

## PRESERVATION OF PHOTOGRAPHS AND AUDIOVISUAL MATERIALS TO GUARD AGAINST COLLECTIVE AMNESIA

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### Abstract

*The article discusses the background to collective amnesia in sub Saharan Africa. Colonialism, and both the colonial and post colonial power and political systems are identified as the major proponents of the current collective amnesia. It is argued that the audiovisual heritage which has remained largely untapped or is scattered both within individual nations or has been collected and carried overseas holds the key to collective memory. The current lack of requisite resources for the collection and preservation of this cultural heritage remains a major problem that tends to perpetuate collective amnesia. Major challenges to the mitigation of collective amnesia are discussed. Some recommendations are suggested on how the current situation may be tackled. Archivists have a major role to play in overcoming collective amnesia.*

**Keywords:** African History, Photographs, Audiovisual Materials, Cultural Heritage, Preservation, Collective Amnesia, Collective Memory

### Introduction

Humankind has depended on memory, whether recorded or otherwise, to remain in touch with the past. The legacy of memory is sustained through various ways such as writing, painting, sculpture, stories, music, and any other artefacts that may remind us about our past. Prior to the invention of reading and writing people kept their culture in memory and passed it orally from one generation to

another. Reading and writing was for a long time a privileged art as it required learning and was limited to selected members of society. It has been and still is argued by many that most written records were/are deliberately constructed and therefore may not have captured the real tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the moment. However, the invention of photography and sound recording machines revolutionized the way memory was to be kept for posterity at least in societies where the new technologies were available.

The use of photography, film and sound recording equipment led to the rapid growth in the volume of records generated in the film industry, radio and television broadcasting, as well as in the academic and research sectors. These audiovisual records embody an integral part of peoples cultural heritage. By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century collections in audiovisual format had become a normal and important feature of the holdings of libraries and archival institutions. This obviously presented a new problem to librarians, archivists and manuscript curators and yet they could not ignore the importance and value of the information on the new media. Schuller (2008: 5) argues that existing audiovisual records around the world are so important as they have:

accumulated a remarkable legacy of primary source materials which form the significant source of cultural and linguistic diversity of mankind... no adequate understanding of the past 100 years would be possible without them.

It is instructive that the preservation of such priceless collections must be of great concern as they form an integral part of humankind's cultural heritage. But of equal concern is the fact that the technologies and media on which some of these materials were initially captured and preserved have already been rendered obsolete by the new developments in the ever changing technologies of image and sound capturing and preservation.

Failure or inability to keep up with these developments means loss of whatever cultural heritage that may be stored on the obsolete media. The importance of these materials and the realization that they are in danger of being lost has resulted into the deliberate establishment preservation programmes. Unfortunately for Africa most of the programmes are found in the developed world. The loss of cultural heritage can be devastating and has been of great concern. This has

led to the establishment of various national and international bodies and conventions to guard against the loss. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has been instrumental in this. A convention under UNESCO, Memory of the World (MOW) was launched in 1992. UNESCO's Memory of the World is based on the premise that

Documentary heritage reflects the diversity of languages, peoples and cultures. It is the mirror of the world and its memory. But this memory is fragile. Every day, irreplaceable parts of this memory disappear for-ever. UNESCO has launched the Memory of the World Programme to guard against collective amnesia calling upon the preservation of the valuable archive holdings and library collections all over the world (and) ensuring their wide dissemination (UNESCO 1992).

Closely connected to MOW is the 2003 UNESCO convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The convention defines intangible cultural heritage as 'the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills-as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith-that communities, groups, and in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage ( UNESCO 2003).

In Africa and most of the developing world where most of the cultural heritage is still held in peoples memory it has become evident that these memories have been captured and continue to be captured by means of film, sound, video, photography and various other electronic gadgets. Scholars such as anthropologists, ethnographers, linguists, historians, archivists, librarians; radio and television broadcasters, film makers; and all types of collectors have gone around societies recording and collecting songs, stories, traditions, cultural artefacts, etc. These audiovisual collections comprise vital cultural heritage of the people and their loss is a sure recipe for collective amnesia.

### **Background and context**

Harvey (2007: 260) stresses the importance of preserving our collective memory by saying that 'memory is essential to coherence and enduringness of the community (or person), to its boundaries and persistence, in short its identity'. Cloonan (2004: 36) addressing the same subject says that 'if history is civilization's collective memory,

then preservation aids memory and sustains history by linking us to the past in a persuasive way’.

