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Fifty years of archives administration in Nigeria: lessons for the future

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Abstract

Purpose – In commemoration of the 50 years of archives administration in Nigeria, the purpose of this paper is to look at the establishment of the National Archives of Nigeria, its expansion and development over the years and its role in coordinating records management in Nigeria.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on published literature and documentary evidence from records.

Findings – The paper discusses the gains of the past, particularly the high hopes of the 1970s and the expansion and consolidation of the 1980s which rolled into the early 1990s. Notes the decadence of the 1990s and highlights the problems that bedevilled the institutions and archives and records management in the country among which are poor funding, lack of appreciation of the importance of archives, obsolete equipment and high staff turn over.

Originality/value – The paper identifies the challenges and sets the agenda for the future.

Keywords Archives management, Records management, Archiving, Legislation, Nigeria

Paper type General review

Introduction

The year 2004 marked the fiftieth year of the existence of the National Archives of Nigeria. A period of fifty years is a landmark in the life of an entity, individual or corporate. For an individual, it is a time to look back, reflect, give thanks for getting that far and look forward to the years ahead which, in most cases, may not be as long as the years gone by. For a corporate entity, whose existence may be in perpetuity, it is also a time to take stock and review past operations, reflect on the successes and failures of the past and map out strategies for the future. This was the position the National Archives of Nigeria, as an institution, founded on 1 April 2004.

The political history of Nigeria is closely linked with the British colonial administration. In 1914, the entity now known as Nigeria came into existence with the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates. Interestingly, the year 1914 also marked the beginning of concern by the Colonial Office for the state of public records in Nigeria. In that year, the Secretary of State for the Colonies sent a circular to the officer administering the Nigerian Government, Sir Frederick Lugard, requesting “a brief report as to the existing arrangements for the custody and preservation of the older official records of the government” and also advising that appropriate steps be taken to ensure “the safe-keeping and preservation of the documents in question” (Ukwu, 1995). The concern was not just for older records, as hope was also expressed



that every care was being taken of more or less recent records required for official reference (Alegbeleye, 1995).

Subsequent dispatches were forwarded in 1929, 1936 (two in number) and 1948 all on the subject of preservation of official records of the Nigerian Government. In the dispatch of 16 October 1936, Mr Ormsby Gore, the then Colonial Secretary, particularly emphasized that "the preservation of its records in a satisfactory state must be regarded as one of the first duties of a colonial government a duty which derives greater urgency from the fact that delay in the institution of suitable protective measures may and does lead to the inevitable loss of documents of value". The 1948 dispatch was also significant in that it was accompanied by a memorandum from the celebrated English Archivist, Sir Hilary Jenkinson who was then the Deputy Keeper of Public Records of England and Wales (Dike, 1954; Alegbeleye, 1995). It was, therefore, evident that the fate of public records in Nigeria was of much concern to the British administration, a concern that spanned a period of over three decades.

Nigerian Record Office

The various dispatches from the Colonial Office to the colonies on the subject of records preservation did not translate to the establishment of a public record office in Nigeria. Sir Lugard's reply to the 1914 dispatch, for instance, stated that official records were "in a very fair state of preservation and that the current arrangements were adequate for their safe-keeping". This, in essence, meant that the need for a record preservation policy and programme was not felt. Perhaps the only positive reaction on the part of the Nigerian government was the internal circular of 1937 issued by Mr J.A.M. Maybin requesting all offices to furnish the Chief Secretary's Office with information on "the existing official practices with regard to the destruction and the retention and preservation of records" In apparent reaction to this directive, most Departmental Heads complained about the lack of facilities, including storage and personnel, that could facilitate the proper preservation of public records (Dike, 1954).

Despite this concern, the eminent scholar, Kenneth Dike, who conducted a survey of public records in Nigeria from 1951 to 1953, found old public records in disarray and in a state of decay and destruction. In his report of the survey, Dike made a number of recommendations, one of which was the establishment of a public record office in Nigeria. The acceptance and implementation of this recommendation by the government led to the establishment of the Nigerian Record Office on 1 April 1954 with Dike, understandably, appointed as the first Supervisor of Public Records.

