

CHALLENGES OF DIGITIZING THE ENDANGERED LESOTHO ROYAL ARCHIVES

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Abstract

The article gives an account of the efforts being made by the royal family and the Matsieng Board of Trustees to safeguard and preserve royal archives and what has been achieved so far, and the challenges and prospects towards the digitization of these records as a means of preserving them. Among the root causes of the problem is poor management of records in Lesotho which has affected the development of archival services as a whole. The National Archives was established in 1957 during the colonial period under the office of the Government Secretary, but the archives service as a whole is still at the rudimentary stage. For a long time the National Archives did not have accommodation and was operating with limited resources. The outdated legislation, the Archives Act of 1967, also contributes to the problems of archival development in the country, making the climate for archives sector gloomy.

Keywords: Archival legislation, Digitization, Preservation, Royal Archives

Introduction

Lesotho is a constitutional monarchy with King Letsie III as the Head of State. King Letsie III is the first son of late King Moshoeshe II. King Moshoeshe II was named after Moshoeshe I, the founder of Basotho nation. Moshoeshe I became the ruler of Basotho in 1824 when he took advantage of the upheavals of *Lifaqane* wars which had resulted in people of different tribes being homeless and scatter-

ed in Southern Africa; he gathered together the remnants of various clans from different ethnic groups that were fleeing the raids of Amazulu and Amandebele during the *Lifaqane* across the sub-region in the early 19th century. The chiefs who joined Moshoeshoe I became his subordinates and were placed in different areas to be his “eyes and ears”. Lethole of Makhoakhoa was placed in Butha-Buthe, Moletsane I of Bataung in Mekoatleng and Lelingoane of Batlokoa in the Maluti mountains in Mokhotlong. The subordinate chiefs looked after Moshoeshoe’s expanding country and kept law and order in their areas. Moshoeshoe I placed his sons in different parts of the country as well. At present there are twenty-two principal chiefs who are directly under the king. Twenty of these chiefs are the descendants of Moshoeshoe I while two are from other clans, *Morena* Moletsane II of Bataung and *Morena* Tumane Thaabe Matela of Makhoakhoa. There is also *Morena* Halikopane Sekonyela of Batlokoa although he is not the Principal Chief. Moshoeshoe I was the first *Morena e Moholo*, which translates to a “great chief”, meaning a king of the Basotho nation. He had subordinate chiefs but he remained the king and symbol of the national unity.

Lesotho royal family

Moshoeshoe I ruled between 1824-1870. During his reign, Basotho fought a series of wars with the Boer Republic of Orange Free State. In 1833 he invited the missionaries to come to Lesotho after a Griqua hunter named Adam Krotz told him about the missionaries. Krotz told Moshoeshoe I that:

the constant wars and disturbances which Moshoeshoe faced would disappear once the missionaries began their work among his people. Moshoeshoe expressed a desire to have such men of peace as well, and, after Krotz left, Moshoeshoe sent 200 head of cattle with which to procure at least one missionary for himself.¹

Since Moshoeshoe aspired to peace and unity he invited the missionaries to come and work among his people. The missionaries accepted Moshoeshoe’s invitation and the first three arrived in Lesotho in 1833. They belonged to the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society and were placed in Makhoarane (Moriya). They were accompanied by his first son, Letsie I, who eventually settled in Matsieng

after his village in Makhoarane was destroyed by Boers. Moshoeshe I ruled from Thaba-Bosiu until his death in 1870. He was succeeded by Letsie I who became *Morena e Moholo* and ruled from Matsieng. When Lesotho became the protectorate of Britain, Letsie I became the Paramount Chief. He was the first *Morena e Moholo* to be styled paramount chief. He ruled between 1870 and 1891 and was succeeded by several paramount chief in the following order:

- Paramount Chief Lerotholi, 1891-1905
- Paramount Chief Letsie II, 1905-1913
- Paramount Chief Griffith, 1913-1939
- Paramount Chief Seeiso Griffith, 1939-1940
- Paramount Chief 'M'antšebo Seeiso, 1940-1960.

