

Preservation of documentary heritage in Malawi

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Abstract

Through preservation, access, use and re-use of documentary heritage can be promised. The paper explored the preservation of documentary heritage in Malawi as there was there is lack of appreciation on the importance of preservation of documentary heritage by policy makers making it a least government priority. The study employed a multi-method design in order to collect both qualitative and quantitative. The study identified documentary heritage materials preserved at National Archives of Malawi in form of public archives, historical manuscripts and, printed and published works. It found out that documentary heritage materials are important as they promote people's enjoyment and inspiration, cultural values, learning, economic prosperity and social equity. Preservation techniques that are followed at the institution include basic mending and minor repairs; binding; cleaning and dusting of materials; photocopying; shelving library materials; provision of adequate security; use of insecticide and insect repellent; refreshing; technology preservation and; migration. Challenges faced when preserving these materials include lack of purposely built infrastructure, limited funding and understaffing. These challenges are handled in-house, seeking government intervention and also from donors. The study recommends that use of documentary heritage materials should be promoted to different users and; National Archives of Malawi should push for customised infrastructure, fight for more funds and staff. It concluded by saying that documentary heritage forms an important aspect of the country's memory and it helps in bridging the past and the present and in shaping the future.

Key words: archives, conservation, documentary heritage, National Archives of Malawi, preservation

Introduction

Archives, libraries, museums and other repositories play an important role in the preservation of documentary heritage (Hedstrom & Montgomery, 1998). UNESCO (2010) defines documentary heritage as items that are moveable; made up of signs, codes, sounds and images; capable of preservation; reproducible; and they are products of deliberate documentation process. According to Sawant (2014) preservation refers to activities associated with maintaining library and archival materials for use either in their original physical form or in some other usable ways.

Kamatula and Mnkeni-Saurombe (2013) views documentary heritage important as it is an essential part of a country's identity. Although it is important Edmondson (2002) says that much of the documentary heritage across the globe is at risk of being lost as they are being exposed to unfavorable conditions.

It is through proper preservation that can guarantee survival of documentary materials for enduring access, use and re-use. Proper preservation includes conservation activities which are techniques of partial preservation of the physical object like a new binding, as well as procedures for the substitution of the original artifact by materials conversion, whereby the intellectual content of the original is at least preserved (Srivastava & Kumar, 1986).

In order to properly preserve national documentary heritage in Malawi, National Archives of Malawi was established in 1947 (National Archives of Malawi, 2010). Then it was a Regional Branch of the then Central African Archives. When the administrative links of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland severed in December 1963, the Zomba Branch was in January 1964 declared the National Archives of Malawi (National Archives of Malawi, 2010). National Archives of Malawi is the official repository of government records as well as records belonging to private institutions and individuals, who were connected with the territorial activities.

Currently, the National Archives of Malawi operates through several service points comprising of Records Management Service with Regional Records Centres in Zomba, Lilongwe and Mzuzu. The other service points are Public Archives, Historical Manuscripts, Legal Deposit Library, Conservation Centre, and Administration and Support Services whose offices are all based at the Headquarters in Zomba (National Archives of Malawi, 2010). Conservation Centre has a leading in the preservation although other sections play important roles.

Statement of the Problem

Documentary heritage is an essential part of a country's culture which provides identification (Kamatula & Mkeni-Saurombe, 2013). Although documentary heritage is important but in Africa it is not appreciated (UNESCO, 2006). In Malawi while archivists appreciate the importance of documentary heritage, policy makers question their relevance. This lack of appreciation leads to inadequate support to the preservation of these precious materials that provide national identity. Documentary heritage have to be appreciated

so that preservation activities can be fully supported.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to explore the preservation of documentary heritage in Malawi.

Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Identify documentary heritage preserved at the National Archives of Malawi,
2. Determine the importance of preserving documentary heritage,
3. Identify techniques used in preserving documentary heritage, and
4. Find out challenges faced when preserving documentary heritage and their solutions.