National Archives of Nigeria

Although the Nigerian Record Office was established in 1954, it was not until 1957 that the establishment was given a legal backing. In that year, the Public Archives Ordinance No. 43 was enacted. The law, which became effective on 14th November 1957, changed the name of the establishment to the National Archives of Nigeria.

The National Archives of Nigeria took off in 1954 in temporary accommodation of two rooms granted by the then University College, Ibadan under the supervision of the Federal Ministry of Works. In 1958, a purpose-built permanent building of the institution was commissioned on the same University College Campus, Ibadan. Subsequently, the offices at Kaduna and Enugu were opened in 1962 and 1963 respectively. These, until the 1980s, were the main location centres of the National

Archives of Nigeria. Each of the centres kept and still keeps mostly records of colonial administration relating to its particular region. In addition, most of the centres keep government official publications and newspapers, the most prominent being Iwe Irohin, reputed to be the first newspaper in Nigeria published in 1859. The oldest archives in Nigeria, however, are the Arabic manuscripts dating back to 12th century A.D. whose acquisition has been credited to S.S. Waniko, one of the early archivists (Shyllon, 2000).

Early leadership

Kenneth Dike was at the helm of affairs of the National Archives of Nigeria from its establishment in 1954 to 1963; he was appointed the Supervisor of Records even before the institution came into being. In December 1953, the appointment was renewed for another period of five years. However, with the enactment of the Public Archives Ordinance in 1957, provision was made for the position of a Director. Despite clamour for the appointment of a full-time Director, Dike was formally appointed in June 1959 the Director of National Archives of Nigeria on a part-time basis for a term of five years with effect from 1 January 1959. A lot of criticisms had been made against Dike's appointment and leadership of the National Archives of Nigeria from inception to December 1963 (Sowoolu, 1970; Shyllon, 2000).

The criticisms notwithstanding, Dike is widely acknowledged as the father of Nigerian Archives. A great deal of the surviving archives of the country would have been lost if not for his vision and efforts. Shyllon (2000) identified "the training of the first generation of Nigerian archivists abroad, the expansion and publicity of the department, and the movement in 1958 to the first purpose-built archives building in tropical Africa" as the major achievements of the National Archives of Nigeria in Dike's era.

Mr Lloyd C. Gwam succeeded Professor Dike as the Director on 1st April 1964. Mr Gwam who is acknowledged as the first substantive director had a very short tenure as he died on 2 July 1965. Despite his short tenure and service, Mr Gwam is reputed to have given the National Archives a dynamic and purposeful leadership. He was a professional to the core. His treatise, *Archive Memoranda*, is regarded as the bible for Nigerian archivists and an important orientation material for a newly appointed archivist for the depth with which it treats professional and technical matters.

Mr S.O. Sowoolu succeeded Mr Gwam. His 18-year directorship has been described as a period of consolidation of the achievement of his predecessors. His administration was particularly commended for the recovery and reorganization of the records in the Eastern States affected by the scourge of the Nigerian civil war that ravaged the country from 1967 to 1970 (Ukwu, 1995). He also started the process of expansion of the National Archives of Nigeria. Mr Sowoolu has been rated as a man of ideas but who "lacked the dynamism of his predecessor" (Shyllon, 2000). This shortcoming, according to Shyllon, "prevented him from achieving the great leap forward he envisaged for the archives".

Achievements

By the 1960s, the National Archives of Nigeria held out high hopes of taking the lead and being the best in Africa. Shyllon (2000) quoted Philip Curtin, an eminent scholar, as expressing the hope in 1960 that "the Nigerian National Archives will be one of the

most efficient in tropical Africa". Three purpose-built archive buildings at Ibadan, Kaduna and Enugu, a crop of well-trained professional staff and unrelenting records acquisition and processing activities were all indices of a committed and serious national archival institution

Training

Gwam, Sowoolu, Waniko and others acquired their professional training and experience in Public Record Office, London (now The National Archives, Kew, London), the Bundesarchiv, Koblenz and other centres of excellence in archival training and education. They also attended workshops, seminars and conferences and participated actively in the activities of professional organisations.

The training of staff was not restricted to archivists. Other categories of staff, including repair/bindery and para-professional staff, were also trained locally and abroad. In the early years of the institution, an expatriate instructor, Mr Derek Charman an English County archivist, was invited to Nigeria for six months to assist in giving staff the required professional training. Thus, the professional standard at this period was generally high.

