

# COLLECTION AND PRESERVATION OF HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS FOR EFFECTIVE UTILIZATION IN THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF NIGERIA

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## **ABSTRACT:**

Historical documents are collections that contain important information about persons, places or events. In most National Libraries, they serve as monuments where information about the past can be easily retrieved. This paper attempts to address the issue of historical documents in the National Library of Nigeria; how it can be acquired, effectively preserved and utilized by the clientele.

**Keywords:** Historical document, Collections, Archive, Preservation and Conservation.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Everything on earth has a beginning and an end. The combination of the beginning and the end of any person, place or event creates a history. If one were to define history as a period when man started keeping records of his existence, one would regard libraries as almost old as history.

History is the chronicling of events and the study of past events in order to throw light on current events and predict what is likely to happen in the future. This chronicle of events could be about various experiences; it could be about famous personalities, places or organizations. Many write-ups and documents that are produced today, such as newspapers, law, edicts, decrees, pictures, drawings, films and music would be considered valuable historical documents now and in the future.

However, most of these documents and items could be lost in the future, since they are either printed on papers, which have a limited life span, or they are on digital formats that could become obsolete in a relatively short time frame or that they were not kept at all for posterity. The ultimate reason for preserving these historical documents is to make them available for the use and consultation of generations to come.

Historical documents are normally found in the libraries, archives and museums. Archives are traditionally responsible for the care of historical materials, but, that notwithstanding, there are other institutions that

concern themselves with the collection and preservation of these unique materials. For more clarification on the subject, the terms "archive" and "archivist" will be explained with brief information about the National Archive of Nigeria.

### **Definition of Terms**

The new Lexicon Webster's Dictionary defines "history" as relating to the past or having important associations with famous events or development in the past. Historical documents, therefore, have to do with the collections, documents, manuscripts and records of the past with unique information.

**An archive** is a collection of documents, usually those of historical and of rare value. These documents, which could be in any form of media, are normally unpublished records, unlike books and periodical publications. The Society of American Archivists (1991) defines archives as "The non-current records of individuals, groups, institutions and governments that contain information of enduring value".

**An Archivist** is a professional who assesses, collects, organizes, preserves, maintains, controls and provides access to information considered to have permanent value. According to Moses (2006) the Archivists keep records that "have enduring value as reliable memories of the past and they help people find and understand the information they need in these records".

The archivists, the librarians, the record managers, the museum curators, and the historians have much in common; but there are important differences among them as well. The librarians, like the archivists collect, preserve and make their collection accessible; they deal primarily with the published items that are not unique.

The archivists, on the other hand, deal with unique materials. The record managers and the archivists often work with similar types of materials. However, the record managers deal with a large number of records that are retained only for a limited time. The archivists work with the small subset of records that merit long-term retention. The museum curators deal with different types of collections, unlike the archivists. Their collections are mostly objects as opposed to paper or media records. Finally, the historians work closely with the records in doing historical research, but they are not generally concerned with the management of records.

### **The National Archives of Nigeria.**

The Nigerian Record Office, now known as the National Archives of Nigeria, was established in 1954 on the recommendation and efforts of Mr. K. O. Dike (Jorg Adelberger 1992). The National Archive has its headquarters at Ibadan, with branches in Kaduna and Enugu. There are some divisions of

competence among the three centres. Ibadan is responsible for the collection and preservation of the western historical documents; Enugu is responsible for the southern part, while Kaduna is responsible for the northern part of Nigeria. Documents available in the archives include, Newspapers, Parliamentary papers, Arabic manuscripts, Books, Photographs, Video, Films, Radio/Television, Festivals, Paintings, Africana Materials etc. For more details about the archive, you can visit their website at: [www.nigeria.gov.ng/archivesindex.htm](http://www.nigeria.gov.ng/archivesindex.htm)

### **Managing Historical Collections**

Managing physical records involves a variety of diverse disciplines. Historical collections often include photographs, architectural drawings and plans, prints, maps, video or audio tapes, films, and most recently electronic records. But whatever the type of records, the professional's task (i.e. The archivist or the librarian) is to identify the records that have continuing usefulness, preserve them and make them accessible through time. In the National Library of Nigeria, the historical collections include the materials in the Government Documents Division (GDD) and the newspapers in the Serial Division. The Government Documents Division (GDD) has materials such as Federal Government Official Gazettes, Supplementary Gazettes, Laws of the Federation, Nigerian Constitution, Colonial Materials, Regional Materials, Speeches of the States' Governors or President and other historical documents.

