

THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND NATION-BUILDING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The paper argues that although the National Archives in Nigeria has become a very neglected institution, it remains a veritable tool of nation - building. It examines the origins of the idea of the archives and its transplantation to Nigeria as a necessary component of the emergence of African History as a credible discipline. It argues that a major pillar on which the nascent African nations depend for their nation - building process was in the infusion of a sense of the past. In this, the Ibadan School of History played a major role through the writings of its scholars. Their humongous achievements and impact on nation-building in Nigeria as in elsewhere in Africa, is partly attributable to the substantial documents provided by the National Archives. The current challenges that have bedevilled the archives are also scrutinised and solutions proffered to get it out of its contents current quagmire.

Introduction

A heritage of independent Nigeria from the British colonial administration is the institution of the National Archives. Although the idea and eventual establishment of an archive in Nigeria is a product of the colonial era, the initiative and push that brought it to fruition has variously been credited to Professor Kenneth Onwuka Dike who is regarded as the founding father and a major catalyst in the emergence of modern African historiographyⁱ. In his zeal to reshape the focus and methodology adopted in the teaching and writing of African History, there was an urgent need for the provision of other primary sources beyond the use of oral tradition that he had successfully utilized for his now epic thesis published in 1956 as *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta*.ⁱⁱ

The establishment of a National Archives was in Dike's view an important element in this quest for making available to scholars the requisite primary documents for the study of the African past. Indeed, the establishment of a National Archives in Nigeria was a product of part of the nationalist ferment that inspired the bringing to the front burner, the study of African History. In this deconstruction of African History, Dike was at the *fons et origo*. The establishment of a National Archives was therefore a necessary component of the new momentum which the study of African History was attracting in the 1950s.

However, while the idea of a National Archives in Nigeria could be credited to Kenneth Dike, this idea of an archive is not novel. Our investigations into the contributions of the National Archives to Nation Building in Nigeria will therefore begin with a historicity of the establishment of archives in the world generally and particularly in Nigeria. Second, we examine how the establishment of the national archives in Nigeria and Nation building are entwined. Third, we reflect on the challenges

facing the national archives in Nigeria. Finally, we conclude by recommending a way out of the current challenges facing the National archives in Nigeria.

On The Idea of Archives

The idea and existence of archives in other climes is of great antiquity. Its development has been linked to the history of human civilization when man started to keep records of his transactions in record rooms. Such record rooms did exist in ancient Egypt. Hedstrom and King support this view when they argue that the origins of archives are intertwined with the emergence of writing, the development of commerce and accounting, the establishment of the rule of law, and the genesis of scholarly discourse.ⁱⁱⁱ George-Otutru trace the history of archives to the clay tablet age, during which period both the created and used materials were restricted to the agencies that created them, for example, religious institutions. He notes that the modern day archive assumed its present role towards the end of 18th century, when archives opened their doors not only to government officials and researcher but also to the general public.

Governments, institutions, associations, corporate bodies and private individuals produce new documents daily. There is however the challenge of preserving and retrieving documents when needed. It is in response to this challenge that the existence of an archive becomes necessary. The Archives is not just a repository of the memory of a people, association, nation or state that is set up to preserve their records but an indispensable source of history of the period covered by the records in the archives. Archives are of great value to nations, regions, organizations, communities and individuals. They provide evidence of activities which occurred in the past. They tell stories, document people and identity, and are valuable sources of information for research. They are recorded memory and form an important part of community, cultural, official and unofficial history. According to UNESCO, archives are an essential part of a society's institutional memory. They are also a major cultural and scientific information resource and a significant element in the national information system^{iv}.

The 7th edition of the Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary defines archives as a collection of historical documents or records of a government, a family, a place where these records are stored. In essence, an archive is a place that people visit in the search for uninterpreted information about the past. It affords the user the opportunity to primary first hand facts, data and evidence from letters, reports, notes, memos, photographs, memorabilia, memoirs, correspondences and other primary sources that were generated earlier in the past. Indeed, archives are mainly made up of primary sources. These are original records created at the time of the event. They are generally unpublished. They are distinct, fragile and irreplaceable. They require temperature controlled conditions for storage, careful handling, and because of their rarity, supervised viewing. It is expected that Governments and other organizations deposit documents periodically and continuously according to the management policies. A public archives might also receive recent papers from individual donors.