The downturn in Nigeria's economy and the consequent problem of foreign exchange in the 1980s made overseas training of staff impracticable. As such, the National Archives of Nigeria had to look inward. A modality for the running of a Masters in Archival Studies (MAS) degree programme in the then Department of Library Studies for the education of archivists was developed with the University of Ibadan. Consequently, the National Archives of Nigeria has, since 1995, been training its staff in the Department of Library, Archival and Information Studies, University of Ibadan. The MAS degree programme is supported by the National Archives of Nigeria through the payment of an annual subvention to the department. Experienced archivists from the National Archives of Nigeria also assist the department as guest/part-time lecturers. Thus, there is a strong bond between the National Archives of Nigeria and the Department of Library, Archival and Information Studies of the University of Ibadan. Both institutions have collaborated and are still collaborating on issues relating to archives administration and records management in Nigeria.

Expansion

Until early 1980s, the National Archives of Nigeria maintained its presence in Ibadan, Kaduna and Enugu. Although expansion was desirable, it appeared that there was a misconception that it was not possible to do so without an amendment to the Public Archives Act of 1957. However, the challenges of archival services in a vast country like Nigeria made expansion imperative. In 1982, the branches in Benin and Sokoto were established. Akure and Ilorin offices came into being in 1985. More branch offices were established in Owerri, Calabar and Port Harcourt in 1986 and Jos and Abeokuta in 1989. The Maiduguri office, a purpose-built centre, was completed and commissioned on 18 March 2005.

The oldest offices at Ibadan, Kaduna and Enugu have been upgraded to the status of zonal offices to supervise, oversee and coordinate the activities of the branch offices around them. Construction works on the extension to archive buildings in these zonal offices were undertaken in the 1990s to alleviate the problem of congestion. The headquarters was moved from Ibadan to Lagos, the then Federal capital and the seat of

the Government of Nigeria in 1984, an exercise that has been described as being merely symbolic, the life and soul of the National Archives still being left behind in Ibadan (Shyllon, 2000). With the change in the seat of government, the headquarters is now physically located in Abuja, the life and soul still remaining in Ibadan.

New archival legislation

In 1992, the National Archives Decree No. 30, which, by virtue of section 315 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, became an Act of the National Assembly, was enacted. The enactment of the law was a realization of more than three decades of agitation to have a more robust law that would take care of the challenges of archives administration and records management in Nigeria. Most of the woes of the first three decades of the National Archives existence were blamed on the inadequacies of the Public Archives Act of 1957.

The National Archives Act makes provision for the preservation and management of all categories of records – public, private, individual and business. The highlights of the Act include the designation of Departmental Records Management Officers for public offices, 25-year access rule to public archives, restrictions on disposal, transfer or sale of private archives without permission of the Director of National Archives of Nigeria, prohibition of exportation of private archives, imposition on business houses of the obligation to establish business archives on attaining the age of twenty-five years, and provision for the appointment of the National Archives Advisory Council. Law, being a dynamic instrument, the Act is now due for review and amendment as the challenges of electronic records management seem not to have been well taken care of in the Act.

Records management activities

In line with the provisions of the National Archives Act, the National Archives of Nigeria gives technical advice and assistance in records management to public offices in Nigeria. In 2004, the institution facilitated the designation and inauguration of Departmental Records Management Officers for federal ministries and extra-ministerial departments to further the implementation of a records management programme for Nigeria. It organizes a training programme for Departmental Records Management Officers in the public sector as well as those in the oil and gas sector in Nigeria. It periodically reviews the record keeping practices of public offices. The institution is also working assiduously on a general schedule for the retention and disposal of records in the public sector while departmental records management officers are being encouraged and assisted to produce specific schedule for records peculiar to their offices.

Collaboration with professional and international organisations

The National Archives of Nigeria is an institutional member of many professional organisations. It also collaborates with many international organisations in the preservation and administration of invaluable primary documentary source material that archives constitute.