Significance of the Study

The findings from this study are to assist National Archives of Malawi and other institutions involved in the preservation of documentary heritage to have an insight in the preservation of documentary materials. The study is also to help the National Archives of Malawi and other guardians of documentary heritage to come up with sustainable preservation programmes. This research is also to simulate others to do more research on preservation of documentary heritage.

Review of Literature

Since time immemorial preservation of information in its different forms has been an important human endeavor (Adeeb &

Ghonaimy, 1997). Majumdar (2005) on the study of preservation and conservation of documentary heritage in India categorized forms of documentary heritage in terms of oral and written. In written form, this vast corpus of literature is spread over different languages and scripts, and on different kinds of material like birch barks, palm leaf, cloth, wood, stone and paper (Majumdar, 2005). Boston (1998) also provides a variety of types of documentary heritage in his preservation guide. Boston divides them, into five groups: Paper and other traditional materials, Photographic and micrographic materials, Mechanical carriers, Magnetic materials and, Optical materials. The author points out that Paper and other traditional materials are the oldest and largest group of documents. Kamatula and Mnkeni-Saurombe (2013) in their study on the role of archives in the promotion of documentary national heritage in Tanzania, South Africa and Botswana categorized documentary heritage in terms of public or private archives. This categorization is important as it helps to understand them in terms of where they come from.

Documentary heritage is important to the society. Majumdar (2005) reported that documentary heritage is important as it depicts culture through various types of tangible circulating knowledge. Kamatula and Mnkeni-Saurombe (2013) also reported that documentary heritage provides people's enjoyment and inspiration, cultural values, learning potential, economic prosperity and social equity. Roper (1979) in a technical report presented to UNESCO says that documentary heritage in Malawi is a significant element in the machinery of government, contributing to its efficiency and playing a role in national development, as well as illuminating the history and culture of the nation and helping to educate the people.

Documentary heritage has to be accessed so that the important of preservation can be appreciated. Common users of documentary heritage include: historians, students, professional researchers, genealogists, public administrators, journalists, politicians and the public (Kamatula & Mnkeni-Saurombe, 2013). It is good to explore the importance of documentary heritage with a focus on common users so that the importance is clearly understood.

In order to preserve documentary materials different techniques can be used. Sawant (2014) presented different preservation techniques applicable to print material and they include: lamination; microfilming; de-acidification; basic mending and minor repairs; pH testing; binding; encapsulation; cleaning and dusting of materials; photocopying; shelving library materials to allow for free flow of air; installing air-conditioners in the repository; provision of adequate security to prevent theft and; use of insecticide and insect repellent. Murtagh (2011) states that as with any archival item, correct handling aid in preserving as more damage can be done from mishandling than leaving material in an attic or basement for a period of time.

Preservation of documentary heritage is not an easy process as challenges may be experienced. Krtali and Hasenay (2012) say that different issues are necessary for successful preservation management such as policies and strategies, financial issues, legal regulations, knowledge and competences, preservation methods and techniques, user needs, and lastly, the cultural and social impact of preservation. Jiazhen (1999) discovered that like many developing countries, the main problems for library preservation in China are the lack of money and experienced staff. Lack of money is also a challenge in Tanzania (Kamatula & Mnkeni-Saurombe, 2013).

Methodology

The study employed a multi-method design in order to collect both qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative data was collected to provide in-depth knowledge while quantitative data was collected to provide magnitude. The central premise of using the multi-method was that it provided a better understanding of the research problem than either one approach alone could have done (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). The study also followed a realism philosophical paradigm to be both objective and subjective in interpreting the findings.

Data was collected from National Archives of Malawi using a questionnaire, records analysis and participant observation. The questionnaire was distributed to 6 senior staff members. An open ended question regarding the overall preservation of documentary heritage was asked. Other questions addressing objectives of this study were also asked. Records analysis was used to provide information in relation to the purpose of keeping documentary heritage materials and who uses them. The observation actually was used to ascertain materials that are preserved, preservation strategies used and challenges faced in the preservation process. The instruments were pre-tested and challenges that respondents faced were dealt accordingly.