It took many centuries for the ‘European’ world to accept the fact that Africa had tangible and intangible cultural heritage and history which was consistently preserved through generations. Prominent European historians touted the theory that Africa had no history other than the history of Europeans in Africa. According to Vansina (1994: 40) Dame Margery Perham whom he thought was more knowledgeable about Africa wrote in 1951 in an authoritative journal *Foreign Affairs* stating that:

the dealings between tropical Africa and the West must be different. Here in place of the larger unities in Asia was the multi-cellular tissue of tribalism: instead of an ancient civilization, the largest area of primitive poverty enduring into modern age. Until very recent penetration by Europe the greater part of the continent was without the wheel, the plough, or the transport animal; almost without stone houses or clothes, except skins; without writing and so without history.

This notion did not end up with Perham because it had to be repeated by an eminent British historian and scholar in 1963 when most of the African countries were poised to regain their independence. Hugh Trevor-Roper, a Professor of History at Oxford University, had this to say about African history in a public lecture he was giving at the University of Sussex in 1963:

It is fashionable to speak today as if European history were devalued: as if historians, in the past, have paid too much attention to it, and as if, nowadays we should pay less. Undergraduates seduced, as always, by the changing breath of journalistic fashion, demand that they should be taught the history of black Africa. Perhaps in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness, like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America. And darkness is not the subject of history (Derrick 2010).

Trevor-Roper’s opinion was rebutted by his own compatriot who, incidentally, was born the same year Trevor-Roper was born (1914). Basil Davidson in most of his books on Africa seemed to understand the pre-colonial African societies better than Trevor-Roper although

he was no scholar of Trevor-Roper's pedigree. Davidson in his book *Old Africa Rediscovered* (1959) opined that great civilisations existed on the African soil when people in the so called European societies were still clothed in skins, He chided Trevor-Roper's ignorance or refusal to acknowledge the fact that there existed in pre-colonial Africa empires such as Ghana, Mali, Songhai, Mossi, Zulu, Xhosa, Bakongo, Baganda, Great Zimbabwe, and many others. He argued that these empires had evolved highly advanced intervention mechanisms that enabled their people to survive wars, diseases, famines, and societal disintegration.

Before Davidson made this observation Vansina (1965) had already acknowledged after his research that Africa had history. He maintained that African history could be studied and understood through oral traditions methodology. He became an authority on how oral traditions could be applied in understanding history of various societies with no written history.

The foregoing historical note may sound digressive but it is argued that it forms the backdrop of the collective memory and amnesia that is the subject of this article. It is not, for instance, easy to talk of the holocaust without the history of the Nazi regime in Europe or apartheid policy without the history of its regime in South Africa. The debate alluded to above, no doubt, impacted the colonising of Africa by Europeans. It also informed their collective amnesia about African history and cultural heritage. It is not difficult to agree with Vansina (1961) that the histories of societies are embedded in their traditions whether written or oral. This being true for Africa as for many other countries it can be safely argued that most of the current archival collections in the Sub Saharan Africa (SSA) cannot be representative of the collective memory of the people of Africa. Most of the archival collections in SSA reflect the inclinations of the politics of their creators, in this case the colonial bureaucrats and possibly their current successors. The lived experiences and traditions of the majority of the society who had no access to power during the colonial administration are glaringly absent in the public archives collections. Those whose memories would have formed the integral part of society's collective memory have since died and buried with their rare experiences and knowledge. The political determination of

archival creation, processing, preservation and access is not limited to SSA but is a universal phenomenon whose debate remains active (Schwartz and Cook 2002; Pickover 2005; Jimerson 2007; Lloyd 2007; Harris 2011). In the SSA the exclusion of the indigenous cultural heritage was a deliberate case of collective amnesia by the colonial administration.

The archivist in Africa is at present faced with the problem that requires him/her to simultaneously identify, accession, and preserve for access materials pertaining to traditions, customs, practices, and indigenous systems of the local communities regardless of their status in society. In essence giving everybody a chance to be heard and preserved. At present materials of this nature still lie with owners, researchers, private institutions both within and outside of Africa. Until the materials are salvaged we remain ill prepared to plan for viable preservation programmes. Moreover the collections will continue to be less representative of the society for which they were intended. Bastian ( 2009:115) argues that:

if archives are to truly capture the essence of our global society and remain relevant in a post-colonial world, then the archivists must actively pursue the records of the many marginalised and often unrecognized communities within that society.

This is where the guarding against collective amnesia starts.

As already mentioned elsewhere in this article for Africa and most of the developing world photographic and audiovisual archives remain the vital sources of indigenous cultural heritage most of which did not win or could not have won any place in the colonial archives. In these countries the photographic and audiovisual archives should be considered to be the foundation of the national archival institutions. Properly collected, processed, copyrighted, and preserved archives in these formats can serve as a great source of national identity besides their educational and knowledge values. It is important to note that most of the existing photographic and audiovisual archives in Africa are in dire need of preservation if their eminent loss through deterioration or theft is to be avoided. Most of these materials are still in the custody of their collectors such as, broadcasters, ethnographers, historians, researchers, etc. Unfortunately most these collectors or creators have no plans, skills or resources for their

preservation. But this is just part of the problem as the existing materials only represent a small fraction of the record of the continent's indigenous cultural heritage.