These materials are acquired through the Legal Deposit Act and their processing is done at the National Bibliographic Control Department (NBCD). This department is responsible for all the technical processing in the National Library of Nigeria. After the technical processing, the materials are sent to the Public Services Department (PSD) for storage and utilization by researchers and other users. The materials are kept separately in a special reading room where it could be consulted by the library users in a supervised environment.

Since the materials are unique and sometimes fragile, the researchers are normally requested to comply with some regulations during the consultation, such as routine checking and registration of users.

### **The Need for Historical Documents Section in the National Library of Nigeria.**

Although the National Archive of Nigeria is being utilized extensively for the collection and provision of historical documents in Nigeria, the National Library of Nigeria, being the apex library, has a role to play in the preservation of the national heritage of the nation. Most National Libraries in the world have historical collections in their libraries; for instance, the United

States Library of Congress has the following as its historical collections: the declaration of independence; the constitution of the United States; the Gutenberg Bible etc. In fact, the declaration of independence and the Gutenberg Bible are displayed in the library. This does not mean that there is no National Archive in the United States of America.

The National Library of Nigeria should have a Historical Documents Section with a cultural heritage, as a unit under it. The historical section should include all materials that are presently available at the Government Document Division. The newspapers and other relevant materials scattered in the various State branches should be put together and sent to the headquarters. Also, the National Library should re-enforce Decree No. 29 of 1970, Section 4 (1). The Decree states among other things that "a private publisher of any book published in Nigeria shall, within one month after publication, deliver at his own cost to the National Library of Nigeria, three (3) prefect copies of such book; the State Government should deposit ten (10), while the Federal Government or its Agencies should deposit twenty five (25) copies". A copy of each document deposited with the National Library of Nigeria must be sent to the University of Ibadan for preservation. The library should ensure that the materials are deposited in the National Library of Nigeria. This will form part of its Historical Document Section.

The Cultural Heritage Unit should have, as its collections, photographs, films, music, drawings, paintings and some traditional attires like buba, sokoto, and agbada; traditional fabrics like adire, aso-oke and angeer; cultural items like cowries, beads etc. All these can be displayed in the Unit. Also, the photographs of Nigeria's pre-independence, other unique photographs in the State Branches, and the Board members photographs and other photographs in the Board Room should be transferred to that unit for effective utilization by the Library users and the researchers.

The historical documents could also be acquired by liaising with the traditional rulers, the chiefs and the communities. The materials could be documented, using the traditional language to make it authentic. The library will also be responsible for translating local dialect to English language where necessary. The issue of copy-right will also be discussed and agreement reached. These documents can be disseminated by repackaging them into abstracts or notes for easy circulation and utilization by the library users.

### **Preservation of Historical Materials**

Most historical documents are organic in nature and, as a result, will ultimately deteriorate. According to Harvey (1992) the rate at which materials deteriorate is determined by two factors. These are the inherent chemical stability of the material and the external actions that affect it.

Others are:

- 1) The nature of modern book, due to high acidic content of its paper, especially those published since mid - 19th century.
- 2) Inadequate storage conditions, which quicken book decay, as a result of lack of air-conditioning facilities that are essential to libraries in tropical countries.
- 3) Biological attacks of fungi, insects, rodents and birds.
- 4) Mechanical wear and tear of books, and mishandling of library materials by the users.
- 5) Negligence on the part of librarians of the physical care of library materials, and lack of awareness of the deteriorating condition of library resources.
- 6) Thefts, which have historically defied solutions, despite the chaining of the books to the desks during medieval period.

Historical documents if not properly managed and preserved, will definitely not serve the purpose for which they are acquired; hence, preservation of the materials.

The American Institute for Conservation (1999) defines preservation as:

"The protection of cultural property through activities that minimize chemical and physical deterioration and damage and that prevent loss of informational content. The primary goal of preservation is to prolong the existence of cultural property."

**Conservation** is a specific term, referring to the physical treatment of individual items, usually after some damages must have occurred. Conway (1996) is of the view that today, preservation is an umbrella term for many policies and options for conservation treatments. Every institution that has a collection of enduring value should have a preservation plan for it. Alegbeleye (1997) put forward a model for assessing possible preservation and conservation of libraries' materials. These include:

- (i) Minimal or small programme level.
  - (ii) Middle programme level
  - (iii) Optimal or full scale programme level
1. **The minimal or small level programme** refers to the measures that are taken to improve the physical handling of materials when they are circulated amongst the users. It is this minimal level that Rosenberg (1993) referred to as "every-day book care" which consists of:
- (i) Cleaning the library and the book stock.
  - (ii) Shelving and careful removal of books from the shelves and replacing

them after use.

