
Taking stock: South African Society of Archivists from the 1960s to beyond the millennium

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Abstract

The paper provides a brief overview of the history of the South African Society of Archivists from its inception in 1959 to the present. It outlines the early years (1960s) the Society fell heavily under the influence of the then State Archives Service and its gradual development into a truly professional and all-inclusive organisation geared towards the furtherance of the archival profession. The important role played by the SA Archives Journal (hereafter Journal) in furthering professional best practice in an ever changing environment is highlighted. Subjects regarding terminology, ethics, conservation, appraisal, electronic media and training were covered. In the socio-political transition period of the 1990s, the Society played an important role in all issues of importance to the country's archives, either by action or through the Journal. It was dynamic and encouraged active debate by way of seminars and international conferences, reaching its pinnacle in the 1990s. Apathy and difficulty in getting members to actively administer the Society, resulted in its steady decline until 2003 when – to all intents and purposes – it ceased to exist. Attempts to revive it in 2005 failed. In 2008 a conference at UNISA elected a steering committee to resuscitate SASA, an initiative which is slowly bearing fruit.

Keywords: South African Society of Archivists, state archives, records, history

1 The early years of archives in South Africa

The 1960s saw the coming of age of the archives profession in SA – underscored by the establishment of The SA Society of Archivists in 1959.

The first appointed archivist in South Africa was George McCall Theal in the Cape in 1879. In the early years of archives, archivists were more historian-cum-record keepers, with very little required with regard to accommodation, document care, professional principles or selection/disposal. The only archives of any note in SA were those of the various colonies, the Boer republics and, after 1910, the Union Government of SA. For many years the issue with which the state archivists involved themselves was whether the role of an archivist was a national or provincial competency and 1922 saw the promulgation of the first Archives Act in South Africa for state archives, including local authorities (e.g. provincial admin, municipalities, magistrates' courts, etc) under central control.

Gradually the 'historian' role decreased and the role of the archivist became better prescribed. The role of the archivist became one of primarily arranging and describing documents – often in amazing detail in lengthy inventories. The Dutch book by Muller, Feith & Fruin: *Handleiding voor het ordenen en beschrijven van archieven* became the archivist's bible and remained so well into the 20th century.

Preservation of archives – which came a distant second in the early archivists' list of priorities – meant keeping rather than restoring or conserving. The limited output of records meant that the word 'disposal' boiled down to: 'how long the office of origin should keep its records before sending it to the archives for preservation', rather than 'what to keep (and for

how long) and what to throw away'. Appraisal was almost exclusively the lofty preserve of the politically appointed Archives Commission.

Over the years greater volumes of records and the need for permanence became increasingly evident – and therefore the need for better storage facilities, conservation, appraisal criteria, principles for filing and access and finding aids – in short, greater professionalism.

Appraisal of records by an archivist was a very new concept. This new function gave the archivist greater professional control and responsibility for deciding what to keep or destroy.

1.1 Coming of age, SASA established

By 1959 the era of the historian-record keeper of old and the archivist that kept whatever was put on paper, was well and truly over. The government's archivists were all graduates with history as a major and many had masters and doctors degrees. These highly qualified and dedicated professionals (all white and mostly males) realised that to be recognised as professionals similar to accountants, doctors and engineers, they needed to have a professional body to determine procedures, protocols, policies, etc independently from the requirements of their employers.

The SA Society of Archivists was established in 1959, one would presume with the express purpose of doing just that. Archivists, however, differ from the generally accepted definition of a professional as they inevitably work for an organisation or office that creates records and, other than being a consultant, cannot really be self-employed.

SASA was nevertheless created on the basis of professionalism and largely succeeded in promoting professional standards. As was the habit in those days, much of what was regarded as logical went unsaid and the society's constitution vaguely outlines its objective as being "*the furtherance of Archival Science in general and in particular in South Africa*". Apart from the express instruction of producing a Journal, the constitution concentrated on the administration of the society rather than the outputs and on the make-up and qualifications of its members and office bearers rather than the detail of what they aimed to achieve.