At the national level, the National Archives is a member of the Society of Nigerian Archivists, which it assisted in founding during the West African Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (WARBICA) Conference in Jos, Nigeria in 1983,

Oral History/Tradition Association of Nigeria and Historical Society of Nigeria. These organisations are supported morally and financially by the National Archives of Nigeria (Ukwu, 1995).

At the regional level, the National Archives of Nigeria is a strong member of WARBICA. Nigeria plays a prominent role in the organisation. In 1994, the Society of African Archivists was inaugurated during the Pan-African Conference on Archival Policies and Programmes in Africa held in Abuja, Nigeria from October 31 to November 5. In appreciation of the success story of the Society of Nigerian Archivists, Nigeria was entrusted with nurturing the new organisation.

The National Archives also belongs to many international organisations, the most prominent being the International Council on Archives (ICA) established in 1950 through a UNESCO initiative as a world body for archival policy development. Nigeria has served in many committees of the organisation. Others are the International Records Management Council and the Association of Commonwealth Archivists and Records Managers.

The National Archives of Nigeria relates to and forges cooperation with UNESCO, an association that has yielded many dividends to the institution. In 1989, UNESCO commissioned and funded the visit of Messrs Peter Bower and Joan van Albada to Nigeria to investigate the state of records management and National Archives in Nigeria. The report of this mission led to the 1993 refresher course organised for archivists and records officers from National and State Archives, Federal ministries and parastatals as well as corporate organisations in Nigeria.

Pan-African Conference

Perhaps the biggest achievement of the National Archives of Nigeria in the 1990s was the hosting of the Pan-African Conference on Archival Policies and Programmes in Africa in Abuja from 31 October to 5 November 1994. The conference, which was attended by 170 delegates from Africa, Europe, North America and Asia, was supported financially by UNESCO. The delegates included the representatives of international organisations like UNESCO, ECOWAS, UNDP and IFLA. Twenty-one papers were presented at the Conference by experts from Africa, Europe and North America. Most of the papers focused on African experience in archives administration and records management. All the papers were published by the ICA in the first issue of *Janus* for 1996. Reflecting on the success of the conference, the editor-in-chief, Joan van Albada remarked in the preface that:

The conference organizers introduced subjects that so far have received little attention in our professional literature; subjects like the concept of archives in Africa; the significance of primary historical source material for African unity and integration; archival legislation as a watershed in the development of archives and records management; and the role of records management in business during market reform programmes. I hope that other conferences will provide archival community with similar valued studies before long.

The hope expressed by Albada in 1996 remains to be realized.

Problems

In the 50 years of its existence, the National Archives of Nigeria has been faced with a number of problems some of which have stunted its growth. Top on the list of problems is poor funding, a problem that is as old as the institution itself, and the root

being traced to Dike's modest budget for its development. Dike volunteered his services to carry out the records survey that led to the establishment of the institution and also got moderate accommodation, equipment and materials at the inception. Thus, the impression was created that archival administration was not a capital-intensive programme. It then, according to Shyllon (2000), "became a habit of those who controlled the purse strings of government to wonder why an idea that had begun as a simple inexpensive scheme should later threaten to cost so much to carry out and maintain".

The manner in which archival matters are handled, particularly in government circles, in Nigeria portrays little appreciation of the importance of archives and this portends grave danger for archives administration and records management in Nigeria. For a very long time, the National Archives of Nigeria has been treated like the proverbial orphan passed from one uncaring relation to another. Since 1954, the institution has been placed under different supervising ministries – Federal Ministry of Works (1954-1957), Federal Ministry of Education (1957-1975), Federal Ministry of Information (1975-1979), Federal Ministry of Social Development, Youth, Sports and Culture (1979-1985), Federal Ministry of Information and Culture (1985-1990), Federal Ministry of Culture and Social Welfare (1990-1992), Federal Ministry of Information and Culture (1992-1999) and Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation since 1999. This movement does not make for stability and has adversely affected the institution. Most of these ministries have had little or no interest in archives with a consequent slide in the fortune of the institution. Thus, the institution has received little or no budgetary support to cater for its professional activities and to upgrade its equipment and facilities.

The National Archives of Nigeria, like similar institutions in Nigeria and other parts of the world, must be an autonomous and self-accounting institution rather than a department in the ministry with the attendant civil service constraints to funding and development. Pending the attainment of the status of a commission, the institution should be located in the Presidency where proper funding and due attention can be guaranteed.