Chieftainess 'M'antšebo Seeiso handed over power to Chief Constantine Bereng Seeiso in 1960. He became His Majesty King Moshoeshe II in 1966 when Lesotho attained independence. He died in 1996 and was succeeded by His Majesty King Letsie III who is the eighth-generation descendant of Moshoeshe I.

Chieftainship and kingship have not only been part of the Basotho nation but also part of their way of life, the key to country's existence and survival at all times as well as a catalyst institution to development. Historically Basotho have been under the rule of their chiefs for almost 200 years.

The chiefs have played a significant role in the administration of Lesotho as they have always been charged with the responsibility of administering the country. During the colonial period they were a link between Basotho and colonial administrators. Even in the present day Lesotho the chieftainship institution and monarchy continue to feature prominently in the politics and administration of Lesotho. For example, if the police have to arrest someone in the village, they first have to report to the chief of that village. Even when a crime occurs in the village, the chief is the one who reports the case to the police. While politics have at times been in serious crisis, kingship has remained intact and has undoubtedly been a unifying factor throughout the ages. The official vision 2020 affirms this fact by stressing that the monarchy will continue to play the most important role of unifying the nation.

The office of the Paramount Chief has been in Matsieng since the time of Paramount Chief Letsie I up to time of Paramount Chief Constantine Bereng Seeiso in 1966. In 1966 when Lesotho attained independence and King Moshoeshe II became the Head of State, his offices were moved to Maseru, the capital of Lesotho and the seat of the government.

The written word was introduced by the missionaries in Lesotho. Therefore the written records in Lesotho started in 1833 when the missionaries arrived. Between 1833 and 1966 the office of the Paramount Chief created and received records in Matsieng. Records relating to various aspects of the Basotho life including the administration of Lesotho, correspondence between the office of the Paramount Chief and the Colonial Administrators and correspondence between the office of the Paramount Chief and the missionaries, settlement of land disputes etc. These records date from 1833. They are unique and irreplaceable and cannot be found anywhere else as the colonial government was only concerned with the records of the central government. The colonial government was not interested in the records of the Paramount Chief as they mostly dealt with the “native” affairs and administration.

Royal archives

The royal family in Lesotho had been based in Matsieng since the time of King Letsie I, the second Lesotho king after Moshoeshe the Great. Letsie I moved to Matsieng after his village was destroyed by Boers in Makhoarane (Moriya). The royal family has been in Matsieng continuously since then and Matsieng has always been the royal hub of the Basotho kingship and chieftainship. Kingship has played an important role in the rule and administration of Basotho. Therefore the documents and records have accumulated in Matsieng from the time of King Letsie I. When Lesotho attained independence in 1966, His Majesty King Moshoeshe II moved from Matsieng to Maseru. As a result, post 1966 royal family records are in the royal palace in Maseru. The collection of the royal archives includes records of historical, political, legal and economic significance such as:

- Records on chieftainship and succession to high office
- Court proceedings and judgements
- Boundary disputes and resolutions

- Traditional marriage system
- Inheritance documentation and disputes
- Official speeches
- Correspondence
- Official administrative records covering the colonial period
- Public works records
- Financial records of government departments

Most of these records are unique as they cannot be found anywhere else. Molapo (2005) and other scholars who have used these records have ascertained that the royal family has a rich trove of archival information covering a period of close to two centuries. However these records in their present state are not easily accessible. When the Government Archives was established during the colonial period, it was to care for the records of the Secretariat, mainly the correspondence of the Resident Commissioner.

Due to the low priority given to archival and records services in Lesotho, the royal archives have not been cared for. They have not been sorted nor catalogued and were kept in various premises in the Maseru Royal Palace and in the offices of the Principal Chief of Matsieng in Matsieng making their access very difficult. At Matsieng the records were kept in poor storage, the roof of the building where records were kept had been leaking posing a serious damage to records. During the heavy rains of December 2008 the roof of the building collapsed leaving the records exposed to rain thus excluding other hazardous climatic conditions and pests and rodents.

