NAVIGATING THE KENYA NATIONAL ARCHIVES: RESEARCH AND ITS ROLE IN KENYAN SOCIETY

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I

Situated at the edge of the central business district in downtown Nairobi, the Kenya National Archives (KNA) is a reservoir and living example of historical and ethnographic knowledge. Straddling the boundary between "tourist" Nairobi and "real" Nairobi, the KNA inhabits a space that transcends both function and class in a cosmopolitan, urban setting. The archives look out on the landmark Hilton Hotel, together with the swarms of up-market tourists and wealthy locals it attracts. On the KNA's rear, Tom Mboya street serves a modern gateway to the crushing, chaotic avenues and alleys that the vast majority of Nairobi's citizens tread daily as they depart from and return to the stark realities of Nairobi's eastern slums. Engulfed by the wailing horns of passing matatus and the rhythmic calls of street hawkers, the spaces inside and outside the archive offer a rich terrain for social scientists interested in both contemporary and historical Kenya.

The composition of the KNA's clientele also reflects the boundaries that the archives span. Throughout the day, international tourists and local schoolchildren trickle into the ground-floor museum (currently undergoing a major renovation supported by the Ford Foundation) to view the extensive collection of artifacts and photographs representing Kenya's diverse cultures and rich history. Tucked away upstairs, a broad spectrum of patrons works and studies in the archives' reading room, using the KNA's resources for a variety of professional and personal projects.

The structure and clientele of the KNA highlight gaps between aspiration and achievement, and draw attention to the disparities in wealth, resources, and expectations existing not only between local and foreign researchers, but between "ordinary" Kenyans and their more privileged countrymen. At the same time, the KNA is equally a part of a resurgent civil society in which ordinary citizens increasingly assert their rights to gain access to information and recognize their stakes in the use and production of knowledge. And the constitution of the KNA points to the level of development which sets Kenya's archives apart from many other archival institutions in sub-Saharan Africa.

For historians then, the KNA offers more than dusty documents. There is history in its very space and structure, in the aims and ideas of its users, and in the various forms of popular and professional practice carried out within its walls. Through the following ethnographic rendering of the state of the archives, we two historians fresh from the field aim to sketch the landscape of the KNA and lay out the practicalities of research for other scholars who take the KNA as their space and source of work.[1]

II

Established in 1956 by the British colonial government, the KNA has come a long way from its humble beginnings in the basement of Jogoo house-A.[2] According to current staff, the archives' first search room was located several blocks from the archives themselves and patrons had to wait patiently in the search room while their files were delivered from Jogoo House by bicycle messenger. The original staff had little or no training in archival science, and preservation and cataloging techniques were rudimentary at best during the archives' first decade.

After independence, the fledgling government officially created the Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service through a 1965 act

[1]Matthew Carotenuto (Indiana University) and Katherine Luongo (University of Michigan) are Ph.D. candidates in African History who have recently concluded a year's dissertation research in Kenya supported by Fulbright-Hays Fellowships. Matthew's dissertation, currently titled "Cultivating Transnaational Identity: the Luo Union in Twentieth-Century East Africa," investigates the evolution of Luo identity in East Africa through the history of an ethnically based social welfare organization. Katherine's dissertation, "Contested Codes and Conflicting Justice: the State and the Supernatural in Colonial Kenya," examines how crimes related to supernatural beliefs challenged various forms of state authority from the early colonial period through the Mau Mau era.

[2]Today Jogoo House is home to the Ministry of Education, the government office which receives research permit applications and issues research permits.

of parliament. However, despite greater government support, the KNA grew slowly during the 1960s and 1970s. During these decades the institution's primary goal was to identify, catalog, and repatriate colonial governmental documents removed from Kenya at the end of the colonial period by the outgoing British regime.[3]

During the late 1970s the KNA moved from its basement beginnings to its present location on Moi Avenue. The current facility first housed the Bank of India and later the Kenya Commercial Bank. Not surprisingly, the building's architecture suggests a depository of currency much more than a repository of information. Indeed, documents are currently stored in bank vaults throughout the building's eight repository rooms, and the most highly-sensitive documents in the KNA's collection are secreted away in the old bank's "strong room," which can be accessed only by the director of the KNA.