By the early 1960s, the National Archives of Nigeria established its presence in Ibadan, Kaduna and Enugu with purpose-built archive buildings. Today, there are fifteen centres including Lagos and Abuja out of which the newly completed Maiduguri centre is the only addition to purpose-built centres. Others are either located in rented accommodation or in the State-based Federal Secretariat where they share accommodation with strange bedfellows. They lack a fully equipped archival centre and therefore exist more or less as liaison offices with consequent effect on operational activities and professionalism. As far back as 1994, the importance of archive buildings was underscored in the communiqué issued at the end of the Pan-African Conference on Archival Policies and Programmes in Africa when governments of African countries were called upon to ensure that "archives are kept in buildings which are properly designed, equipped and maintained".

One of the future challenges is the upgrading and proper housing of all these archival centres in Nigeria. Technical units like a micrographic and reprographic unit as well as a conservation and bindery unit, which are essential for the proper functioning of an archival institution but are now lacking in most centres of National Archives of Nigeria, must be established.

Perhaps the most visible problem of the National Archives of Nigeria is that of infrastructure decay. Most of the facilities provided in the first two decades of the institution's existence have deteriorated and become non-functional. The air conditioners in the repositories as well as conservation and reprographic equipment in Ibadan, Kaduna and Enugu have completely broken down. The repositories are filled up despite the extension projects of the 1990s. The physical condition of the holdings leaves much to be desired. The microfilming programme of the institution, which was pursued with vigour and enthusiasm in the 1980s and early 1990s, is virtually abandoned. The recent acquisition of more sophisticated microfilming equipment has not made much impact, as the equipment has not been put into maximum use.

Another problem area is staffing and this dates back to the early years of the National Archives of Nigeria. Sowoolu (1972) reported that:

The one problem that remained intractable throughout this period (1958-1965) was providing sufficient prospects in the higher ranks of the department which would encourage good officers to stay on. This problem created and perpetuated instability in the rank of archivist. Of the four officers trained between 1955-60, three had left by 1962. Of the three recruited in 1960, two left the same year.

Beyond the problem of high staff turn over in the 1960s, the recruitment effort of the 1980s did not match the pace of retirement and expansion while it finally came to a halt in the 1990s. Today, most centres of the National Archives of Nigeria are faced with the problem of acute shortage of staff particularly in the archivist cadre. Ibadan centre, for instance, had a total number of 20 archivists on the nominal roll in December 1978. By August 2000, the number had drastically dropped to five archivists and today, archives administration at the centre is carried out by just four archivists who are increasingly finding it difficult to cope with the challenges of a modern archival institution as well as meet the technical need of public offices in records management.

Lessons

A number of lessons can be learnt from the 50 years of the existence of the National Archives of Nigeria that can properly position the institution for the future challenges of archives administration and records management in Nigeria. In the first place, archives administration and records management thrive in an environment of appreciation and understanding of the value and relevance of records. This has not been the case in Nigeria and it is a reflection of the record keeping culture in both the public and private sector in the country. Consequently, the National Archives of Nigeria is little known and rarely appreciated. Thus, the fortune of the institution has been on the decline with adverse implication for archives administration and records management.

Secondly, archives administration and records management are no trivial or inconsequential activities requiring minimal budgetary support, a notion that has affected the funding of the activities of the National Archives of Nigeria. They must be seen as a serious business that must be properly funded. The government, therefore, owes the duty of adequately funding the activities of the institution, which are aimed at ensuring the survival of national documentation heritage.

Thirdly, a national archival institution should play a leading role in managing public sector records, a role which the National Archives of Nigeria has not effectively

played in Nigeria. For a very long time, the institution's emphasis has been on archival preservation at the expense of records management, particularly in the public sector. It must be appreciated that the quality of archives depends to a very large extent on the records management practices at the various stages of records life cycle. The management of current and semi-current records should, therefore, be a legitimate concern of the institution to guarantee smooth transition of records of permanent value to the archives.

