commonwealth. The school had been established with the assistance of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) for Anglophone speaking countries. Politically and economically this was perhaps the darkest period in Ghana's history when the country was going through very difficult times. Economically the country had grounded to a halt, corruption was rampant, and essential commodities were difficult to obtain. Having come from Nairobi University where university life was relatively comfortable, our stay in Ghana was a very humbling experience. We had some very fine lecturers such as Kwasi Agyei and D G Keswani. The programme prepared us well for the challenges that lay ahead of us. However, it must be recalled that these were the days when library and archival automation was at its infant stage and we found it difficult to understand or relate the new emerging information communication technologies to archives and records management. At that time there were practically no software packages in the field of archives and records management and the only technology that was really being advocated was microfilming.

## **Retrieval of Kenya's migrated archives**

My association with the retrieval of Kenya's migrated archives goes back to 1979 when soon after completing the post graduate diploma in Archives and records management I was asked to join a team of others in conducting a records survey of records held in the United Kingdom. The need to locate and retrieve Kenyan records held overseas stemmed from several factors. Firstly, until the eve of independence, the country lacked a strong archival institution. During the colonial period, the collection and preservation of public records was accorded very low priority and thus many would be public archives were lost. Secondly, in 1939, the then colonial secretariat in Nairobi was gutted down by fire destroying virtually all the records held by the government. Thirdly, Kenya was among the few African countries which gained independence after along armed struggle commonly referred to as the Mau Mau. On the eve of independence the imperial government opted to remove certain records from the country arguing that it was not common practice for one government to hand over its records to a new government. Obviously, this was a direct attempt to hide the atrocities committed by the imperial government to a newly independent state.

Efforts to retrieve Kenya's records from the United Kingdom began in 1963 when a cabinet committee was established to consider ways and means of preserving Kenyan records. The Chief Archivist raised the issue again in 1967, but at this juncture it was still not possible to establish the volume and nature of records held outside the country. A broad based inter-ministerial committee was established in 1973, which clearly delineated the boundaries of the programme. It was however, not until 1978 that the first survey of records held in the United was conducted (I was not part of the survey team that that visited the United Kingdom in 1978). This was followed by yet another survey in the United Kingdom in 1979 in which I participated.<sup>1</sup> A final survey and one in which I participated was carried out in the United States of America in 1980, after which the government decided to open an office at the Kenya High Commission in London with the sole objective of acquiring microfilm copies of records held in various institutions in the United Kingdom. Young as I was, and with very little experience, I was appointed Cultural Attaché at the Kenya High Commission London with the responsibility of carrying out the actual copying of Kenya's migrated

archives, a position which I held until the end of 1985. By the time the office was closed in 1990, several microfilm copies; photographs, photocopies and original manuscripts had been obtained through purchase and donation. These ranged from official records held at the Public Records Office, Church missionary society organizations, manuscripts of colonial administrators held at Rhodes House Library, Oxford to private papers from former Kenyan settlers and missionaries (Mnjama 1985). The entire project was fully funded by the Government and has contributed significantly to the information resources held locally in the country.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of professional development these were perhaps the most formidable years in my career. Being in the heat of London, I was able to visit virtually all types of archival institutions in the England, copying Kenyan records and observing U.K record keeping practices. Moreover, this period also offered me opportunities to consult archival literature which I hitherto failed to gain access during my training days at Accra. Contacts were also established with professional associations such as the Records Management Group of the Society of Archivists. Discussions with colleagues in London and other commonwealth archivists transiting through London were also held often at the Institute of Commonwealth studies leading to the formation of the Association of Commonwealth Archivists and Records Managers (ACARM).

### **Training at Girton College, Cambridge University 1986/87**

Towards the end of my two-term tour with the Kenya High Commission London, I developed a keen desire to pursue further studies in the area of administrative history. Although I had studied Kenyan and East African history at undergraduate level, working with the Kenyan copying project led me to the realization that an effective retrieval migrated programme must be based on a thorough understanding of the organizations that created and used the records. The administrative history that Professor Margaret Priestly taught me at the University of Ghana focused mostly on Ghanaian history and was irrelevant to Kenya. Moreover, searching for Kenyan related manuscripts and records at the Public Records Office required a clear understanding of the workings of Colonial administration in U.K and the evolution of various arms of government in Kenya. I sought admission to Cambridge University, and fortunate enough, a study in such an area was considered worthwhile.

The Cambridge Commonwealth Trust in collaboration with Overseas Development Administration (ODA) offered me a one-year scholarship. While at Cambridge I was able to trace the evolution of most of Kenya's departments and be able to place the records in their right contexts.

