

FIAF SCHOOL on WHEELS

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Kenya National Archives

NAIROBI – KENYA

REPORT

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ORGANIZATION

The workshop was very much awaited. All the institutional, formal and organizational aspects were well prepared. The experts were welcomed on the opening day by the KNA director, Mr John G. M'reria, and on the closing day by the Goethe Institute deputy director, Ms Barbara Reich. The collaboration between the two institutions very clearly looked proven and stable. The closing ceremony included a participants' achievement/valuation survey and final attendance certificates.

Office support was provided through the whole week by KNA and all the curatorial and organizational aspects were accomplished with great attention by the KNA responsible for the project, Mr Francis Mwangi supported by his very welcoming staff. It is without doubt that KNA and Mr Mwangi in particular are a real reference point in Kenya and also among other African countries. They are regular member and attender of ICA and regular organizer of regional ICA conferences and in 2013 they will host the general ICA conference in Nairobi.

The workshop was a challenge for everybody, both experts and participants, but there was the right mood and confidence to adjust in progress the program and the teaching methods according to the audience's needs, background and knowledge. Always practical and useful handouts came out as results.

Entwining the 3 different classes rather than presenting them in one day blocks one after the other came out to be a good formula in terms of learning procedures. Especially, it favoured interaction among participants and experts. Moreover, doing so, we constantly had the chance to experience the happy situation of approaching the same topic or issue from 3 different points of view and to deliver them in different moments and for several times in the week.

Something that should be improved and given the proper significance, as it shows from Thelma's and Egbert report, is a preliminary on-distance preparation work for the seminar, including information about participants and institutions and also documents to deliver on time to settle the teaching ground of the classes.

PARTICIPANTS INSTITUTIONS COLLECTIONS

It was my first time in Kenya and in Africa and I do not have enough experience to state anything definitive. My impressions are twofold. On one hand it seems to me that the mainly paper and administrative document archival background is of some impediment to a correct recognition and management of the audiovisual nature of their holdings. There is not a clear distinction among different materials (paper, microfilm, AV, objects) and the assorted composition of the class is a confirmation of this.

Therefore it is also difficult to identify and underline the need for correct and proper AV policies and procedures. For instance, it may be quite usual for an administrative paper collection not to have a single-by-single document idea of the content and of the state of preservation. But this cannot be true for an AV collection. Very often, trying to work out in class real Kenyan Institutions case studies on preservation policies, we face the situation of not knowing the content of the collection examined. This also goes together with Thelma's report statement on the need for a strong preliminary identification and cataloguing action as the very starting point for any further preservation strategy and activity.

On the other hand, given the fact that the collections are mainly non fiction AV and very little fiction film, I do not see particular lateness or impediment in preserving the holdings. They face the same problem driven worldwide at the present time by the uncertainty of audiovisual and digital migration and preservation

procedures. Moreover, the amount of AV holdings in Kenya is not as big as those of other, for instance, European countries (as you can see from the figures arranged by Egbert).

Generally speaking, my impression is that for a relative limited amount of money it would be not impossible to temporarily migrate the not so wide UMATIC and BETACAM collections (that characterize the main part of their AV archives) to a more stable carrier and therefore to secure their life for the next future. The Kenyan TV or Information Agency archives are already oriented this way. These archives, together with the KNA and the University of Kisii (very paper and document oriented but facing with the need of improving a media collection for some film studies classes) were among the participants the most active and interested. Their archives are actually consulted on a regular basis.

Significant is the case of a particular collection hold by the KNA regarding the 10 years preparatory parliament works for drafting the Kenyan constitution. It is the case of a collection that can make the whole archive activities and its role visible to the Country and also interest some international support.

In my opinion, in terms of further school activities, two main aspects should be taken in consideration. First, to reinforce the international cooperation: the on site workshops should be alternate with some abroad visiting experiences offered to the Kenyan Institutions. In this sense, many aspects already organized and structured in modern archives may give a better idea of the preservation practices and organizational procedures. I felt difficult to give a general idea of an archival workflow when the existing structures and departments are completely different or not quite existing yet.