The *Journal* became the backbone of the society. And, while little else was done, it did perform a valuable service by outlining the changing horizons of the archival profession. Subjects that were covered included those of professional (but primarily of governmental) interest such as acquisition procedures, types of information in collections as well as the criteria for disposal authorities and the compilation of inventories and index cards as prime finding aids. Appraisal also received increasing attention in the *Journal* and the need to understand historians and their requirements was underlined.

For many years, the Society was in essence really an 'old boys' club' comprising government archivists only. All the members were from the State (national) Archives and the office bearers were almost exclusively State Archives' male executives. Junior members of the national archives were coerced into joining the Society and, even though no immediate benefits were evident, fear of ostracism and seniors' body language did much to swell membership numbers. One did not ask "What can the Society do for me?" but "What can I do for the Society?" – other than paying ones fees and voting for the boss to secure a place on the Society's executive.

1.2 Non-governmental archives, training

During the 1970s there were a growing number of archivists in institutions outside of government employ. Churches were finding a need to organise their archives, largely because of a growing demand from genealogical researchers. Universities were also appointing people to administer their historical records along archival lines. A few companies, like Barlow Rand, De Beers, Sanlam, Anglo American, Armscor, Standard and Barclays Bank, etc were looking into the need to establish archives – mainly for public relations and promotional purposes, often prompted by the companies’ celebrating anniversaries. The people placed in charge of these ‘archives’ were often retired administrative employees or librarians. Many libraries had special collections and their custodians were called manuscript librarians. Seldom were these very willing, but uninformed, custodians trained archivists and they were on the look-out for an organisation to join to help them find their feet and give them guidance.

Amongst these non-government archivists there was a belief – whether well founded or not – that the ‘old boys’ club’ of SASA was not open to them. The Association for Archivists and Manuscript Librarians (AMLIB) was created to give non-government document workers a home. They held periodic seminars, mainly in the Johannesburg-Pretoria area, and issued a periodical newsletter. These outlets enabled them to exchange ideas, network and secure contacts which could help to solve particular shared problems. They also paved the way for SASA to understand the actual needs of archivists in and outside government. There was clearly a need to learn.

The only archival training in South Africa in the 1950s & ‘60s had been the departmental examination which all state archivists were required to do. In 1965 the examination was replaced with a National Diploma course in Archival Science which, while managed by the government archives, was also open to candidates outside of national archives. Whether SASA played any direct part in this improvement is uncertain, but it is known that the curriculum remained virtually unchanged for the next 20 years. Those candidates who did not have some experience in a government archives, were very disadvantaged as the examples in the handbooks were taken from national archives collections.

The passion shown by all practitioners and the desire to do things well introduced a period of great vibrancy and incredible growth and stimulus in archives in South Africa.

From the end of the 1970s and early 1980s SASA openly welcomed all archival practitioners as members, and articles in its *Journal* increasingly called for archives diploma curriculum changes to accommodate non-state archivists.

3 Diversification, 1980s

Appraisal issues became increasingly important. Macro versus micro appraisal kept the archival world occupied for many years. SASA in general and the *Journal* in particular covered the subject in depth and often. But it was still primarily the profession following the national archives’ lead rather than the other way round.

By this time the need for better records management within the civil service had become apparent. The design and training with regard to filing systems and registry office procedures in government offices soon became the responsibility of the national archives.

As the competencies within the national archives increased, so the SASA executive – still exclusively employed by the state – spread the word. SASA’s executive in the 1980s was highly intellectual, particularly competent and willing to share knowledge. The editorial staff of the *Journal* in particular did sterling work in keeping South Africa – very much out of the loop internationally due to apartheid (and there not being any Internet yet) – up to date on international best practice. Individuals such as Dr Hendrik Snyman, Dr JH Cilliers, Daantjie

Smith, Marie Olivier, Piet Myburgh, and, in particular, Clive Kirkwood and Verne Harris must be commended for their exceptional contributions, admirable work ethic and willingness to give of their time.