Since its move to Moi Avenue, the KNA has developed into one of the leading archives on the continent. Today the institution employs nineteen trained archivists and an overall staff of close to 100, responsible for maintaining over 1.5 million documents along with thousands of microfilms and photographs.[4]

III

Although the KNA contains a wealth of documents, the authors' own experiences reflect some of the many hurdles and frustrations patrons encounter. While the KNA staff is exceptionally attentive to patrons' requests and knowledgeable about the archives' collection, much of the know-how about how best to exploit the archives' holdings comes from the painstaking weeks that each new researcher must spend working by trial and error to master intricacies of the archives cataloging and holding systems. In our time at the KNA, we both became search room "experts," using countless guides and nuggets of advice to develop our own modes of searching and our own personal catalogs. Nevertheless, on numerous

[3]Archival staff have noted that substantial portions of the archive were either looted or destroyed by departing colonial officials. For details see J.J.M. Nyagah, "Speech by the Minister of Natural Resources on the Occasion of the Opening of the First East and Central African Archives Conference." Inaugural Conference Proceedings. June, 1969. 2, cited in D.L. Newman, "The Kenya National Archives." This short undated paper is available at the Institute for African Studies at the National Museum of Kenya in Nairobi.

[4]For a more detailed look at the historical development of the KNA see ibid. and M. Musembi, *Archives Management: the Kenyan Experience* (Nairobi, 1985).

occasions the authors experienced the researcher's chagrin of finding that "key source" in the bound or computer indexes, only to discover that it was improperly cataloged or missing altogether. New researchers should be warned that it is necessary to devote a considerable amount of time to learning how to locate and identify sources, and that they should be prepared for disappointments.

Given the challenges that we have encountered in our research as trained historians, it is not surprising that the KNA often struggles as well to meet needs of Kenya's diverse public. On one hand, university post-graduates, academics, novelists, and non-fiction writers—as well as lawyers and journalists using the KNA for professional purposes—encounter many of the same conundrums as foreign academics. On the other hand, the range of non-professionals using the KNA search room as a study hall, office space, or reading room fare better, as the search room offers a relatively quiet refuge within the chaos and cacophony of the city center.[5]

In the last few years, members of Kenya's public have increasingly drawn on the KNA's resources to do their own historical research about two contentious issues: Mau Mau reparations and the Maasai Land treaty. In the wake of heated international discussion and popular discourse about the possibility of the British Government offering reparations to Mau Mau detainees, elderly ex-detainees and their relatives are visiting the KNA with the hope of finding family names in the colonial detention records, thus making them eligible for reparations if such funds indeed become available. Second, with the recent expiration of the controversial Maasai Land treaty, an agreement through which the British colonial government acquired Maasai lands for settler development for a period of 99 years, elders from Maasai communities are searching the KNA collection for information to aid their campaigns to reclaim the leased lands.

According to the KNA staff, many of these elderly patrons are semi-literate or illiterate, and their lack of skills only exacerbates the difficulties which challenge the professional researcher and casual user. While search room staff is willing to help all patrons, KNA staff limitations prevent the search room archivists from providing specialized help to these patrons and require that the patrons bring their own reading assistants. In addition, colonial documents pertaining to these cases contain significant

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[5]Although the KNA restricts its access to patrons over 18 years of age, many secondary school students frequent the KNA search room and use the space as a study area.

spelling discrepancies, and numerous place and proper names have been changed since the colonial era, making it difficult for the casual user to trace people, places, and events. In such circumstances, many of the KNA's users leave frustrated, and empty-handed.

Recent discussions over the possible establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in Kenya point to additional roles that the KNA could take on. Based on the South African post-apartheid model, a Kenyan TRC would address the abuses of the colonial period and of the Kenyatta and Moi regimes.[6] The formation of a TRC would likely inspire a dramatic upswing in the number of non-professional users accessing the KNA, while at the same time enhancing the institution's engagement with, and influence on, Kenyan political discourse and culture.