Second, to make sure that not only the technicians but also the officers and the heads of departments take part to the School. It is important to start from the understanding of the needs and the nature of the archival and preservation workflow.

TEAM OF EXPERTS

This is not my first international teaching group-experience and I'm very happy to say that the level of collaboration within the team (and also with the participants) in Nairobi was pretty rare. It was the first time with FIAF and I must say that the common shared FIAF background helped a lot, especially if thinking we experts have never worked together before. The advantage of sharing a common scientific and cultural archival language and mentality was clear and crucial. Topics and issues were spoken, by all three of us, one voice. Differences were appreciable in thinking preservation procedures and problem solving processes, but this has enriched the seminar and the discussion. A strong collaborative spirit has accompanied us during each single class, attended by all the experts, in preparing the program for the following day and in adjusting directions and level of teaching intensity.

The tremendous preliminary work done, especially by Thelma with slides, ppt, and specific Kenian history cases and examples, helped a lot in delivering some difficult aspects of two sometimes very technical topics like film preservation and cataloguing. The figures provided by Egbert helped a lot in structuring examples and case studies. Sometime my Archive Management classes (by nature structured in a different way then the technical ones), turned out into some very interesting discussions among experts and participants, being very practical as well.

We three experts come from three different kind of archives, a national, a regional and a private one. This was a very good mix of different points of view in approaching single cases but sharing the same ethical and curatorial FIAF background.

ARCHIVE MANAGEMENT CLASS

My sessions on Archive Management were mainly focused on the significance, the structure and the building of an archive policy, including curatorial and managerial values framework. The two main risks in the given context were represented by the possible non familiarity of the participants with the topic and by an eventual too small group of officers or curators. These two aspects punctually occurred. Two were the main strategies adopted to avoid the class losing efficacy over time.

The first one was to adopt the archive assistants and operators point of view (the larger part of the audience) and approaching the topic in terms of what is expected from their daily work and duties by their head of departments. How to improve the archive workflow and which are the final goals to accomplish.

The second one, alternated with the first, was to pretend and assume we all are collection curators and archive managers in order to establish precise processes in thinking and managing the whole archive workflow.

The first analytic moment together with the second more general and overlooking drove us to exercise with some specific case studies drawn from the reality of the Kenyan Institutions participating the seminar.

At the end I believe it was pretty clear that in terms of acquisition, preservation and access procedures, any possible problem or critical aspect faced by an archive can find a proper solution in the collection policy itself and in the reasoning process in drafting it.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

To sum up the main points of the report on the Kenyan context:

- strong traditional paper and document archive background (ICA);
- not big amount of film involved;
- large first-generation AV collections (UMATIC, BETACAM);
- approaching digital and electronic migration and preservation strategies as the rest of the world;
- main impediment for the decision making process: not clearly knowing the contents of large parts of the collections; difficulty in running old AV technology in order to expertise collections' contents;
- need for selecting parts of collections to preserve and to access for visibility and recognition of archival activities and role by general public and Governmental Institutions;
- collaboration aspects: permanent on-distance experience sharing; alternating activities on-site and abroad; networking for problem solving process;

In terms of further school activities, my final consideration is mainly about improving international cooperation. The context as described is not different from what currently faced by other archives in the world. And, as we know, the main contribution in working out difficulties is to share experiences with other archives. I've personally suggested Mr Francis Mwangi to take in consideration the idea of joining FIAF in order to strengthen international collaboration. I understood this may be an option.

As stated before also by my colleagues' report, the on-site seminar would achieve much more significance if a preliminary and permanent activity of sharing documents and experiences were on the field.

In order to improve the networking skills, I've already invited Mr Francis Mwangi to the next edition of the Pordenone Silent Film Festival. It is one of the many opportunities to meet colleagues, share knowledge and improve curatorial knowhow. This could be the starting point of a visiting program around the FIAF archives. Moreover, I've personally mentioned to participants an idea brought within the PAC Commission by former president Antti Alanen. It is the coordination of information (a sort of an on-line register) on the dismissal of analogical film equipment in the Scandinavian (or other) countries at the turn to digital production and programming. This would be of great benefit not only for Kenyan Institutions. It could be a rather simple and very practical solution to think about, also to endorse by the EC.

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