The 1980s brought much improvement:

– The Society was now dedicated “*to ensure mutual contact and to supply information*” by means of its *Journal* that was being “*circulated to individuals and institutions concerned with and interested in the care, custody and making available of source material in their possession bearing on the political, military, economic (business), social, cultural and ecclesiastical history of the Republic of South Africa.*” (SBA: Editor, *Journal* – SB Archivist, 9.3.1982)

– The *Journal* introduced a Chronicle section on activities of various archives depots, improvements in facilities, acquisitions, etc.

– A SASA cash prize was introduced in 1983 for contributions to the *Journal* of outstanding quality, demonstrating original research/thinking on an archival subject – not necessarily awarded every year.

– Branches of the Society were established in the Cape, Natal and Free State and eventually, after the constitution was amended to allow for a branch in Pretoria, also in the then Transvaal. The branches organised meetings and seminars and visits to places of interest, creating a vibrant archival environment.

– The Chairman started distributing a report to all members on an annual basis

– National Committee meetings were held more regularly – justifying the requirement that the members be resident in Pretoria.

– From 1980 there was talk of convening a conference, but it kept on being postponed and the branch gatherings had to suffice.

– The *Journal* stopped printing lists of researchers/research projects and book reviews of a purely historical nature – concentrating on archival issues and historical works concerned with archival sources.

– The Committee recognised that non-State Archives members should be co-opted on to the National Committee, but whether Col Combrinck and thereafter Brig Otto from the SA Defence Force Archives really qualified as such, is debatable. In 1991 Riek van Rensburg of the Hervormde Church Archives was the first truly non-State Archives co-opted member

– A list of archival terms was compiled.

– Articles regarding co-operation, collaboration, similarities, differences in archives, museums and libraries as sources of historical information were published.

– Selected papers presented at branch, AMLIB and other conferences were published in the *Journal*.

– The *Journal* included articles regarding inter alia, the replacing of full inventories with skeletal lists and computer indexing and tentative opinions regarding the impact of electronic and disk technology on archives.

– Articles regarding building design for archives were also published.

– Conservation issues, eg deacidification, temperatures, UV, HR, pest control, good house-keeping, etc as well as restoration issues were also covered.

4 Constitution amended

The old boys club was, however, still evident. Elections were held annually. The wider scope of the *Journal*'s market, the increasing interaction between members and the passion of archivists to contribute meant that increasingly non-State Archives archivists were

being nominated for the National Committee, but throughout the 1980s the committee comprised almost exclusively the State Archives' top brass. In 1992 I was the first non-State Archives member to be elected to the National Committee and subsequently its first female chairman (*SA Archives Journal* Vol 35, 1993).

At the time, the other committee members still often confused their roles within the Society with those of the State Archives. I often had to stop discussions in meetings to ask whether the matter was relevant to the Society or not, only to receive rather sheepish apologies and a change of subject – back to Society issues.

In 1992 SASA's constitution was amended to gear its functions towards not only the development of archives but also the promotion of the profession. The need for National Committee members to be resident in Pretoria was removed, enabling a wider range of candidates, provided they were prepared to travel at their own cost. Their term of office was increased to 2 years and, to encourage 'new blood' and new ideas, the Chairman could only serve one full term. Membership criteria were also expanded to distinguish between various categories of members (to include eg records management practitioners, genealogists, history aficionados, etc) and to streamline the admittance process.

With South Africa's re-admission to the world because of the end of apartheid, there was much debate around whether to change the name to the Southern rather than South Africa Society of Archivists. At the time, however, there was considerable hype in SA about how it was superior in so many ways to the rest of Africa. The Society did not want to reflect the same arrogance in pre-supposing that the other southern African states would simply agree to join SASA without prior consultation. So that change was left to subsequent committees to debate.

Cooperation between the Society and the then Technikon RSA enabled the latter to take over the National Diploma in Archival Science and together a new curriculum syllabus and guides were compiled. Consultation continued on an ongoing basis and members of the National Committee served on the Technikon's Advisory Committee for Archival Studies. Other universities also introduced archival training programmes, which the Society welcomed.