Royal Archives Board of Trustees

The Royal Archives Board of Trustees is composed of volunteers (historians, librarians, archivists, anthropologists and architects) who agreed to assist the royal family to establish the Royal Archives, Information Resource Centre and Museum /Gallery at Matsieng at the invitation of the royal family. Members of the Royal Family have been worried about the safekeeping of the records of the late King Moshoeshoe II, a University of Oxford graduate, and a prolific writer who had accumulated many records and documents. The volunteers met in 2006 and started working on the modalities on how to assist the royal family. The Steering Committee was formed. In 2008, in

order that this body should be recognized as a legal entity, the Board of Trustee was formed and registered with the Lesotho Law Office. The Board has a constitution.

Members of the Board surveyed the records in Maseru Royal Palace. Records and documents were listed, boxed and kept together in one office. They then went to Matsieng to inspect the condition under which the records of the Paramount Chiefs were kept. The findings were that records were kept under appalling conditions and faced the risk of permanent damage. They advised the Royal Family accordingly. In the meantime they started negotiations with the National University of Lesotho Management to accommodate the Royal Archives from Matsieng as a temporary measure. In December 2007 and January 2008, with financial assistance from United Nations Development Programme, records were repatriated from Matsieng to the National University of Lesotho Library.

In May 2008, the Board received a grant from the Prince Claus Fund, of the Netherlands. The grant was for the restoration of the Matsieng Archives by treating them against infestation and fungus. Infestation was dealt with by fumigation. The Archives were to be organized into boxes and labeled. This project was successfully completed in November 2008.

The Board has received financial assistance from the Chinese Embassy in Lesotho, UNESCO and UNDP. UNDP has donated equipment, computers, printers, scanners and a video camera. At present the Board is seeking funding to configure the former offices of the Paramount Chief Constantine Bereng Seeiso (Moshoeshe II) in Matsieng into the Royal Family Archives and Information Centre.

It is the intention of the Board to digitize these records using the National University of Lesotho Archives staff and the students of Historical Studies, for this project. The Board has sent a proposal to the British Library Endangered Archives Programme.

Digitization in Lesotho

The National University of Lesotho Library has played a leading role in introducing digitization of libraries and archives in Lesotho. In 2007

the University Library jointly with Lesotho College of Education Library and Lesotho Library Consortium (LELICO) organized a training workshop on Open Access and Institutional Repositories for Lesotho and Swaziland. The workshop was sponsored by Electronic Information Network for Libraries (Eifl.net). One of the objectives of the workshop was to train participants in the art of preparing scholarly materials or information in the manner that they may be electronically handled by local institutions. As a result of this workshop the National University of Lesotho Senate approved the implementation of an Open Access and Institutional Repository in the library at its 283rd meeting.

In 2008 the Library organized a training workshop on Greenstone Library Digital Software for building and distributing digital library collections. Greenstone is an open source software system produced by the New Zealand Digital Library Project at the University of Waikato. It is developed and distributed in cooperation with UNESCO and the Human Info NGO in Belgium. In Southern Africa, Greenstone has a regional centre in Namibia and the national centres in Zimbabwe, Malawi and Lesotho. Participants for this workshop were from Botswana (University of Botswana), Mauritius (University of Mauritius) and Lesotho. Greenstone is aimed at empowering users to build their own digital libraries.

Challenges of digitizing the royal archives

The challenges facing digitization projects in Lesotho include: poor archives and records management, problems facing the National Archives and staffing.

Poor archives and records management in Lesotho

The poor management of archives and records in Lesotho is the root cause of the problem of the development of archival institutions in Lesotho. In Lesotho, at the national level, the archives and information service is still at rudimentary stage. This is despite the existence of the National Archives since 1957.