Permission to conduct the study at the selected institution was sought from the authorities. Ethical issues that surrounded this study were adhered to. Ethical issues that surrounded the research were confidentiality, privacy and informed consent, these were observed.

Qualitative data collected was analysed inductively from questionnaire and participant

observation while quantitative data was analysed deductively from records analysis.

Findings

The findings of the study are presented in accordance to research objectives. This is done in the following sub-sections.

Documentary Heritage Preserved at the National Archives of Malawi

One of the objectives of this study was to identify documentary heritage materials preserved at the National Archives of Malawi. It was revealed that National Archives of Malawi preserved documentary heritage collections which are categorized into:

- Public archives,
- Historical manuscripts and,
- Printed and published works deposited with the National Archives Malawi.

Public archives collection was composed records of enduring value which originated from public institutions and they include minutes, standing orders, agreements, licenses, regulations, policies, reports, correspondences, court cases, opinions, notices and photographs. These materials are preserved in accordance with the National Archives Act.

Historical manuscripts collection included historical papers and works from private organization and individuals connected with the country's endeavours. Historical manuscripts that the National Archives of Malawi preserved include writings belonging to missionaries, religious institutions, traders and, renowned individuals connected with Malawi's history in one way or another. Preservation of historical manuscripts was

also in accordance with the National Archives Act

Printed and published works collection was also another documentary heritage preserved. It included a comprehensive collection of published literature on Malawi. These comprised of books, magazines, newsletters, newspapers, government gazettes, Hansards, reports, maps and cinematographic collection. Printed and published works were preserved in accordance with Printed Publications Act. Collecting of published works in Malawi is also the mandate of National Archives of Malawi.

Documentary heritage collections preserved were in different media forms ranging from Paper and other traditional materials, Photographic and micrographic materials, Magnetic materials and, Optical materials. The form was both oral and written and spread in different languages. The age of these materials date back to as early as 1891. The content is historical in nature and of enduring value.

Importance of preserving documentary heritage

The other objective of this study was to determine the importance of preserving documentary heritage. The study discovered that materials were preserved so that they are protected against destruction in order to enable their usage for a longer period as much as possible.

It was found that documentary heritage was preserved so that they were accessed and were important to the society as they contributed to:

- People's enjoyment and inspiration,
- Cultural values,
- Learning potential,
- Economic prosperity and
- Social equity.

The study looked further on the usage of documentary heritage in terms of user categories and levels of usage. The following figure depicts users' categories who were assisted by during the period July 2013 to June 2014

