

**GOETHE-INSTITUT/KENYA NATIONAL LIBRARY  
SERVICES (KNLS) Librarians' Workshop**

*Workshop Theme:*

**THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN PROMOTING DEMOCRACY: ENSURING  
FREE ACCESS FOR ALL**

*Paper Title:*

**Libraries and Democracy: The Role of the Kenya National  
Archives and Documentation Service**

Paper presented at the 2008 Goethe-Institut / KNLS Librarians' Workshop held at  
CPA-Centre-Ruaraka, Nairobi from 23rd<sup>h</sup> - 25<sup>th</sup> July, 2008.

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## *Abstract*

*The paper starts by a “detailed” introduction on what the Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service is all about. It goes ahead to explain what democracy is and even gives an example of a democracy that was well established, its characteristics and how it collapsed. There is also a look on contemporary democracy that hinges on the provision of information. It is upon this premise that the role of the Kenya National Archives in democracy is built. Finally the challenges, way forward and a conclusion are given.*

## **Introduction**

The Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service (KNA&DS) is a department within the office of the Vice President and Ministry of State for National Heritage and Culture. The Kenya National Archives was established by an act of parliament, The Public Archives Act of 1965 (Commenced on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1966).

“There shall be established, constituted and maintained a public department to be known as the Public Archives Service for which there shall be appointed a Chief Archivist, and such other staff as may be necessary for the purposes of this Act.”

*(Section 3. (1) – Establishment of Public Archives Service)*

The Act was later revised in 1990 to become The Public Archives and Documentation Service Act, Cap 19 of the Laws of Kenya. There was a slight amendment in this Section 3. (1) To rename the Public Archives Service to the Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service. Besides the renaming, the position of the Director was created for that of Chief Archivist. Notable was also inclusion of **Section 5A**. that distinctly set up the National Documentation Service and outlined its major roles of which majorly empowered the section to select , collect ,process, house , control and preserve all bound documents created by any government ministry or department.

**The department has seven divisions**

1. Records Management Service
2. Archives Management Service
3. National Documentation Service
4. The Conservation Section
5. The Audio-Visual Archives Section
6. The Microfilming Section
7. Administration

Records Management Service

This section is decentralized with five provincial record centres, namely:

- ✓ Nairobi Records Centre: It serves three (3) provinces: Nairobi, Eastern and North Eastern Provinces. It is housed in Co-operative House within the Central Business District.
- ✓ Nakuru Records Centre: Serving Rift Valley Province, right from the South to the North Rift, a wide region indeed.
- ✓ Mombasa Records Centre : Serving Coast Province
- ✓ Kisumu Records Centre : Serving Nyanza Province
- ✓ Kakamega Records Centre: Serving Western Province.

The main purpose, of this service is to advice public offices on proper records management practices. This is through developments of file classification schemes, file retention and disposal schedules. Each of these is headed by a Provincial Archivist.

#### Archives Management Service

This service is centralized at the department's headquarters in Nairobi. Its main purpose is to provide preservation of public archives (microfilming, storage, audio-visual and conservation) and access facilities (search room) of the same materials. Efforts have been made to computerize archival lists and catalogs. Users are able to access both manual and catalogs on archival holdings.

The department has embarked on a digitization project with the purpose of long-term preservation of archives as well as increased accessibility of archival holdings.

National Documentation Service

This service supplements archival materials with publications. In addition it facilitates establishment of information resource centres / documentation link centres in public offices.

The NDS has six distinct sections, namely:

The Government Publications Section

The Murumbi Africana Collection

The Staff Library

The Legal Deposit Library

The General Publications Section

The Periodicals Section

The Conservation Section

It has state-of-the art equipment for conservation purposes. The major role of the department is to restore damaged specimens. In order for information to be available, it has to be preserved and conserved. They department also offers advisory services on the best practices for preservation and conservation of information resources across formats – print , digital, microfilm etc

The Audio-Visual Archives Section

Just as the name denotes, this section houses information that can be listened to –audio- or viewed –visual-. Others can be both listened to and watched as in the case of video tapes. It has a rich collection of still photos on Kenya’s heritage; it also houses audio tapes that were taken on and about Kenya. There are tape reels. All these have information about the rich Kenyan heritage.

#### The Microfilming Section

It has become important to convert information to other formats and this is exactly what the Micro-filming section does. The department concentrates on converting print documents to digital formats. Notable are the Kenyan Dailies – Nation, Standard, Kenya Times. The section had also started digitising the Murumbi Africana Collection – the rich collection of the Late Joseph Murumbi, one time Kenyan vice president.