The National Archives

The idea of collecting, organizing and preserving records in Lesotho was introduced in 1917 by the then Resident Commissioner, R.S.

Coryndon, when he proposed the establishment of the Basutoland Museum. He appealed to people who might have documents dealing with the early negotiations between the British, the Boers and Basotho to deposit such documents with the museum to be kept for posterity. The first Government Archivist was recruited in 1957 and the Government Archives was then established. The main purpose of establishing the Lesotho Government Archives was to collect and preserve colonial records pertaining to Basutoland. The majority of these records emanated mainly from various Government Departments and they included the records of the Governor's Agent, the Secretariat and some of the District Administration records.

The Government Archives was under the office of the Government Secretary but was transferred to the Department of Information. In 1965 it was put under the supervision of the Department of Education later to be known as the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture. In October 1986 the Archives was transferred to the Ministry of Tourism, Sports and Culture, under the Directorate of Sports and Culture. At present the National Archives is under the Ministry of Tourism, Environment and Culture under the Directorate of the State Library and State Archives. Since its establishment in 1957, the National Archives has been faced with various problems, namely staffing and accommodation:

Staffing

The National Archives was manned by one person from 1957 to 1973 when the post of the Assistant Archivist was established. At one point during the colonial period, between 1961 and 1963 the post of the National Archivist was occupied by an untrained person who was not at all skilled in archives work. It is alleged that this person was employed because she happened to be the relative of one of the government officers:

There were other difficulties too. The Archivist, not being a professional, but a mother in law of one of the officers, constantly rang to complain that the stoep of the archives had been fouled again by Mr. Curtis Augustinus Maqutu's cattle.²

During that period 1961-1963 not much work was done in the archives as the person responsible did not know what to do.

Staffing continues to be one of the major problems of the National Archives. At present only two people run the National Archives and

as result the archives is unable to perform most of its obligations and even give a satisfactory service to its clients.

Accommodation

Accommodation has contributed a lot to the underdevelopment of the National Archives in Lesotho. For a long time the National Archives did not have proper accommodation. In 1982 the National University of Lesotho offered to accommodate the National Archives when it was realized that the records might get lost and be damaged permanently since they were kept in an insecure, congested and dilapidated building. The National Archives were then transferred to the National University of Lesotho library building as a temporary measure. However the records were kept at the National University of Lesotho until 1997.

During all this time the government was aware that there was an urgent need to erect a building for the National Archives but it kept on promising to construct an archives building in its three successive plans and nothing was done. In the first five-year development plan 1970/71-1974/75, the government promised to build the National Archives:

The Nation's Archives are at present poorly housed and it is planned to erect new building, a project which will cost an estimated R60,000.00.³

Nothing was done during that period. Again during the second five-year development plan 1975/76-1979/80 the same promise was made.

The need for a national archives has long been recognized. Historical records are being kept under poor conditions. During a second plan a new building will be constructed and the necessary staff recruited and trained to keep archival materials under proper conditions before it is irrecoverably damaged or lost. The second plan allocation for this programme is R60,000.00.⁴

Again nothing was done and the same promise was made again in the third five year plan, 1980-1985.

The need for storage facilities for historic records is now even greater and it is planned to build facilities in Maseru in 1980.⁵

Again nothing was done. The National Archives building was constructed only in 2006, 26 years later after the first promise was made. Prior to 2006 the National Archives was unable to collect records from other government departments due to lack of space.

Other archival institutions in Lesotho

There are other valuable categories of archival institutions which are collecting records of national interest. They are briefly outlined below.

The National University of Lesotho Archives

The Archives was established as a unit in the library in the 1978/79 academic year when the library was extended and the basement area was dedicated to the archives. The University Archives is the official repository of the University's own records. The University Archives also houses records of national significance which are non-university records like business records, private and individual records, trade and labour unions, historical manuscripts, *journal de missions* (missionary records), official speeches, local publications including government publications and local newspapers.