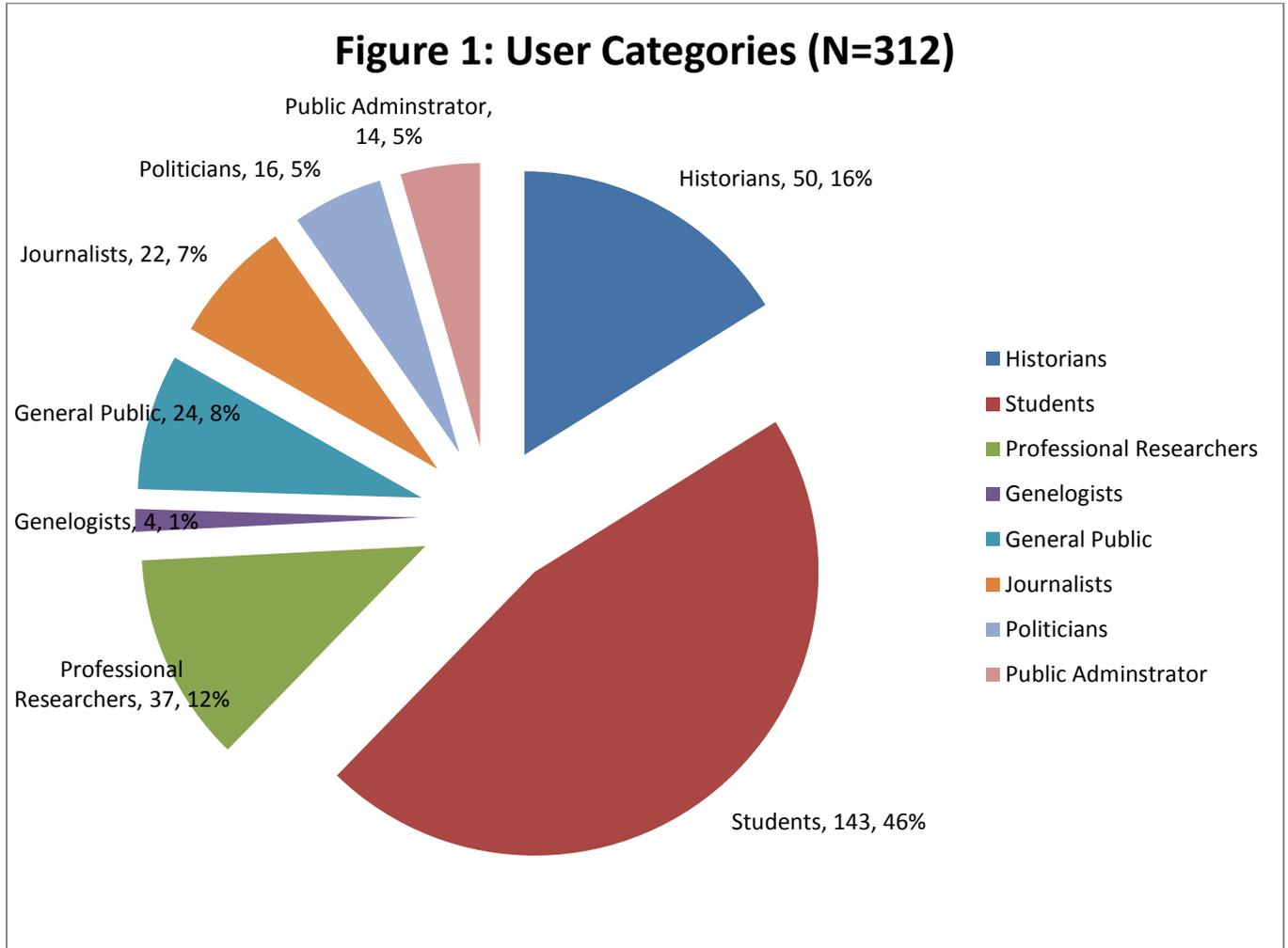
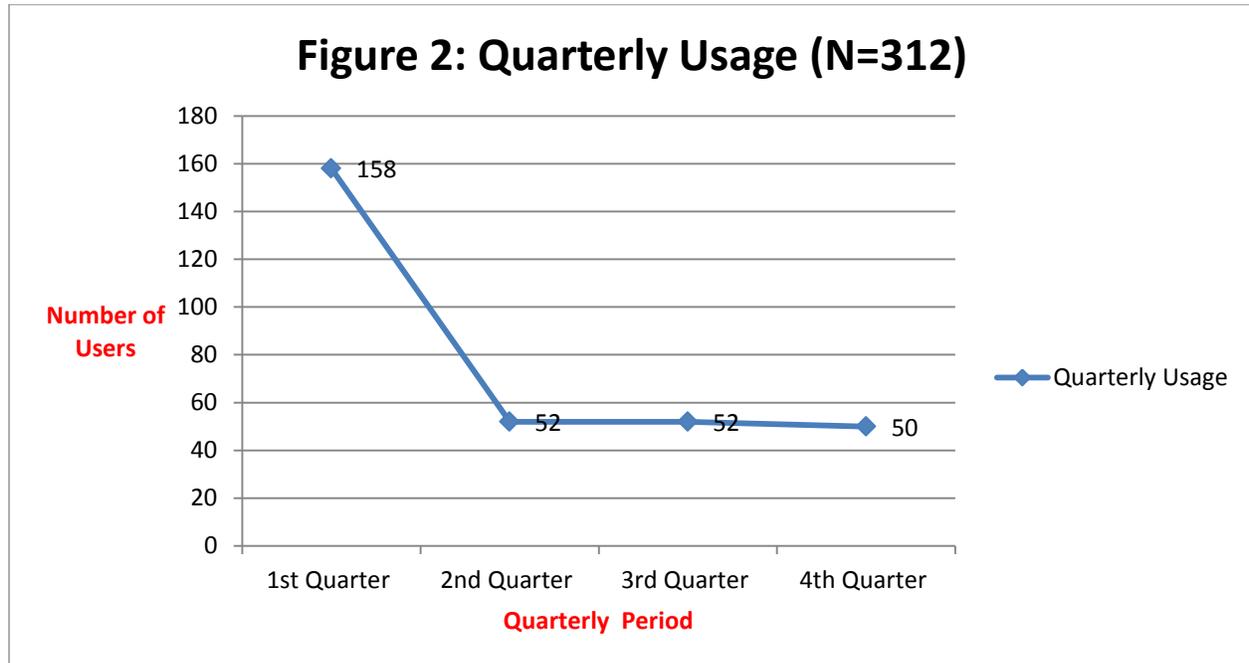