5 A changing South Africa, new logo

1992 saw the first truly international symposium presented by SASA's national committee in collaboration with AMLB. There were about 130 delegates from across southern Africa and the Netherlands. Two years later a second – even more successful – international conference was held. The idea was to have such gatherings biennially – but as several members of SASA's National Committee were involved in organising the 1997 ESARBICA conference in Pretoria, this time table was disrupted.

In 1993 SASA's old coat of arms was replaced with a more up-to-date logo. The logo symbolised the vigour and national identity of a professional association stimulated by the challenges of the nation's transformation. It depicted the acronym of the Society's name on a symbol representing archival media (scroll/tape/film) and incorporated an African element in the patterning.

The 1990s saw considerable political upheaval in South Africa. As Verne Harris so eloquently put it:

The opening of new horizons in the archival profession... evident [from] the late 1980s ... received added impetus from the socio-political transition process (SA Archives Journal Vol 34, 1992).

In all issues of importance to the country's archives the Society played an important role, either by action or publishing relevant articles in the *Journal*. Professional debate thrived and a new energy was evident, including the first benefits of cross-border interaction. No longer did the editorial staff have to beg, cajole or twist arms to get copy for the *Journal* – unsolicited submissions for the *Journal* started pouring in. While much of it revolved around lofty transformation and philosophical issues, matters of import for basic archival practice were not neglected.

There was considerable debate around the issue of the *Journal's* language policy. Previously a bilingual (English/Afrikaans) publication, the Society had to adapt to changing conditions and a new policy, allowing for contributions in any South African language, was adopted. To reach a wider, international audience, English remained the preferred language and all non-English articles had to have an English summary. The majority of members approved of the change of policy – on a trial basis.

A Position Paper on Information and Archives was produced to position the Society on the central issues confronting the profession during transition. Subsequently SASA participated in discussions and made submissions regarding new archival legislation for South Africa – including the consultative forum and the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee. Members also gave oral evidence during the hearings – culminating in the 1996 Archives Act.

SASA also made a formal submission to government on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission from an archival/records management point of view. Vigorous submissions in the interests of the profession were also made with regard to the new Constitution and the Draft White paper on Arts and Culture.

SASA contributed to the debate regarding Secrecy vs Access to Information legislation as well as the question of the need for a moratorium on the destruction of state records. Branches of the Society contributed towards the formulation of Provincial legislation relating to archives.

The Society kept its finger on the pulse of matters affecting archives and brought issues to the attention of the relevant parties. In 1997 Brenthurst Library purchased Dr Percy Yutar's records of the 1964 Rivonia Treason Trial and, thanks to SASA and newspapers such as the *Sunday Times*, Brenthurst Library agreed to provide microfiche copies of the records to other institutions.

6 Dynamic 1990s

Ongoing archival issues were not forgotten:

- A Professional Code was produced.
- The SA List of Archival Terms was updated and published by the National Archives on behalf of SASA.
- At SASA's suggestion and with its help, the National Archives published a directory of archival institutions in SA (1999).

Subjects covered in the 1990s included:

- Access protocols and changing formats of finding aids to meet changing user needs
- Records management and the challenges of managing the entire life-cycle of records
- The role of records in transparency and the need for clearly defined protocols
- Appraisal theory and practice, perspectives on oral sources, electronic records

- The debate whether archivists preserve documents or the information in those documents and the impact of migration to other media.
- Computer applications for effective document management – mainly as finding aids
- Machine-readable information management (computers, micrographics and optical disks) and the required standards for long term preservation
- Repatriation of archives in exile
- Education and training of archivists – including undergraduate levels
- Emergency preparedness, disaster management and preservation/conservation policies
- Energy efficiency and non-toxic housekeeping in archival storage facilities
- Outreach programmes for archives – the pros and cons
- Similarities and differences between Archivists, Librarians, Museologists and Historians

Non-traditional archival forms received increasing attention and uses, guidelines and opinions were incorporated in the *Journal*:

- Electronic archives – either born digital or converted – on disk or server or shared.
- The growing demand for film and sound/music archives.
- Improving systems for archiving of photographic collections.
- The role of oral history and the question of the responsibility for the capture and preservation of orality.