The University Archives has reasonable facilities. In 2006 when the library was extended the archives was moved to an even more spacious and suitable accommodation. At present the Archives has a staff of seven: four professionals and three para-professionals. The Archives has its own vote under the library's main budget for the purpose of purchasing archival materials. The University Archives operates with limited resources especially human and financial.

Religious Archives

Morija Museum and Archives

Morija is the place where the first missionaries settled in Lesotho. Morija Museum and Archives is the official repository of the Lesotho Evangelical Church. Being the first missionaries to Lesotho the Paris Evangelical Mission Society was deeply involved with Moshoeshe I in the building of the Basotho nation. The archives contain materials of interest to the church and to the nation as a whole. The collection at Morija archives include early printed materials on Lesotho, government publications, missionary correspondence (with some letters dating from as far back as the time when missionaries acted as

secretaries and advisers to Moshoeshoe I), church registers, Leselinyane newspapers from 1863, photographs, maps, and monographs on Lesotho in French and English. These records have been donated to Archives by missionaries and colonial administrators like Captain R.S. Webb who donated his collection of rare books with a special instruction that this collection was always to be made available to Basotho. Morija Museum and Archives also operates with limited resources, and there is a shortage of staff especially trained staff for the archives. It depends on a subvention from government for staff salaries. There is shortage of space in archives and some of the records are packed in boxes.

Oblates Archives

The Oblates Archives are housed in Maseru. These are records of the Catholic Church and the Oblates in Lesotho. It is believed that these records contain a valuable source of information on Lesotho but they are unfortunately not accessible.

Matsieng Royal Archives

The records of the paramount chiefs in Matsieng have been neglected for a long time. They have been kept under appalling conditions with no financial and human resources. Digitizing these records is a challenge. Most of the records from Matsieng are in paper formats. Due to the conditions under which they were kept, some of these records have been damaged beyond repair. During the rains of November and December 2007 when the building in which the records were kept collapsed, the records were damaged by water, mould and insect. Some of the records are too damaged or deteriorated to scan. The other problems include: funding, staff, accommodation and outdated legislation.

Funding

The Royal Archives does not get any funding from the government, and so far it has been depending entirely on grants and donations. Funds are needed in order to carry out the digitization project. There is a need to purchase equipment and to pay project staff.

Staffing

At present there is nobody employed to look after the Royal Archives. Members of the Board of Trustees when listing the records in Maseru

Royal Palace were working on voluntary basis with no pay. They had to do that at their own times mostly on Sundays. For transferring the records from Matsieng to Roma and also for treatment and listing of the records the work was carried out by the students of Historical Studies under the supervision of National University of Lesotho archives staff.

Accommodation

The Royal Archives does not have accommodation. In Maseru records have been kept in one of the offices of the Royal Palace where their security cannot be guaranteed. The Royal Archives from Matsieng are temporarily housed in the University Library and the space is diminishing.

Outdated archival legislation

In Lesotho the archives operates under the Archives Act of 1967 and the Archives Regulations of 1972. Both the act and the regulations are outdated and result in the poor management of archives and records. In this legislation records management is not addressed. The emphasis is on government archives not the national archives. The outdated legislation poses a problem to the management of records. Without proper legislation control over the creation and use of records becomes difficult.

Conclusion

The Matsieng Royal Archives covers a history of Lesotho from the origins of the Basotho nation in the early 1800s. These are unique historical records. However due to the fact that records and archives management are given a low priority in Lesotho a large amount of the material is fragile and or damaged, there are many pages which are crumpled and torn. There has been extensive damage from insect infestation and some of the contents are water damaged. The royal family and the Royal Archives Board of Trustees have been trying to safe these records. The records can be saved by digitization. This will not be an easy task as there are challenges, but on the other hand we cannot fold our hands and let these important records, the national treasures, be lost permanently. There are prospects too with resulting from digitizing these collections. Through digitization copies

of these records will be made for permanent preservation and access and this will establish the foundation of a Lesotho Digital Archive.

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