The records in the archives are usually of enduring cultural, historical or evidential value. They are normally unpublished and almost always unique, unlike books or magazines for which many identical copies exist. This means that archives are quite distinct from libraries with regard to their functions and organization. It is important to note that access to archival materials is restricted to

archivists who make them available to users on request. There is therefore a close supervision and monitoring of archival documents as they constitute invaluable heritage of the society.

In the discharge of their duties, it is expected that archivists collect, preserve and manage government, missionary, private and company documents and other historical records. In government, important records are mostly found in the local, state or national level. Developed nations such as Canada, France, Germany, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States of America, etc., caught the vision of preserving their documentary heritage for future generations early in their history. It is often said that a nation that does not know its past cannot plan for its future. America has one of the largest archives in the world; the National Archives in Washington D.C. called the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) holds billions of materials which come from the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. NARA retains the correspondence files of past US Presidents and previous directors of Federal agencies. This has greatly helped the United States in shaping policy and planning for the development of the country.^v

In Nigeria, in pursuit of the mandate to collect and preserve worthy documents of the past and making same available for reference and research as enshrined in the 1957 Public Archives Ordinance 12(a) No.43 and as amended in 1992, the records kept at the archives include intelligence reports of colonial administrators, correspondences between colonial government officials, records of government activities, diaries often from famous persons, notes or recordings of interviews, photographs, sketches and paintings, birth, death and marriage records, records that document trade policies and figures, wars and natural phenomena, the migration of peoples, the birth and development of the national identity, gazettes, land registration, titles to property, maps, court records, architectural plans and engineering drawings, meeting minutes, memoranda and correspondence of associations, political parties, local government councils, school boards and other formal groups. It is crystal clear from the pool of records cited above that archives are important resources for answering our questions about the past. Records may be used to settle legal claims, they may clarify family and group histories, they are a major source for historians and they help illuminate the past.

According to Yusuf, K.F.^{vi}, the legal regime of the National Archives vests it with the responsibility of collecting, registering and preserving worthy memorials of the past and making these available for reference and research. These resources include books, documents, photographs, maps, manuscripts and newspapers. Otutru^{vii} observes that four categories of documents are preserved in the National Archives of Nigeria (i) records of the Federal Government, (ii) records collected from various local government areas, which include administrative, constitution, and legal records throughout the country, (iii) records of private bodies and individuals who deposit them on voluntary basis, and (iv) audio-visual records. These materials are kept in the National Archives of Nigeria for policies, decision procedures, operations and so on for continuity and consistency. Apart from the above mentioned records, there are other records which are preserved, such as Agreements, Proclamations, Treaties, Orders-in-council, letters, patents, royal instructions, conventions etc. Others are records of the colonial activities covering 1884-1914, records of both World Wars I and II (1914-1918 and 1939-1945) and records of the church missionary societies. Effective records management is essential to quality research, impartial adjudication and good governance. There is no gainsaying

that any nation that wants to excel and intends to have a proper record of its past must make the institution of archives a priority.

Although archives are created primarily for use by government, its rich stores of material are available to all; historians and the academia researching and interpreting the past from primary sources, journalists researching stories, students preparing term papers, long essays and other forms of dissertations and theses; ethnic groups, communities, institutions, societies and associations pressing claims and persons tracing their ancestry or satisfying their curiosity about particular historical events. Genealogists rely on archival sources to reconstruct family trees and trace their histories. Property owners may need to research the history of their land or building and determine boundaries. Maps can be used to show the size and shape of the original lot.