Businesses were also encouraged to consider the value-add and practical uses of archives (e.g. building restorations, promotional campaigns, advertising, legal protection, etc).

Also highlighted was the recognition that while archivists are custodians of narrative, they can and should also be narrators of stories that have been marginalised – a return to our basic archival roots.

The South African Society of Archivists was dynamic and reached its pinnacle in the mid 1990s. It was attracting a number of young, black professionals in the field who, in 1995, constituted about 25% of the Society's membership of 228. Numerous seminars were presented by the various branches of the Society and active debate was evident throughout the country. There was no longer a need for AMLIB as it merged in every sense of the word, except formally.

7 Apathy, changing technologies

In 1998-1999 there were disturbing signs of reluctance by members (now numbering 261) to pay their membership fees. Vigorous attempts of reminding them reduced the outstanding fees from 50% to 30%. This sad reality was cause for concern at a time when the profession was losing status and there was an urgent need to raise the level of professionalism through a professional association. In an attempt to meet members' financial concerns, a two-tier fee structure, determined by the income of the member, was introduced. The heady days of the 1990s were over and the time had come to consolidate and build new structures. The disturbing signs, however, intensified:

Verne Harris' departure from the Editorial Committee of the *Journal* in 1998 saw the editorship move to a collective under the leadership of the Director of the Campbell Collections in Durban. It was a departure from the established practice that the editors be members of SASA's National Committee. The experiment failed and the 1999 issue was distrib-

uted very late – based on a 1998 project and very much a “rescue effort” by the National Committee in the absence of any tangible outcomes by the editorial team. The function thereafter returned to the National Committee. There was a reputation to uphold as the *Journal* had been rated as the 3rd most important read in the world’s archival serials by Canada’s Terry Cook.

SASA was finding it increasingly difficult to find members with the energy and ability to organise conferences, do administration, advocate for the profession and edit its publications.

The National Committee still had members that were keen to contribute and they played an important part in the Standards Generating Body for Archives process. And a conference on “Renaissance in Archives” was held in 2000 and a further conference in 2002 was well supported.

But, since the turn of the century things had changed dramatically for the Society. The era of the Internet had arrived and the National Committee depended increasingly on technology. SASA now had its own website and posted updates, but did little to prompt members to actually go to the site. The chairman’s annual reports were no longer posted by snail mail – or even emailed – to members.

SASA introduced a listserv service enabling members to communicate and forward items of interest –mainly from the Net. While the service provided a very useful purpose in disseminating information, the human element was missing. There was a sense that interaction and networking was unnecessary and that you just HAD to get what you were looking for on the Internet.

The emphasis was on electronic technology. Members were urged to participate in new projects geared towards digital archiving – once again by clicking on links and finding out for oneself. The *Journal* reflected the new thinking that, while preservation was central to the archival function, digital technologies were the archivists’ future.

Traditional archival issues such as appraisal/disposal, archivists’ knowledge of collection contents, sorting, description, access protocols, finding aids, historical information management, conservation, etc started receiving less and less attention. If it could not be found on the “system” it did not exist.

8 Records management, other societies keep flag flying

The decrease in emphasis on archival professionalism was replaced with an increasing emphasis on records management. The largely office administrative function of RM meant that one could now depend on outsourcing and for-profit conference convenors to arrange workshops and conferences, at vast expense, that, more often than not, promoted a particular IT application – short courses seldom more than a week or two in duration.

The National Committee prided itself on having achieved the ‘independence’ of the Society which it felt had been controlled by the National Archives (*Journal*, Vol 42, 2001/2002). It reversed a 1994 resolution to house the Society’s own archives at the National Archives – with only active records remaining in the possession of the serving Secretary and Treasurer – and removed the collection from the Archives. It was an unfortunate move, as this collection was subsequently lost and, as far as can be ascertained never retrieved.