For effective management of records in the public sector, there must be co-operation and good working relationship between the National Archives of Nigeria and public offices. The recent cold war between the institution and the Federal Ministry of Establishments as to whose responsibility it is to coordinate records management in the public sector, particularly at the federal level, is a worrisome development and a lesson on the need for cooperation and proper delineation of functions and authority in the overall interest of records management in Nigeria.

The future

The future of archives administration and records management in Nigeria lies in the hands of the National Archives of Nigeria as the nation looks up to it for leadership in this regard. The gains of the past must be harnessed while the problems that have slowed down the development of the institution in the last fifty years must be addressed for solution.

The importance of archives administration and records management is little appreciated among administrators and bureaucrats in Nigeria. The National Archives of Nigeria must demonstrate the value and relevance of archives to the society. By so doing, it will command the appreciation and respect of the society. There is need to be proactive in the years ahead. The Nigerian government and society learn to appreciate and support any institution that proves its mettle. A case study is the National Agency for Food, Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), which has gradually endeared itself to the heart of many Nigerians despite seemingly difficult terrain in which the Agency is operating.

In the area of preservation, a lot has to be done in the immediate future, as preservation is an important issue in archives administration. As observed by MacKenzie (1996), preservation "... contributes to the physical well-being of collections". Archival materials are unique and are, therefore, irreplaceable if lost or damaged. Most of them are made of materials that are organic in nature. Since they advance in age, deterioration can set in through natural ageing process. The continuing preservation of these cultural heritage, most of which have existed for several decades is a challenge facing the National Archives of Nigeria in the foreseeable future, as the effects of long years of existence and the difficult-to-manage tropical environment are already manifesting on the materials.

Dilapidated conservation equipment and facilities need to be repaired and new ones that meet the challenges of modern conservation programme must be acquired. Conservation and repair workshops must be resuscitated and invigorated. Archives must be protected against latent and inherent hazards. A digitization programme must be introduced not only to salvage endangered archives but also to promote wider access.

The development of information technology (IT) has made tremendous impact on records creation, use and management. Fifty years ago when the National Archives of Nigeria was established, records were mostly in paper format. Today, they are increasingly generated electronically and stored using computer technology. With emphasis shifting to electronic government (e-government), public official businesses are now conducted electronically, thus opening the frontiers of preponderance of electronic records generation. The management of these records and the administration of emerging electronic archives constitute a big challenge facing the National Archives of Nigeria in the post golden jubilee years. In this regard, the institution has to be proactive and get involved in the design of records systems that will ensure the proper management of electronic records throughout their life cycle and beyond.

The National Archives of Nigeria must remain focused and be properly positioned to meet the challenges ahead. The government, which is the main funding agency for the institution, must be convinced as to the relevance of archives to its reform agenda. More importantly, it must be demonstrated that records are crucial in ensuring transparency, accountability and good governance which are now the key issues in, and the expected benefits of, archives administration and records management.

The National Archives of Nigeria must reach out to and actively partner with international organisations like the ICA and UNESCO for technical and financial support in meeting its social responsibility to the Nigerian nation in particular and the archival world at large, as Nigerian archives constitute an important part of the memory of the world. It also has to collaborate with other archival institutions within and outside Africa to improve professional standard. It behoves the institution to give the much-desired leadership for archives administration and records management in Nigeria and at the sub-regional level.

Conclusion

Although remarkable achievements were made in archives administration in the early years of the National Archives of Nigeria, the economic recession of the 1980s and the early 1990s, among other factors, has adversely affected the activities of the institution. Poor funding, deterioration of facilities, equipment and materials, high staff turn-over and dwindling opportunities for staff training and development are some of the problems the institution has been grappling with in the last two decades.

The National Archives of Nigeria has shown little concern for the management of records at the current and semi-current stages of the life cycle. Until very recently, the institution made very minimal positive impact on the management of public sector records. Its emphasis was on archival preservation, particularly the records acquired by the institution in the first two decades of its existence.

The challenges of the future are enormous, as the National Archives of Nigeria must dictate the pace for records management and archives administration in Nigeria. The Nigerian government must give the institution the required budgetary support to upgrade and expand facilities, as more and more records mature daily for acquisition, processing and archiving. The institution must give due attention to and champion the cause of records management in the public and private sectors to ensure sustainable development and to guarantee transparency, accountability and good governance in Nigeria.

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