The enormity of the problem of preserving the audiovisual materials in SSA is captured by Zinyegere (2008: 37) a qualified audiovisual archivist, who avers that:

Audiovisual recordings are vital elements of our collective memory, determining our achievements over the years, documenting our past, present and determining our future. However, audiovisual recordings in(on) the African continent are endangered because of various factors including but not limited to political and economic factors, legal statutes towards audiovisual materials, staffing, lack of training and funding, obsolescence of playback equipment, climate issues, technological awareness and the preservation and access of recordings.

This by no means gives the impression that preservation of cultural heritage in formats other than audiovisual is any better, far from it. At present the preservation of cultural heritage in Africa can be said to be at crossroads. This should be great cause for worry especially on a continent whose majority of the population have existed in the oral culture for many centuries. The perennial low literacy rates in most of Africa does not augur well for the creation of written records. The death of a member is tantamount to the eternal loss of part of the society's cultural heritage. The seriousness of this problem is portrayed in the many scholars who have researched, written or reported on this subject (Khayundi 1993; Mazikana 1995; Olivier 1999; Ngulube 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005; Keakopa 2004; Matangira 2003; Motsi 2004; Qobo 2004; Abankwah 2008; Zinyengere 2008; Mnjama 2010).

For various reasons many countries in Africa are less involved in any plans or programmes aimed at dealing with this vital missing link in their post-colonial cultural heritage (Zinyegere 2008; Mnjama 2010). This remains so notwithstanding their being signatories to most, if not all, international conventions and schemes pertaining to the safeguarding of their cultural heritage (Edmondson 2002).

In South Africa there has been an upsurge in programmes and projects aimed at the redressing the discrepancies in the country's collective memory. Before the dawn of the new democratic dispensation South Africa's archival collections were politically constructed to reflect the political ideology of the ruling or power elite. This resulted in the creation of an archival system which excluded the collective memory of the majority of the population. The projects are engaged in collecting various aspects of the communities' collective memories. Most of these projects have no association with government and operate on donor funding which puts their long term sustainability into question. The few projects associated with the government like the Road to Democracy, also known as South African Democracy Trust (SADET), have also depended on private or donor funding. The most important thing to note here is that these projects have generated and still generate a lot of photographs and audiovisual materials. It is not clear the plans they have for the preservation of the materials. It is possible some of the materials will be abandoned after some topical reports and publications have or are compiled. Some of them may be deposited with libraries, private or institutional archives. Such apparently abandoned materials form the true record of the collective memory. It is early to pass judgement whether or not the outcome of these projects will reflect the sum total of the South Africa's collective memory.

### **Challenges to the mitigation of collective amnesia in Africa power and political patronage**

There is a lot of literature that indicate an apparent nexus between power and collective memory at all levels of society (Taylor 1983; Schwartz and Cook 2002; Pickover 2005; Lloyd 2007; Jimerson 2007; Harris 2011). Harris has been consistent in talking about the impact of power play or politics in all spheres of archives management. He argues that:

Even in countries where archivists have successfully re-imagined themselves as auditors of state record keeping, or as institutional knowledge managers, or as purveyors of national and local narrative, their purchase on power seems slight. With few exceptions even premier archival institutions find themselves straining to make their voices heard in higher level



of policy making and decision making. They find themselves struggling to secure adequate resources (Harris 2011: 105). On the other hand, Jimerson (2007) feels that archivists do have immense power over the constitution of their archival collections in any format. He argues that the archivists should use this power to determine and achieve a balance in the records to be preserved for future generations. They are in a position also to determine the power inherent in the archives and use it to promote accountability, open government, diversity and justice.

Archivists are the only ones who are in a position to identify the cultural gaps in their holdings. They can therefore lobby interested groups to assist in filling up the gaps through planned oral traditions collection and preservation. Archivists should involve themselves in activism and advocacy as form of guarding against collective amnesia. Pickover (2005: 3) admonishes archivists as being unable to see themselves in 'a social and political context or as documenting history but rather become cocooned in the practical world of processing and storing materials'.