Further, with the political opening brought about the 2002 presidential election, the KNA's staff expects increasing demands for information about more contemporary topics—for example, the political assassinations of prominent politicians like Tom Mboya and Robert Ouku, which were off-limits under the previous regimes.[7] However, due to the "30 year ` rule"—legislation stipulating that government documents cannot be accessed by the public unless the documents are at least 30 years old—and a mandate enabling the government to close indefinitely any documents it deems a "threat to national security," the KNA may well be unable to meet an increasingly inquisitive and vocal Kenya public's demands for information.

Despite the interest in the KNA coalescing around these issues, the archives remain largely unknown and vastly underutilized by the majority of the Kenyan public. Staff members state that few of the thousands of people passing by the KNA each day have any idea of what the archives are or what they can offer. Indeed, on explaining that they do research at the KNA, the authors have been asked by countless Kenyans, "Where are the archives? What do they do there? Who can use them?" Even students from the University of Nairobi, located scant blocks from the KNA, rarely use the archives' resources. Unfortunately, there are very limited resources for outreach and publicity, restricting the staff's best efforts to market the

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[6]Archives in South Africa have played a significant role in providing information to the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. See *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carloyn Hamilton et al. (Cape Town, 2002).

[7]See Hervé Maupeu, "Enterrement des Big Men et Nation Kenyane" in Yvon Droz and Hervé Maupeu, eds., *Les Figures de la Mort à Nairobi: une Capitale sans Cimetières* (Paris, 2003), 231-63; and David William Cohen and E.S. Atieno Odhiambo, *The Risks of Knowledge: Investigations into the Death of the Hon. Minister John Robert Ouko in Kenya, 1990* (Athens, 2004).

KNA. Apart from the sporadic school group visit or occasional newspaper article, the KNA receives very little official or public attention.

IV

Unlike the national archives of its East African neighbors, the KNA is a truly public institution that does not require that users hold a research permit in order to read documents. KNA readers' cards are available in the search room for 50 Kenyan Shillings (about 65 US cents), renewable each year. A photo I.D. and a passport-size photo are required for issuing the card. The search room is located upstairs and is open from 8:30am-4:30pm, Monday to Friday, and from 8:30am-1pm Saturdays. New readers should inform the receptionist at the main entrance that they would like to visit the search room.

The KNA's holdings of 1.5 million archival documents range from yellowed, slightly mouldering, handwritten reports produced at the coast during the late nineteenth century to bright, sharp photocopied District and Provincial reports generated within the last decade. In addition, the KNA houses 12,000 microfilms, 10,000 historical photographs, and 23,000 assorted publications. The documents are stored in boxes stacked on stationary shelves, although a shift to space-saving mobile shelves began in 2001. These boxes are spread across eight brimming depository rooms, with a "strong room" for the most sensitive documents.

The holdings of the KNA are indexed in bound volumes and on four computer databases in the main search room. Computerization using an ISIS system began in 1995, and so far 286,000 references have been added. Search room staff estimate that at least ten months of full-time data entry would be necessary to computerize all the remaining holdings, but unfortunately, sufficient staff is not available at this time to continue cataloging these references.

For the present, bound indexes remain the researcher's most useful finding aid. These volumes are divided into several series. The majority are divided according to geography and administrative department, e.g., Index of the District Commissioner Northern Frontier District. Bound volumes are also organized according to government ministry/department, e.g., Index of the Attorney General's Office, Index of the Ministry of African Affairs, and so on. Additional bound volumes cover miscellaneous topics such as Private Papers and Repatriated Materials.

Each Index contains a list of the short titles of files in its series. These titles may be highly general, e.g., "Ulu District Annual Report, 1916-1928," or extremely specific, e.g., "Wizards and Rainmakers." For ease

of use and thoroughness, we would suggest that first-time researchers begin by using the bound indexes and consulting the District and Provincial Reports for their regions of interest. We would then suggest that they consult the bound indexes of the ministry/department most relevant to their project. For example, a historian working on customary law in Machakos District should begin with District and Provincial Reports identified through the bound indexes and then move to Attorney General files identified through the Attorney General Index.