#### Administration

It goes without saying that each organisation has a way it is administered. The Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service is headed by a Director, who has two deputy directors being followed the Provincial Archivists and the Heads of the various sections mentioned above.

## **Democracy**

This is not a new term to most of us. *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines democracy as “a system of government by all people of a country, usually representatives whom they elect, thought of as allowing freedom of speech, religion and political opinion.”

*The Wikipedia Encyclopaedia,*

Democracy is a system of government by which political sovereignty is retained by the people and exercised directly by the citizens. In the contemporary society, the term democracy has also been used to refer to a constitutional republic where people have a voice through their elected representatives.

Perhaps the most popular definition of democracy most of us have heard is that of the eloquent words of Lincoln in the Gettsburg Address. “**A government of the people, by the people, for the people.**”

The term democracy comes from Greek and combines the elements *demos* which means “people” and *kratos* which means “force” or “power” This is to say, democracy is where power is vested on the people.

Democracy is a political system in which all the members of the society have equal access to power.

### **A Brief History of Democracy**

The history of democracy traces back from its origins in ancient world. Athens is regarded as the birthplace of democracy and the most important democracy of old. The Athenian democracy of Cleisthenes and Pericles was based on freedom. To preserve the principles, the Athenians used lot for selecting officials. The lot's rationality was to ensure all citizens were "equally" qualified for office. Corruption was avoided by use of allotment machines

### Characteristics of the Athenian Democracy

- In courts, judges were chosen randomly by use of lot from a pool of judges. There were many juries without judges.
- No one was allowed leadership position more than once. This meant that no-one could build up a power base through staying in a particular position for long.
- The only officials chosen by elections were generals where military knowledge was required and the treasurers who had to be wealthy. For the simple reason that any funds discovered to have been embezzled were recovered from the treasurer's private fortune.
- Debate was open to all present and decisions in all matters of policy were taken by majority vote
- Individuals who were interested in holding office had to nominate themselves a year before. No office appointed by the lot could be held twice by the same individuals.

All in all Athenians enjoyed their liberties not in opposition to the government but by living in a city that was not subject to another power and by not being subject themselves to the rule of another person. In brief, the power was in the people's hands.

The decline of democracy was not only due to external powers, but from its citizens such as Plato and Aristotle through their influential works by feeling that the less-born, the mob or the poorer classes were holding power. It was only later after the publication of "*A History of Greece*" by Georger Grote in 1846, when the Athenian democracy of Pericles started to be viewed positively from the political thinkers.

### **Democracy in the Contemporary Society**

Where once the democratic norm led people to be allegiant and passive, citizens today are more skeptical of politicians, parties and political institutions , as well as more assertive in their political participation. The engagement in new forms of democratic participation is increasing. (Dalton, 2002). The share of the public that engages in direct forms of action, ranging from signing petitions to participating in protests has grown over the last several decades. (Inglehart, 1997). Citizen groups, public interest organisations and Non Governmental Organisations have proliferated; and these groups claim to represent issues that democratic governments have ignored. Thus contemporary democracies generally face popular pressures to grant more access, increase the transparency of government and become more accountable to their actions.

Change is qualitative as well as quantitative; citizens are participating in new types of decision making, often in ways that give them more scope to cast a direct verdict on

policies or individual politicians. There are increasing opportunities for citizens to directly vote for their leaders. These changes suggest that citizens now have a larger and more direct role in important political decisions, though in a way that builds upon, rather than supercedes, representative institutions.

Referendums and initiatives place even greater demands for information and understanding upon the voters. This is where the libraries and or information centres play a key role to meet this need.

### **Key Elements of Democracy**

- Freedom of Speech
- Rule of Law
- Citizens' Participation in Governance
- Freedom of Press
- Freedom of Worship

### **The Role of the Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service**

In order for people to participate in a democracy, they need information. KNA&DS has a rich collection of information on Kenya and other regions that is useful for this. The archival staff in this department have an obligation to provide accurate, trustworthy, complete, timely, reliable and useful information. This information is used for the following purposes:

*Accountability*

It is important to document all processes undertaken by any institutions. Since a democracy is for the people, citizens should be made aware of “all” the happenings in public organizations. There are audit reports from parastatals, public universities, ministries and so on. This information is important for auditing and carrying out monitoring and evaluation exercises.

*Justice*

The KNA&DS archives holds information relating to past human rights violations like extra judicial executions, assassinations, land grabbing, appointments, past decrees, political events amongst many others that are sensitive issues touching on democratic principles. These are records on most of the past injustices, correspondence that was done on the same and even actions that were taken on that. If people access this they will know where they have come from and where they want to go. For the past is our heritage and one has to know where s/he is coming from.