Figure 1 shows that there were 312 users who used the collection. Students used documentary heritage materials more than any other category as in terms percentage they made up 46 % of all the users. These were college students who were doing their undergraduate research in partial fulfillment for award of degrees. They were mostly directed to use those materials by their lecturers. There were also 50 (16%) historian, 37 (12%) professional researchers, 24 (8%) general public users, 22 (7%) journalists, 16 (5%) politicians, 14 (5%) public administrator who used the collection. It was also found that these documentary heritage materials were rarely used by genealogist with just a 1 % use.

The following figure depicts users who were assisted by during the period July 2013 to June 2014 and is according to quarterly period.



From the diagram it shows that there were more users who visited the institution in the first quarter, this is between July, August and September as there were 158 users, 52 users in the second quarter, 52 users in the third quarter and finally 50 users in the last quarter.

Techniques used in preserving documentary heritage

The other objective of this study was to identify techniques used in preserving documentary heritage. It was revealed that several techniques were used namely basic mending and minor repairs; binding; cleaning and dusting of materials; photocopying; shelving library materials to allow for free flow of air; provision of adequate security to prevent theft; use of insecticide and insect repellent; refreshing which involves periodic copying from one physical medium to another; technology preservation that is replicating any old configuration of hardware and software and; migration that is transfer of digital materials from one generation of

computer technology to a subsequent generation. It was discovered that these techniques were used to address issues concerning biological agents, environmental factors and, human activities which were reported to cause much damage to the documentary heritage collection.

Challenges faced when preserving documentary heritage

The other objective of this study was to determine challenges faced when preserving documentary heritage and solutions applied to them. The study discovered that lack of purposely built infrastructure; limited funding and; understaffing were negatively affecting the preservation of documentary heritage at National Archives of Malawi.

Lack of purposely built infrastructure was reported to have exposed the collection to threats such as extreme temperatures, dust, termites, mice, theft and poor plumbing system. There was also lack of storage space which led to storing materials in places that are not ideal for them.

Limited funding was also reported to have negatively affected preservation at the National Archives of Malawi. It made collecting of documentary heritage materials difficult as the institution could not properly reach out to the creators of these materials as a result materials got destroyed before getting to the National Archives for preservation. This limited funding also made it difficult for the institution to acquire equipment necessary for preservation such as shelves, cabinets, scanners, folders, document cases, boxes and other materials appropriate for the long-term preservation.

Understaffing was another challenge affecting the preservation of documentary heritage at National Archives of Malawi. There was high vacancy rate at the institution to the extent that in every section there were vacant positions. This made it difficult to properly carry out good care and handling of materials; conservation and restoration treatment; reformatting; refreshing, and migration of materials.

The study also focused on how challenges were handled. It discovered that several approaches are used to handle challenges that are faced.

On the issue of lack of purposely built infrastructure, the department had been persistently advising the Government to consider providing for a spacious and purposely built infrastructure for better preservation of the precious national heritage. While waiting for a positive consideration

from Government on this matter, the department undertook periodic rehabilitation of the existing buildings.