Searching via the computer database invites multiple challenges. The ISIS system includes databases of archival documents, books and journals, and audio-visual material. The databases can be searched via a single keyword subject search, for example, "witchcraft," or via a "terms dictionary" list that also employs single keyword searches but allows for the selection of multiple related keywords. A "terms dictionary" search using "witch," produces a list of related terms such as "witchdoctor" and "witchcraft," which can be selected together to generate a broader list of related references than that produced by a subject search. In addition, computer searches often produce references that include file abstracts, as well as catalog information.

However, the single keyword-searching option limits the specificity with which one can search. The computer databases are replete with typing errors, which result in false negative search results. For example, a "terms dictionary" search using the keyword "archives," produced a list which included the keyword "archoives." On selecting "archoives," we were able to the read abstracts and catalog information of several files pertaining to archives. We would suggest that scholars search using both subject and "terms dictionary" options. Researchers investigating topics related to specific communities or ethnic groups should include all the relevant spelling and word usages for their chosen group in their search. For instance when searching for sources on the Luo community, a researcher should also be certain to include "Joluo," "Jaluo," "Dholuo," and "Kavirondo" because all types of historical and linguistic group name variations are represented in the cataloging of the computer indexes.

Library holdings, including a separate journal database, can be searched through the system described above or through a card catalog. The library itself is open only to KNA staff, so browsing by patrons is not permitted. Audio-visual holdings must be searched via computer only.

A researcher may order six files at a time. Archival materials are requested using pre-printed slips with spaces for title, file number, piece dates, shelf number, and box number. This information can be established using the methods described above. The researcher presents his/her

slips to a member of the search room staff, who in turn forwards them to the holding rooms. A retrieval specialist locates the documents and presents them to the researcher in the search room. In the event of a retrieval delay, the search room staff will consult the retrieval specialist to ascertain the source of the delay. It is important to note that the number of retrieval staff is limited and some searches can take considerable time.

Typing errors on the computer databases also impede ordering, because many file numbers have been entered incorrectly. Scholars are often required to cross-reference bound indexes with the computer information to get the correct ordering information. Fortunately, search room staff are knowledgeable about, and helpful with, cross-referencing the computer and bound indexes.

There are no stipulations as to the number of library sources a researcher can order at a time. Library materials are requested on preprinted slips with spaces for title, author, and catalog number. Unfortunately, many library materials listed in the indexes are unavailable for various reasons. If a book or journal is missing, the search room staff will gladly search the library shelves for a different source on the same topic. Audio-visual materials are requested using the slips for archival materials described above.

Photocopies are 5 Ksh. per page and can be ordered in unlimited quantities. Search room staff is extremely willing to assist patrons with duplication, and researchers are also permitted to use digital cameras.

V

Four regional records centers—Kakamega, Nakuru, Kisumu, and Mombasa—complete the collection of the Kenya National Archives. A recent attempt to locate the KNA, Kisumu, was unfruitful, and the authors have not visited the other centers. Search room staff in Nairobi explain that the regional centers are utilized by a negligible number of patrons each year and that lack of space is a significant problem.

Some administrative and judicial files have not been shifted to Nairobi or to any of the regional centers, and can still be consulted in District Offices or local courthouses. However, the organization, condition, and availability of these files are patchy at best. For example, an experienced historian of Kenyan recounted having to climb through a hole in a chicken wire fence to reach local court archives, only to find the holdings shredded and heaped on the floor of the building's basement.[8]

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[8]For foreign researchers looking for accessto KNA documents in the U.S., the Center for Research Libraries, Syracuse University, and Michigan State University offer

The University of Nairobi library system holds numerous archival and secondary sources of interest to historians. Researchers should be aware that it is best bring a letter of affiliation from a university department before attempting to obtain a reader's card at the Jomo Kenyatta University Library located at the main campus. Daily membership fees for the library are 50 Ksh. or 500 Ksh. monthly. A picture I.D. must be presented in order to consult materials from the Africana Collection. Photocopies cost 3Ksh. per page.

The *Daily Nation* library is an excellent resource for contemporary newspaper articles and photographs from one of the most highly circulated papers in sub-Saharan Africa. Articles have been clipped and filed thematically, thus providing researchers with files containing numerous articles arranged in chronological order. Housed a short walk from KNA in the Nation Centre on Kimathi Street, the library is open from 12-3p.m. Monday-Friday. Access costs 200 Ksh. per day for members of the public and 100 Ksh. for students. Photocopies cost 30 Ksh. per page and laptops are permitted.