Nation-Building

The term Nation-Building has been interpreted variously. In this paper, nation building is seen as all efforts made towards national integration, cohesion and national unity. Nation-building involves the arduous task of bringing together into a harmonious political unit the diverse sub-nationalities within that political unit. Nation building is a process of integrating diverse autonomous political entities within a state. It is a process whereby the various political entities transfer their loyalty and commitment from ethnic or primordial group to the larger nation unit. Nigeria as a nation emerged from diverse socio-cultural entities. In 1914, the varied societies north and south of the latitude of Lokoja were declared by the British government to be members of a single state called Nigeria. Since then, various efforts have been undertaken to integrate the diverse political entities to ensure national cohesion and unity

In the task of getting the diverse peoples that comprise the new Nigeria to understand themselves, there was the need for a detailed historical study of the peoples and societies within Nigeria. Apart from the various oral traditions of the people that existed, very little documentary evidence was available. Even this, was not systematically preserved and managed for the use of researchers. These records about pre-colonial Africa that were largely generated through intelligent reports of the colonial administrators were not accessible to scholars. The first generation of academics on Nigeria had to depend largely on the resources in the Public Records Office in London. It was against this background and the vigorous attempt to not only decolonize and reconstruct African history but to address the problems of the paucity of written sources on Nigeria that Kenneth Dike embarked on a survey of documents of the Nigerian colonial government in 1951 with the purpose of preserving them.

Dike states that the need for the conservation of the National Archives of Nigeria was recognized by the Colonial Office as far back as 1914, when the Secretary to the Colony in England indicated interest in the preservation of official documents in the colonies and protectorates. The secretary suggested that steps should be taken to ensure that effective provision was made for the safe keeping and preservation of the documents as indicated in various circulars dispatched within 1914, 1929, 1936 and 1948 to the colonial administrator.^{viii}

The idea was to have large bodies of written documentation that could be used in combination with other sources. A recommendation contained in his Nigerian Records Survey 1951-

53, gave birth to the Nigerian Records Office in 1954. On 1st April 1954 National Archive of Nigeria was established as a unit in the Federal Ministry of works with the name "National Record Office" headed by Kenneth Onwuka Dike.^{ix} In other words, it is on record that the Dike Report led to the establishment of the National Archives with the *raison d'être* being a national repository of all important documents that directly affect national development. On 14th November 1957, the Nigeria Public Archives Bill was passed into law as public Archives Ordinance 12(a) 1957 Ordinance No. 43 of 1957. The Nigerian Records Office metamorphosed into the Nigerian National Archives by 1958, with three major branches domiciled in the nation's three regions as at that period- Ibadan, Kaduna and Enugu. And on January 9, 1959, the first permanent block of the National Archives of Nigeria was formally declared open.^x However, there are smaller branches of the archives at Abeokuta, Akure, Benin, Calabar, Ilorin, Jos, Lagos, Maiduguri, Owerri, Port Harcourt and Sokoto. In 1992 a new decree, known as National Archives Decree was enacted which made significant amendment over 1957 Ordinance.

It was against this background of the establishment of a National archive, that historical studies blossomed in Ibadan. Indeed what became the only academic global brand in Nigeria – the prestigious Ibadan School of History – was partly forged with the documents from the National Archives. Her historians embarked on several ground-breaking research endeavours utilizing the primary sources available in the newly established archives. For instance what became the flagship of the brand - *Ibadan History Series* – known for its excellent historical tradition was anchored on documents derived from the National Archives amongst other sources. Under Dike who was incidentally also the first Director of the National Archives, "Ibadan became famous not only for its quality teaching but also the rigour, variety, volume and quality of the research work emanating there from".^{xi} The acronyms of NAI, NAE and NAK became constant and almost predictable in all the students projects, dissertations and thesis produced in Ibadan^{xii}. Prominent works of the Series include J.F.Ade-Ajayi's *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841- 1891: The Making of a New Elite*, J.D Omer-Cooper's *The Zulu Aftermath: A Nineteenth Century Bantu Africa* and *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842-1914: A Political and Social Analysis* authored by E.A. Ayandele. *Niger Delta Rivalry: Itsekiri –Urhoo Relations and the European Presence* by Obaro Ikime, R.A. Adeleye's *Power and Diplomacy in Northern Nigeria 1804-1906* and A.F.C. Ryder's *Benin and the Europeans* are some of the best sellers from this series. In all, over twenty five titles were produced that derived a good chunk of their documentary data from the National Archives.