### **Training of archivists and AV creators and collectors**

Mnjama (2010) and Zinyengere (2008) acknowledge the lack of trained audiovisual archivists in Africa. This is equally true for other creators, collectors and custodians of AV records such as librarians, researchers, families and individuals who lack training in managing materials in this format. The technical challenges of dealing with audiovisual materials require special skills. The current training offered to librarians and archivists in Africa contains insignificant or no component on audiovisual and digital or electronic archiving. Training in these is available overseas but at an unaffordable cost to most of those who are required to collect and manage society's cultural heritage. This is worrying given that most of the cultural heritage of Africa is increasingly being captured and stored electronically. The need for trained audiovisual and digital or electronic archivists is increasingly becoming less optional.

Qualified audiovisual archivists are required so they can initiate collection of oral traditions that are fast disappearing in most African countries. Currently there are hardly any countries in SSA with

sustainable oral tradition programmes. Some countries such as Botswana, Kenya, and South Africa have made some attempts at collecting oral tradition but this has never developed into full blown and sustainable programmes.

### **The viability of preservation programmes**

Most countries in Sub Saharan Africa (SSA) have weak or no preservation programmes especially for materials stored on electronic media (Ngulube 2002; Mnjama 2010). Keeping of electronic or digital records is more expensive when compared to paper records. Information in this format requires refreshing, migration as well as the capacity to sustain the upgrades in the hardware and software. This is in addition to the observation and maintenance of the normal requirements for the preservation of records. In SSA such a situation may lead to the loss of valuable cultural heritage when institutions or individuals are in a less strong economic position to meet the requirements of the fast changing technologies.

### **Digitization**

Digitization has become the albatross of viable archives preservation programmes in SSA. The arrival of this technology has drastically impacted the management of records. This is a transition that requires the archivists and records managers to deal with archives and records which were either digitized for purposes of preservation and access or were born digital and are to be managed on different sites. To cope up with this new role the archivists and records managers require massive resources besides their possession of the required skills in the management of records in this format. These are resources that many countries in SSA do not have and may not have in required quantity in the next two decades or so. The unsettling fact is that the efficient management of these records is 'key to accessing the cultural heritage of SSA by the present and future generations' (Ngulube 2004: 143).

The life of digitization as a preservation method is yet to be settled. However, digitization is important to both collective memory and collective amnesia. Digitization has its origin in the 'North' and is used to champion the desires of the North of access to all sources of

information globally. Since it is an expensive technology only the rich (read North) can afford it. This has led to selective digitization programmes by the North in the societies of the South. The owners of the selectively digitized information may never be able to have access to it as they do not have internet access. Pickover (2005:8-9) feels uneasy on this and argues that:

Selection of what to digitize is important because it speaks to issues that affect access to knowledge and production and quality. There is the danger that everything that is not digital will only become unimportant but also to all intents and purposes, cease to exist, so whatever is available on the internet becomes the history...this is very powerful because the information we can access shapes our view of the world.

This argument underscores the major cause of modern genesis of collective amnesia. There are deliberate efforts by the more economically advanced and politically powerful to dictate the collective memory of the less economically and less technologically advanced. It sounds like a case when the processed product becomes unaffordable by the producer of the raw materials; like the chocolate made from the cocoa beans from a rural farmer in the Ivory Coast which he and his children cannot afford when it is imported back into his country.

### **Migrated archives**

It was a common practice by departing colonial administration or forces of occupation to destroy records as they left. Those records which could not be destroyed were often transferred to the 'mother' country. Besides this official destruction and transfer private collectors also carried away materials that are vital to the cultural heritage of the country of origin. Some countries such as Botswana and Kenya have had to pay heavily to repatriate copies of the migrated archives.

### **Recommendations**

There is evidence that there is a great deal of collective amnesia in Africa. This is linked to its colonial past as well as the increasing forces of globalisation as driven by the information and

communication technologies (ICTs). More collective memory is in danger of being lost if no remedial action is taken as a matter of urgency. Archivists can play a crucial role in this. As a result the following recommendations are suggested as part of the strategy to mitigate collective amnesia on the continent.

1. The establishment of national or regional preservation centres. These centres will act as clearing houses for a number of tasks that are key to preservation of cultural heritage. These will include, inter alia, the following:

- Pooling of the necessary resources for the management of preservations such as infrastructure, fund raising
- Oversee the application of copyright on access
- Authenticate digital records
- Liaise with national, regional, and international oral history associations
- Liaise with national, regional, and international bodies and institutions dealing with standards and conventions on preservation of electronic records

2. The current training of archivists should be reviewed with a view to incorporating components touching on competencies and skills to manage electronic records.

3. National governments should be approached and requested to invoke the existing international cultural heritage conventions to repatriate the migrated cultural heritage.

4. Public awareness programmes on cultural heritage preservation should be established. The programme should strive to involve the public in the debate for the preservation of collective memory. Materials collected from the public should be preserved in place where they can easily have access to them.

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