The Committee itself also shifted its focus from professional issues to administrative and transformation issues. Substantial strides were made to address the past demographic imbalances in membership (both racial and geographic), with an emphasis on numbers. There was unfortunately a loss of many highly qualified professionals – whether due to leav-

ing the profession, the Society, or simply the dummied down of archives due to limited training, one does not know. Members from farther afield than Gauteng were encouraged to serve on the National Committee. The approach however, was not administered as efficiently as one would have liked and things started to grind to a halt. There was talk of mergers with other societies.

Apathy set in and surveys asking for suggestions for new directions went largely unanswered. Members no longer paid their membership fees and the Committee did not have the time or energy to chase them up. SASA was no longer the vibrant society of old. Branch activities also decreased and the *Journal's* last edition was No 43 of 2003.

The problem was to get people willing to administer the society – membership, finances, events, communications, watch-dog roles, etc. Various organisations offered their administrative services, but there was a suspicion, rightly or wrongly, that these institutions were looking for business and that the mailing list for marketing their own wares was their prime target and not the furtherance of the profession.

Good intentions abounded, as did suggestions to have workshops to discuss the way forward. Nothing however came of them. Attempts to revive SASA in 2005 were also unsuccessful.

Archivists increasingly depended on other organisations for discussions on issues of interest. Thankfully organisations such as the Nelson Mandela Centre for Memory, Wits University, UNISA, SA History Archive, ESARBICA, various historical societies, etc stepped into the breach.

The launch in 2009 of the Archival Platform was a breath of fresh air, and archivists in South Africa welcomed it with open arms.

“The Archival Platform is a networking, advocacy and research initiative. We use the word ‘archive’ to refer not only to records or books in archives and libraries, but also to memory, cultural practice and places that tell the stories of the past. The Archival Platform’s aim is to facilitate dialogue and information sharing between professionals, academics and government employees in the heritage and archive sector.” (Archival Platform)

Even with these other organisations, there was clearly still a need for an association such as the Society of Archivists. A corporate archives forum had been formed as a discussion group for business archives and its periodic meetings over the years were attracting increasingly more and more non-corporate delegates and records management practitioners – thereby losing both its ‘corporate’ and ‘archival’ character.

9 SASA resuscitated

At the behest of Patrick Ngulube the gathering of archival and records management professionals at the First Unisa Department of Information Science Archives Conference held in 2008 elected a Steering Committee with the express purpose of reviving SASA. The Steering Committee’s first meeting was held in September of that year and the new National Committee met for the first time in June 2009. With UNISA and the National Archives, the new SASA organised successful conferences in 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012. A shared electronic group communication service (similar to the listserv of old) has been set up and today we celebrate the launch of the revived *Journal* – No 44 of 2011. And congratulate the National Committee and thank them for their hard work.

Archivists look to the past and talk to the future. The issues facing archives are numerous, challenging, but also interesting. One would hope that the professionalism due to archivists will be regained and that their status will be more generally recognised.

The issues facing the profession are considerably more complex than purely records management. While records management is necessary to make archives work, but the preservation and utilisation of information for long term use – as long as possible – must remain a priority. RM can help make filing systems more effective and ease the burden of appraisal, but the historical impact must not be forgotten.

Sorting and description, finding aids, access controls, preservation and storage concerns remain important, even if their character changes. Understanding the storage, description and access of information on hard copy is still essential, as not all the last few centuries' information has been digitised.

Storage of soft copy must also receive attention – migration from application to application is not as simple as it may sound, as loss occurs and, if left to automatic systems, items are often just dropped from the system if the new application does not 'talk' to the old – and who has the time to check daily whether all the records on the system yesterday are still there today?

As the question of emails has not yet been resolved, how are archivists going to handle the matter of social networking – last year's Egyptian rebellion was largely spurred on by Facebook and Twitter, after all. History will overtake us if we are not vigilant.

How do we address these issues? By talking to each other, to other countries, and do not allow organisations such as SASA to disappear again.

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