The effects of these works are remarkable in the transformation of Nigeria from a colonial state to a modern post-colonial nation state. As Dike himself has noted, "every nation builds its future on its past"^{xiii} The archives provided substantial crucial primary material in the task of unveiling and knowing the past; the past on which the future of the new country was built. As has been argued by E. J. Alagoa, there is the cultural dimension of building a national consciousness; a consciousness that is an essential ingredient of national development^{xiv}. In the construction of this consciousness the role of the historian is indispensable and in the performance of this role, the archives have provided invaluable documents. It is therefore the case that the flowering of Nigerian history as an acceptable sub-area of specialization within the family of African history is partly attributable to the role of the

National Archives in the provision of documents with which to reconstruct the past of Nigerian peoples and societies.

Much as the focus of this piece have been on the interaction between the historian, the archives and the society, it is pertinent to remind us that historians are not the only users of the invaluable documents in the archives. Legal practitioners in the pursuit of their professional calling in courts of law visit the archives to conduct searches and get necessary documentary evidence especially for their land matters and chieftaincy disputes. A good number of major land matters that ended in the Supreme Court have a substantial dose of primary evidence emanating from the National Archives. Even some co-travellers with historians in the task of interrogating the past have had to rely on documents in the National Archives. A good example is the doctoral thesis of Professor Lanre Olutayo, a Sociologist in the Faculty of the Social Sciences, University of Ibadan.

The point in emphasis is that beyond the historian, there are various other professionals who rely on the documents in the National Archives in their researches and in the practice of their profession. These professionals- such as lawyers, journalists and social scientists have contributed immensely to nation building in Nigeria.

The Challenges of the National Archives

In the past three or more decades, the fortunes of the National Archives have plummeted substantially. It has suffered neglect, gross underfunding and marginalization by its owner- the Federal Government of Nigeria. Its documents have deteriorated so badly that a good number have been lost to inadequate facilities for their preservation and to pilfering by its users. The workers in the various archives have suffered substantial frustration and disillusionment as a result of the utter neglect from government. In the face of this scandalous situation, the archivists and the users of their products have remained helpless and unable to fashion out a sustainable solution to get them out of the quagmire. The situation still persists and accounts for the determination of the Historical Society of Nigeria to partner with other interested parties to address and halt the decay.

It would appear that there is a nexus between the fortunes of the history discipline and that of the National Archives. When History blossomed, the National archives were well funded and its need attended to. Today, its failings are very apparent from the state of its infrastructures, the dwindling paucity of available documents, the non-updating of their records, the lack of major historical documents in their custody and the almost non-existent training programmes for members of staff. There are no systematic depositions of documents in the post-colonial era. It would not be out of place to ask at this juncture of the documents that were generated from all the post -1960 National Conferences, the various post-1960 Commission Reports (such as OputaPanel and Uwais Panel Reports), the Nigerian Civil War papers, etc. These documents are part of our national heritage that should be available to researchers. It is a known fact that a good number of documents belonging to various institutions of government are either rotten away or sold to groundnut and puff-puff sellers to wrap their products.

The very poor financing of the National Archives limits its development in terms of staff, accommodation, equipment for preservation and services such as oral collection. The conditions of service for archivists are generally poor in Nigeria and this makes the job unattractive. Improper

preservation of records provides a favourable condition for insect, rodents, etc. to penetrate and destroy documents. Lack of comprehensive policies on what to keep and what to weed, what to destroy and non-charlatan attitude of staff to create access to the records also hinders the development of archive in Nigeria.^{xv}

The archive is a vital factor in the preservation and presentation of the cultural heritage and National identity as well as a tool for administrative efficiency. When the archives are neglected the nation suffers and continues to forge on without a sense of history. The wheel is not only reinvented due to a lack of knowledge of the past, old mistakes continue to re-occur. No country aspiring to greatness could afford to ignore that part of its National heritage, which is preserved in old papers and ink for immortality.^{xvi} It is therefore not surprising that Nigeria has continued to wobble and fumble in virtually all spheres of her endeavour.