### **Establishment of the Department of Archives and Records Management at Moi University**

In 1984, Kenya government appointed a commission to investigate the possibility of establishing a second university in the country. One of the recommendations of the committee was that the proposed new university should include a faculty for the training of information professionals. In 1988, friends from Moi University approached me with a request that I join the new university as a lecturer responsible for developing courses in archives and records management, an offer which I gladly accepted. The Chief Archivist was not amused at all that I had decided to accept an offer from Moi University without following the laid down civil service procedure. The stalemate led to a delay in the transfer of my years of service to Moi University for almost three years, but this was finally done. The programmes at Moi University were very fascinating as Kenyan professionals had begun to realize that the information profession was drawing closer. The University therefore adopted a harmonized programme whereby students taking courses in librarianship, archives and records management, information technology and publishing and the book trade were trained together for the first three years of their training and only allowed to specialize in any of the above areas in their final year of their undergraduate programme. Launching an archives and records management programme was no mean task. Financial resources were inadequate to purchase equipment and learning materials. My small collection of reading materials acquired during my six years working experience in the U.K became valuable resource during those early years. Book, journals and other reading materials were also obtained through donations from friends in the U.K. The South Africa Society of Archivists also donated some materials.

After two years of serving as a lecture, I was appointed to head the newly established Department of Archives and Records Management. As part of University requirements for senior appointments, I

was offered British Council scholarship in 1991 to pursue a doctoral programme in archives and records management at University College London, a course that I completed within three years. My three years' stay in central London was once again a time for renewing contacts with U.K archivists and records managers as well as acquiring more reading materials relevant to my professional development. Upon my return to Kenya, I was appointed once again as Head of the Department of Archives and Records Management and a few months later doubled as Acting Dean of the Faculty of Information Sciences, both positions which I occupied until August 1998 when I moved to the University of Botswana. Today, the Department of Archives and Records Management is one of the major centres in Africa for the training of archivists and records.

### **The working workshops and conferences**

Perhaps one of the most exciting moments in my career have been those moments when I have been involved as a resource person in records management programmes in several developing countries including. In 1991, I was invited by ICA to visit Tanzania and assess the state of training programmes at the School of Library, Archives and Documentation Studies (SALDS) at Bagamoyo, Tanzania. While in Tanzania, I seized the opportunity to visit the national Archives. For the first time I came across a very desperate situation where I saw records stores in a disused cinema hall. Some of the windows were broken, the roof was leaking, the room infested with rats and the records had been dumped on the floor. This experience touched my life and I promised that I would whatever. Although it took several years, I was happy to return again to Tanzania in 1995 as part of a wider team supported by the British Council to rescue Tanzanian records.

Other involvements in workshops and records management activities include participation in workshops at The Gambia (1989, 1992), Sierra Leone 1991, Ghana (1989, 1990), Tanzania (1995, 1998), Guyana (1999), Belize (1997). Those workshops have been targeted to address major records management problems in the civil service. The main focus of these workshops has been to decongest registries and organize national archival institutions (see Mnjama 1991; 2000a). The International Records Management Trust organized most of



these activities. My participation in international conferences also took me to Malaysia (1992) Canada (1994), Trinidad and Tobago (1996) and Jamaica (1996).

None of these activities ever wavered my interest in our regional professional association - the Eastern and Southern African Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives popularly known as ESARBICA, which to me has been one of the most dynamic professional archival associations in the African region. On several occasions I have been invited to present a paper on one topic or the other dating back to Harare (1982), Namibia (1995), Pretoria (1997), Seychelles (1998 as a Board Member and resource person for Directors of National Archives on the issue of disposal of records), Zanzibar (1999), Harare (2001), Mozambique (2003) and Botswana (2005). I have presented papers in our regional body. All these activities have enabled me to appreciate the many challenges facing archivists and records managers in Africa and to be willing to lend a helping hand whenever called upon to do so.

### **Archives and records management programmes at the University of Botswana**

I joined the Department of Library and Information Studies, University of Botswana in August 1996 on what was supposed to be a two-year contract. Since 1979, the University of Botswana has been offering courses in Library and Information Studies at certificate, non-graduate Diploma, undergraduate degree and post-graduate diploma levels, as well as a Masters degree. These programmes have attracted and continue to attract students from all over Africa. The University of Botswana has distinguished itself as a Centre of excellence in the training of library and information professionals in the region.