*Transparency*

This can only exist if things are laid bare as they are. It means that decisions taken and enforced are executed based on stipulated rules that are understood by the stakeholders. The KNA&DS has enhanced this by having in its possession reports and records from key government establishments. The NDS has a number of reports from “all” government

departments showing the statistics of development in the various regions in the country. These are supplied from the Central Bureau of Statistics. They form a good basis of planning.

Various “watchdogs“, the civil society, Kenya Anti-Corruption Commission and other stakeholders are accessing these documents to make a point when presenting their arguments.

#### *Good governance*

In democratic states the ruling class creates opportunities for the ruled to participate in decision making, particularly in regard to welfare of the society. This can only happen if the citizens are well informed on matters that affect them through the provision of information. The KNA&DS plays a role in this by keeping valuable records as appertains to this. Actually, proper record keeping is a sign of good governance.

#### *Voice for the voiceless*

Terry Cook argued that in records appraisal, Archivists and record managers “are deciding what is remembered and what is forgotten, who in society is visible and who remains invisible, who has a voice and who does not”. This may be partially true. Many at times there have been complaints of marginalization on how this is carried out.

However, the KNA&DS has engaged itself in a macro-appraisal approach to meet the various groups of the “voiceless” with the basic concern being selecting and preserving records which reflect a broad spectrum of human experience. This has led to having an

improved selection and preservation of more comprehensive documentation on the society, and especially the so called voiceless and invisible members of the society.

### *Rights of Citizens*

This is just puts all the above in perspective. If the state is accountable to the citizens, there is justice, transparency, all members of the society can articulate what they feel is good so long as it does not cause harm to others, then we can say the rights of the citizens are being met and this is all the essence of a democratic society. This is only possible by provide accurate and reliable information as the KNA&DS does.

### *Others*

- Conservation and preservation ensures information is there for a long time, as it may be needed. Public archives constitute a very significant component of the memory of the nation. This is a chore undertaking of the KNA&DS. Citizens need to have this information as long as it takes for it to be in use.
- The advice given to various record creating agencies in the country, ensures that these records are “well” managed to be available for decision making. After all in a democracy, this process should be vested on the citizens.
- The format conversion processes undertaken by the department ensures that information is available in as many formats as desired and if one format is lost, there will be another to be available for use.

## **Challenges**

- A major characteristic of developing nations is the general non-appreciation on the value of information. Despite the rich collection that the KNA&DS has, the use of those materials is still below par. A collection is not worth existing, if it is not in use.
- The legislation that is there. For instance, a record is not to be accessed until the expiry of thirty years. By then most of the information contained there-in could have by-passed its usefulness.
- Staff attitudes are at times limiting to the use of the archival holdings. They may not have a clear picture of what they have and at times they lack an interest in doing so. This makes some of the information available not to be in use.

## **Way Forward**

- Democracy can only be achieved if there is the support of access to information. This is to make governments – Kenya included- to be open so as to be accountable and exposed to the judgements and evaluation of citizens. However, this can only happen when the information held by public bodies like the National Archive is

subjected to maximum to maximum disclosure. Although there may be limited exceptions to this for information of security in nature.

- The archival staff have a role to educate potential and actual users on available information that can help in filling the knowledge gap. Such information may be key in resolving controversial issues within the society. Information like personal wills, treaties and government circulars is useful in helping current regimes solve issues that may be creating rift within the society. This ethical value demands that whenever there is a conflict around an issue, and many a time built on ignorance and lack of proper information, the national archive that is in possession of information that can unravel the controversy should be able to provide that guidance.

Archival staff should answer courteously and with a spirit of helpfulness all reasonable inquiries about their holdings and encourage use of them to the greatest extent compatible with institutional policies on preservation of holdings, legal considerations, and individual rights. They should explain pertinent restrictions to potential users and apply the rule equitably.

- Freedom of information, FOI is paramount as it is based on the understanding that information maintained and held by the government is reflective how public resources are used, thus the need for the information to be opened to the public.
- Aggressive campaigns to market the archival holdings so that the public may access them. At times, these documents are not used just because people are not aware that they do exist.

## **Conclusion**

The ethical value of the national archives is to realize their input in public good. Enrolling this value demands the archivists to weigh with care the value and impact of the information they hold to the society's good. Recognition of this value becomes key in deciding whether availing certain information to the public domain serves the interest of the public or not. This interest has to be viewed all-round-positive and negative. The Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service being a major department in the Kenyan government is playing a great role in developing the democratic space in the country. This is basically on the information that is being provided from the establishment. There needs to be relevant support from the concerned agencies, the government and the stakeholders. Then democracy in Kenya will not only be a pipe dream but a reality.

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