Conclusive Remarks

We suggest that the National Archives of Nigeria should be more pro-active in the provision of services such as exhibition; this should be done from time to time so that the citizens can be more enlightened about the existence of archives and its potentials. Archives as a social agency should move from the old pattern of waiting for user to come and patronise them to "market" the services to the people in order to achieve better result. Furthermore, the Federal Government of Nigeria and other owner institutions should make more funds available for effective running of the Archives. The importance of archives needs to be understood by all, so that proper care can be given to records. It is clear that records are exposed to natural and man-made disasters, hence, should be protected. There is also the need to provide the facilities for adequate storage and management of resources. The government should take all necessary steps to preserve our written documents and improve the holding capacities of the facilities in the archives in the various parts of the country. Mutilation and pilfering of archival documents should not just be criminalized, but infractions punished and publicized with the hope that it will act as a deterrent.

The National Archives houses some aspects of our National heritage. A resuscitation and sustenance of this national institution should therefore not be the exclusive preserve of the Federal Government alone. State and Local governments, public spirited individuals, non-governmental organizations and companies must all come together to offer the requisite support for the National Archives. Grant awarding bodies and the Tertiary Education fund should be approached to help in the resuscitation of this national institution. Government as the most critical stakeholder cannot abandon its responsibility in this regard. Adequate budgetary allocation needs to be provided for the National Archives yearly. All other efforts at sustenance from other stake holders must be understood to be merely complimentary. In the task of revitalising the National Archives for the purpose of nation building, all hands will need to be on deck.

Notes

ⁱ Earlier on, at about 1914 and 1929, the Secretary to the Colony in England had recognized the need for the preservation of official documents in the colonies. See Yusuf, K.F. 2013, "The Role of

Archives in National Development: National Archives in Perspective” in *International Journal of Economic Development Research and Investment*, vol.4, No.2 and also Uya, O.E. 2008, “The Historian as a Citizen: The K.O. Dike Challenge” in C.B.N. Ogbogbo & O.O. Okpeh *Interrogating Contemporary Africa: Dike Memorial Lectures 1999 -2007*, HSN, Ibadan, p.76

ⁱⁱK.O. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta*, Longman, London, 1956.

ⁱⁱⁱOtutru, G. 2000. “The role of the National Archives of Nigeria in National Development Nigeria” *Journal of Library and information service*, 3, 4.

^{iv}Albada, J. van and Bower P. 1989. Records Management and National Archives in Nigeria. *Report prepared for the Government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) U N E S C O Technical Report RP/1988-1989/VII.2.1 FMR/IPS/UIS/89/117*

^vWarner, Robert M. 1985. The National Archives at Fifty. *The Midwestern Archivist*, Vol. X, No. 1. 25-32

^{vi} Yusuf, K.F. 2011. The Role of Archives in Development: National Archives of Nigeria In Perspective. *Journal of Library and Information Service*

^{vii}Otutru, G. 2000. The role of the National Archives of Nigeria in National Development in Nigeria *Journal of Library and information service*, 3, 4.

^{viii}Dike, K. O. 1954. *Report on the preservation and administration of Historical records and the establishment of a public record office in Nigeria*. Lagos: Nigeria Government Printer.

^{ix}Dike, K. O. 1954. *Report on the preservation and administration of Historical records*

^xLloyd C. Gwam. 1963. The First Permanent Building of the Nigerian National Archives. *Journal of the Society of American Archivists*. Vol. 26. NO. 1. January 1963: 67-74. PDF version, July 26, 2010.

^{xi} Uya, O.E. 2008, “The Historian as a Citizen: The K.O. Dike Challenge” in C.B.N. Ogbogbo & O.O. Okpeh *Interrogating Contemporary Africa*, p.88.

^{xii}NAI is acronym for National Archives Ibadan, NAE for National Archives Enugu and NAK for National Archives Kaduna.

^{xiii}Afigbo, A.E. 1999, *History as Statecraft: Nigerian National Merit Award Winner's Lecture*, Whytem Publishers, Okigwe, pp. 3-5.

^{xiv} Alagoa, E.J. 1998, *Dike Remembered: African Reflections on History Dike Memorial Lecture 1985 – 1995*, University of Port Harcourt Press, Port Harcourt.

^{xv}Ibid.

^{xvi}Ukpaki, S. C. 1995. *National Crisis and the Civil War: Identifying and recovering the sources material on the Federal and Biafra experiences. Inside Nigeria History (1950-1970)*, Ibadan, the Presidential Panel of Nigeria. Since Independent History Project.