While this was happening, the area of archives and records management remained untouched. Botswana students desiring to pursue courses in archives and records management had to travel to Europe or India to pursue their studies. The need to train archivists and records managers at home became more apparent when in 1992; the Botswana National Archives was transformed through an Act of Parliament into the Botswana National Archives and Records

Services. This transformation meant that the national archives were now responsible for the management of the entire life cycle of records. Although this was a right step in the right direction in ensuring that there was continuity in the management of records from their time of creation to their ultimate disposition, it also revealed the chaotic manner in which records were being managed in the entire civil service. Suddenly, the national archives found itself inheriting a work force of about 400 untrained clerical staff. A scheme of service for archives and records management personnel was soon developed and discussions began with the University of Botswana to develop a programme, which could address some of these problems. The immediate desire was to train as many registry clerks as soon as possible.

The first group of certificate students was admitted in the 1995/96 academic year. Due to problems experienced by the University in recruiting a professional lecturer with relevant teaching experience, the first group of students was taught courses in archives and records management by a member of staff from the Botswana National Archives and Records Service. It was due to the staffing problems relating to the recruitment of a trained archivist that that I was recruited.

Initially, it had been planned to launch the diploma programme during the 1996/97 academic year. However, due to unforeseen circumstances particularly shortage of archives lecturers, the launching of this programme had to be delayed for one year. Most of our students are sponsored by the Botswana Government while others are self-sponsored or sponsored by international funding agencies. The course has attracted students from Uganda, Malawi and Lesotho. Since 2004, The Department of Library and Information Studies has successfully launched a two years master's degree programme in archives and records managers. The programme is offered on both full-time and part-time basis and already there are over ten students enrolled for this programme. The programme has already begun to attract foreign students and it promises to be one of the growth areas for the department. The programme has greatly reduced the costs of sending African students to the West and I am delighted to know that I took an active part in the design of the programme.

Apart from teaching at the University of Botswana, I have been involved with various projects together with my other professional colleagues. The project dealt with the transformation of an ineffective records keeping programme at Botswana Meat Commission to a modern day records management programme which approached me complies with ISO 9000 records keeping requirements. This was one of the most challenging projects as involved working with technical personnel at the Meat Commission to evolve a records system that they could understand and sustain (Mnjama 2000b). The second project was concerned with installing a records management programme at the Bank of Botswana. As a result of the project, the Bank now has employed a professional records manager to oversee their records. In addition to these projects visits have been made to several public and private institutions to observe records management activities. One unforgettable experience was when we were taken round to inspect records storage facilities - only to discover records stored in a mortuary.

### **Lessons learnt**

Reading through the above recollections might give that impression that it has been easy working as an archivist. I have learnt many lessons that I would like to share with my readers. Firstly, it must always be remembered that archives and records management as a profession is relatively new in Africa. This is something I did not know. For the first five years that I worked with the Kenya National Archives, I had to occupy the same position even after undergoing training. This situation has changed considerably in Kenya, but in many developing countries there are no clear career paths for archivists and records managers and many have had to leave the archives profession to join more attractive professions. To many who might be going through this kind of situation, I would only encourage you to remain patient and committed to the ideals of the profession.

Secondly, it must be realized that the archives profession does not command as much respect and prestige as the more general administrative and managerial areas. Anybody working in the archives and records management field does so because he or she is committed to the collection, storage, provision and dissemination and preservation of recorded information. Thirdly, I have also come to the realization

that although records management is such a good area, it is a hard nut to sell. Many organizations still do not value information and they will only appreciate it when they are pressurized, for example, forced to provide evidence in a court of law or a private company seeking ISO certification. Fourthly, I would like to offer a piece of advice to young professionals. Training in archives and records management is not adequate. With the introduction of computers in the work place, individuals are forced to create, store and retrieve records without the assistance of records managers. Archivists and records managers trained in the last two decades are likely to find themselves unable to perform their duties satisfactorily or to offer advice to records creating agencies as the skills and competencies they acquired during their professional training did not embrace fully emerging technologies. Unless these professionals are provided with training in information technology they are bound to become unemployable (Phillips 1995:56). The question that needs to be answered is what kind of skills, competencies and attitudes will the archivist/records manager of tomorrow be expected to possess? In my opinion today records manager and archivist must embrace all the aspects of the emerging information communication technologies. Failure to do so will render the traditional archivist irrelevant to meeting today's organizational informational needs.

Finally but not least, working and teaching as an archivist has shown me that we are pursuing a worthy cause and I would say like one dominion archivist once observed, archives are perhaps the greatest gift we can bequeath to mankind and the care and extent of the care of them will determine the extent of our civilization. I am glad to be part and parcel of the team that is collecting and preserving humanities collective memory.

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## Endnotes

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