The McMillan Library, located one block from the Nation Centre, has an extensive collection of vernacular and colonial-era newspapers. The library is open during normal business hours Monday to Friday, and on Saturday mornings. Access costs approximately 200 K sh. per day.

The libraries of the British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA) and the Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique (IFRA) are the best resources for African studies monographs and journals in Nairobi. Located in the suburb of Kileleshwa (a short taxi/bus ride from the KNA), the BIEA's collection includes works on history, anthropology, and archeology. The library also has full runs of flagship journals such as *Journal of African History* and *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*. The BIEA is open Monday-Friday during business hours. There is a nominal annual user fee and photocopies are 3 Ksh. per page. Registered patrons may borrow books for two weeks at a time.

IFRA is housed in Maendeleo House on Monrovia Street, a short walk from the University of Nairobi main campus and the KNA. The library collection includes Anglophone and Francophone works on history, political science, anthropology, and geography. The library has select English and French journals, and an extensive, well-organized collection of newspaper clippings from around East Africa. IFRA is open Monday through Friday during business hours, but closed during August. There is a nomi-

large collections of microfilmed colonial documents. For a guide see Robert G. Gregory, Robert M. Maxon, and Leon P. Spencer, *A Guide to the Kenya National Archives* (Syracuse, 1968).

nal annual user fee and photocopies are 3 Ksh. per page. Registered patrons can also borrow books for two weeks at a time. In addition, the institutions hold a joint public seminar series at the Maison Française, behind Maendeleo House. Dates and times are posted on the organizations' respective websites.[9]

The KNA's city location on the "borderland" of Nairobi's two cultures also poses challenges for researchers when they venture outside the archives' bounds. On one hand, the archive's proximity to the Hilton and Stanley hotels offers researchers numerous cafes and restaurants (there are no food facilities or places to consume food within the KNA) and shops and internet cafes. On the other hand, presence of such a high concentration of tourists and the KNA's proximity to the notorious and frenetic Tom Mboya Street makes researchers potential targets for the scams and petty crimes. With care and attention, the area around the KNA can be navigated successfully and enjoyably. Nonetheless, many researchers prefer not to bring their laptops to the KNA because of the prevalence of bag-snatching in the city center. However, the city center and its environs offer a range of accommodations within short walking distance to the KNA and available to fit a wide variety of budgets.

VI

The KNA has been at overflow capacity for 15 years. Staff say that were there to be an infusion of government or donor funds, the first priority of the archival service would the construction of a purpose-built archives building that would take into account the KNA's development trajectory over the next 50 years. Ideally, the new premises would be located away from the heavy pollution of the city center, which is taking its toll on the archival documents, and also away from the chaos and cacophony of downtown which can create an amusing albeit distracting environment in which to do research. A new facility would require additional staff and means to train them properly. Unfortunately, funds for such projects are not forthcoming.

Archives' staff and researchers alike would like to see the development of an archival "practice" among patrons and additional personnel to facilitate it. On top of their other duties, search room staff are charged with "policing" the search room, stopping patrons in the (regular) disruptive and destructive acts of gum chewing and eating, and writing on docu-

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[9]The British Institute in Eastern Africa: www.britac.ac.uk/institutes/eafrica/. Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique: www.ifra-nairobi.net.

ments, as well as combating the pervasive use of mobile phones. Additional staff is required to "train" patrons in appropriate archival practice.

Navigating the KNA can be both a challenging and rewarding venture for any scholar able to devote the time and effort to learning the intricacies of research. Over nearly half a century, the KNA has emerged from a humble, ill-managed repository of colonial documents into one of the leading archival institutions in the region. However, the current state of the KNA makes its contribution to the wider Kenyan public ambiguous at best. Yet the many pitfalls professional researchers encounter investigating lead us to wonder what facilities the KNA might marshal in order to increase its accessibility for the wider Kenyan public. Contemporary challenges also drive us to question what role we as historians should play in improving the accessibility, use-value, and source-preservation abilities of the KNA, not only for professional researchers like ourselves but for members of the wider communities in which we conduct our research.