- (iii) Careful use of books during reading
- (iv) Photocopying; and
- (v) Minor repairs which do not need special tools or expensive materials.

2. **The Middle level programme** refers to all elements under the minimal level plus preventive conservation. This includes environmental control and provision of a moderate stable temperature, humidity and controlling exposure to light and pollutants. At this stage, the air conditioners are very important because they are the best means of stabilizing temperature and humidity. They also help to filter out particulates and chemical pollutants such as dirt, dust, smoke etc. In areas where electricity facilities are not constant or not available, the use of windows is highly recommended in ensuring good air-circulation. Also light should be controlled especially the ultra violet rays. Library buildings should be structured in such a way that direct penetration of the sun rays could be avoided. It is hoped that the new permanent National Library building in Abuja is structured in line with the above recommendation to ensure proper preservation of her collections.

3. **Optimal or full scale programme** level embraces both the minimal and the middle levels; it also includes direct intervention with the materials. The optimal level includes preservation by substitution or reformation. Reformation involves reproducing materials into stable media to preserve the information contents. This can be achieved by:

(i) **Microfilming:** "Reformation" by microfilming or by photocopying onto permanent paper is well-suited for paper materials that are valuable only for the information they contain (e.g. Deteriorating newspaper). Reformatting can also provide a surrogate copy, so that fragile originals are protected from unnecessary use. Properly produced and properly stored microfilm has a lifespan of about 500 years. It requires only a lens and a light to read. Microfilming is a preservation reformation method of choice by most advanced libraries.

(ii) **Photocopying:** In-house photocopying into permanent durable paper is an excellent way to preserve acidic paper materials. It also provides preservation for fragile materials and for those that are heavily used in the library.

(iii) **Deacidification:** Deacidification is a technique utilized in conservation science to remove the acids that are in books or papers.

(iv) **Lamination:** Lamination is another technique used to restore a

book or document into a useable condition. Lamination provides protective, waterproof and transparent cover to all varieties of documents.

**(v) Book Binding:** Book binding is a process whereby disintegrating books are bound together, usually with a hard cover.

**(vi) Digitization:** Digitization is the process of converting traditional library materials, such as books and other paper-based information materials, into an electronic form, so that they can be stored and manipulated by a computer. The National Library is currently involved in the digitization of newspapers. Other materials to be included in the historical collections can also be digitized or microfilmed.

According to Smith (1999), two basic reasons why libraries embark on digitization are: to increase access to materials and to preserve the original document. If all the collections are digitized, they can be placed on the website for on-line browsing. The historical document should also be preserved in the same way. However, the library can still consider the aspect of microfilming if it deems it necessary. The National Library of Nigeria is already engaged in the minimal, middle and full scale programme of preservation; but more efforts should be enforced to achieve the desired goals.

### **Preservation of Photographic and Audio Materials**

Among the materials collected and organized by the educational and the research institutions are photographs, which are most treasured and heavily used. Photographs are extremely sensitive to moisture, heat, light and pollutant and so they should not be stored in hot places or near heat sources. Photographic prints and films should be packaged in an enclosure such as envelopes, boxes or albums. Exhibitions of the original Photographs should be strictly avoided, while copies should be made available for display purposes, Photographs could be digitized and placed on the web for on-line browsing. Deteriorating photographs will require conservation treatment by a professional photographic conservator.

Non-print materials also require special care. According to Harvey (1992) microforms should be handled by the edges because the fingerprints can obscure the images. The microfilm and the microfiche tools should be cleaned regularly to prevent scratching. Care should be taken to handle the compact discs and the CD-ROMs by the edges; the magnetic media (such as Computer discs) should not be placed near a strong magnetic field.

**Conclusion:**

The primary responsibility of any National Library is to conserve the national heritage of that nation. Evelyn (1964) said that Dr. Kwame Nkrumah was of the view that a good National Library is at once the repository of the nation's culture and wisdom and an intellectual stimulant. Historical Document and Cultural Heritage units in the National Library of Nigeria will not only portray the library as the giant memory and intellectual store-house of the nation, it will also enable the library to provide services that will reflect the values and needs of the people.



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