On the issue of limited funding the National Archives of Malawi had been discussing with the Government treasury to consider increasing funding for the department. While waiting for the increase, the provided financial resources are used prudently and also proposals had been sent to different donors to provide support in specific areas.

On the issue of understaffing the National Archives of Malawi had been advising Government to recruit more staff for the institution. While waiting for the response current members work as a team.

Discussions and recommendations

The discussions and recommendations are presented in accordance to research objectives. This is done in the following sub-sections.

Documentary heritage preserved at the National Archives of Malawi

Documentary heritage collections preserved at the National Archives of Malawi include Public archives, Historical manuscripts and, Printed and published works deposited with the National Archives Malawi. Kamatula and Mkeni-Saurombe (2013) also identified Public archives and Historical manuscripts collections as part of documentary heritage. There is a difference in terms of preserving published literature as part of documentary heritage as in other archival institutions it is not considered as part of documentary heritage. The media of these collections were ranging from Paper and other traditional materials, Photographic and micrographic materials, Magnetic materials and, Optical materials. These media were also presented by

Boston (1998) although Mechanical carriers which include sound recordings on cylinders and discs were not found in the study. The institution should consider collecting Mechanical carriers in order to boost its collection. The form of the collection is both oral and written and spread in different languages just concurring with Majumdar (2005).

Importance of preserving documentary heritage

The study discovered that documentary heritage were important as they contribute to people's enjoyment and inspiration, cultural values, learning potential, economic prosperity and social equity which were also found by Kamatula and Mnkeni-Saurombe (2013). Contribution of documentary heritage to promotion of cultural values was also discovered by Majumdar (2005) and Roper (1979). In terms of user categories they are similar to Kamatula and Mnkeni-Saurombe (2013) findings. In regards to usage pattern there is a need for the collection to be promoted to different user categories as there were signs of low usage by genealogists, politicians and public administrators. The promotion can be through public awareness campaigns. These campaigns are also like to make usage levels of the collections to be even in a year.

Techniques used in preserving documentary heritage

Preservation techniques such as basic mending and minor repairs; binding; cleaning and dusting of materials; photocopying; shelving library materials to allow for free flow of air; provision of adequate security to prevent theft; use of insecticide and insect repellent; refreshing; technology preservation and; migration are also similar to what Sawant (2014) presented. These preservation

techniques are not the only that can be applied, the institution should also try lamination, microfilming, de-acidification, pH testing, installing air-conditioners in the repository and, emulation. Biological agents, environmental factors and, human activities as threats were also presented by Sawant (2014) but these factors are mostly applicable to print materials. A technological factor such as obsolescence of technology these days is also a challenge to digital materials Gollins (2009).

Challenges faced when preserving documentary heritage

Lack of purposely built infrastructure; limited funding and; understaffing are the challenges affecting preservation of documentary heritage. The challenge of building and understaffing was also reported in a study by Kamatula and Mnkeni-Saurombe (2013) while underfunding was also reported by Jiazhen (1999). The institution should not give up, it should push for the customised infrastructures and while waiting present infrastructures have to be taken care of; fight for more funds but in the meantime funds should be used on priorities and; advice government there is immediate need for more staff.

Conclusion

Documentary heritage forms an important aspect of the country's memory. They help in bridging the past and the present and in shaping the future. Documentary heritage materials preserved at National Archives of Malawi are in form of public archives, historical manuscripts and, printed and published works. These materials are important as they promote people's enjoyment and inspiration, cultural values, learning, economic prosperity and social equity. Users of these materials include historians, students, professional researchers,

genealogists, public administrators, journalists, politicians and the general public. Challenges faced when preserving these materials include: lack of purposely built infrastructure, limited funding and understaffing. These challenges are handled in-house, seeking government intervention and also from donors.

Based on the findings this study recommends that these materials should be promoted to

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- other users as it has been shown that they mostly used by students. While taking care of the existing infrastructure, the institution should push for the customised infrastructure. The institution should use the available funds on priorities while they fight for more funds. It should advise government to recruit more staff.
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