Planning and execution: Digitization of an endangered material in Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria

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Abstract:

The Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library (HOL), Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria, contains a huge collection of native/customary court records from the Western Region during the colonial years (1900 – 1963). Although this collection contains highly sensitive information, it provides information about the customs and traditions of the Yoruba groups during the colonial period, giving a rare and unique facet of the Yoruba culture and history between 1900 -1960s. This rare manuscript of about twelve thousand volumes is unique, irreplaceable and the information provided cannot be obtained anywhere else in the country. Unfortunately, many of the volumes are in poor condition due to age, use, while some have been damaged by insects and humidity. Hence the urgent need to digitize the collection and preserve it for posterity.

Thus to facilitate the long-time preservation and accessibility of this collection, our approach in the planning is to focus on three key areas which were work plan for digitization, cost evaluation and sourcing for funding. For the work plan, the activities identified to be carried out include cleaning...
and fumigation, binding, salvaging and restoration of the deteriorated volumes. We also plan to sort out the collection by divisions and chronological listing. Thereafter the collection will be relabelled, relocated and reorganized on the shelves. Metadata will then be created for the digitized copies and uploaded on HOL’s website. Furthermore, we evaluated the cost implications of the various stages by interacting with experts in preservation and conservation of library collections. The last stage is where we are present, to put up a proposal to send to funding agencies that are interested in funding endangered materials.

By executing this plan, we will be able to conserve and preserve this endangered material in a digitized format that could be easily accessed online and be a form of reference for historians, legal professionals, researchers, and the general populace for future use. Therefore through this presentation, we aim to share our experience on the longtime preservation and digitization process of this endangered material.

**Keywords:** Customary Court Records, digitisation, endangered material, preservation, Nigeria.

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**Introduction**

The Western Region of Nigeria during the colonial years and before Nigeria gained her independence from Great Britain in 1960 was inhabited predominantly by the Yoruba. This group of people which speak the Yoruba language had their own mode of adjudication, governance and administration predating colonial rule. However, the conducts of these duties were oral and largely unwritten. With the composition of administration by the colonial government on the Yoruba people, the administration set up structures for the conduct of affairs of the people. This gave rise to the creation of customary courts and chief courts which generated a lot of records in the course of their adjudications.

On gaining independence from Great Britain in October 1960, the Premier of Western Region of Nigeria, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, sensing the value in the scattered court records ordered that the volumes of the court records be transferred to Obafemi Awolowo University because the University is the common heritage of the Yoruba people. Professor Saburi Biobaku (Lawyer/Librarian) facilitated the transfer of the scattered records to Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library of the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.

The collected Customary Court Records are now stored in a large air-conditioned room in the basement of the library. The customary court records are about 13,000 volumes with an average of 600 pages each comprising proceedings of the civil and criminal cases heard and adjudicated by scores of local courts. Some of the records go as far back into the early twentieth century, others in the 1930s and 1940s, and all continued during the colonial period. The content of the documents provides information on diverse issues bothering on cultural practices, ownership and relationships. Specifically, they provide records about landholding, agriculture, commerce and debt issues, family relations, traditional and western religion, transportation, chieftaincy, local police, relationship and power delineation between the native courts/traditional rulers/chiefs and colonial authority among many other issues.

The Customary Court Records are invaluable resources as they are *bona fide* evidential materials for litigants and judiciary. The records which were generated as a result of direct activities of the various customary court's dispensations under the Western Region of Nigeria are regarded as primary court records and are automatically of legal importance. Therefore,
the records constituted a great research material for scholars, historians and lawyers both within and outside Nigeria. They are, according to Quinn and Laster (2016), endangered are most likely to go missing. Thus, because these records are invaluable, irreplaceable, the information contained cannot be obtained anywhere else and the fact that they are frequently used in the pursuance, adjudication and execution of justice, it is therefore very important that the contents of the Customary Court Records be preserved, digitized, publicized and made visible to the public in order that scholars, historians, archivists and lawyers would find them valuable for use.

The Customary Courts Records of various customary courts in the Western Region, Nigeria from 1900 to 1960 contain about 13,000 volumes of about 600 pages handwritten customary courts proceedings from individuals, families, churches, mosques and various communities in the old Western Region of Nigeria. These rare manuscripts collection is unique in that they were the legal deposits of the Western Nigeria Regional Government and cannot be found anywhere else in the country. These manuscripts record in considerable detail the civil and criminal cases heard by scores of local courts. Some begin early in the twentieth century, others in the 1930s and 1940s, and all continue through the colonial period. The information provided about the daily lives of ordinary people could be used for academic research on a great variety of topics. Although scattered court proceedings survived in other archives, this collection constitutes the major repository. The manuscripts were collected from the customary courts shortly after Independence and have received constant use by individuals with related court cases but low use by scholars/researchers due to lack of awareness.

The records are currently housed by the Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. The records are fast deteriorating and remedial restoration should commence urgently to save the entire documents from total extinction. The records are endangered because of physical deterioration due to the age of the material and chemical deterioration due to a high level of acidity of paper. Others include biological deterioration due to moulds and insect infestation as a result of poor humidity control, lack of proper management and classification. The resources are not properly integrated into the mainstream collections of the library, hence, care and full attention not given to them and lack of funding to process the collection with a view to establishing an archive in the University.

Fig. I. The current state of the Customary Court Records
Figure II. Examples of the loosed manuscripts

Due to the above-stated problems and the current state of the records as shown in Figures I and II, the project for preservation, conservation and repackaging through digitisation is being initiated to save the valuable resources from being lost to posterity. There is, therefore, the need for long-time preservation of the manuscripts. Users will be able to use the digital copies, thus avoid unnecessary damage to the originals.

In view of this, we intend to bring into public awareness the importance of the customary court records in the administration of justice in Nigerian courts in recent times. Moreover, we intend to rehabilitate, preserve, conserve and digitize the customary court records in order to make the contents accessible to users. Furthermore, we plan to create awareness to the scholarly and legal communities about the existence of valuable historical information and precedents contained in the customary court records and to create conscious awareness among information and library professionals on the need to embark on historical studies and projects to advance the society.

The need for digitization of endangered materials in the library

Digitization refers to all of the steps involved in the process of making collections of historical and other materials available online. In the world of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and globalization, digitization of materials is fast becoming the norm among libraries as each seeks to contribute its quota to the world information resource. Libraries embark on the digitization of their materials for various reasons. Digitization makes library’s resources available electronically thereby providing a wider access to its collections. In a networked campus, users can access the library’s digitized resources from their offices and halls of residence even when the library is physically closed. Also, as many people as possible can gain access to as much material as needed at any given time, a situation not possible with a print copy. When digitized materials are put on the web, they tend to increase the visibility of the library as the users all over the world have access to the resources.

Libraries play a critical role in organizing, preserving, and providing access to the cultural and historical resources of society (Hedstrom and Montgomery, 1999). Libraries like archives and other repositories are responsible for preserving information and are faced with various challenges especially when it comes to digital preservation. University libraries are increasingly becoming digital conscious and launching projects designed to digitize their
collections in response to the global information exchange and for wide outreach (Jagboro, Omotayo and Aboyade, 2012). However, the process in the developing countries, Nigeria inclusive, has been very challenging. The digitization project has been slow and expensive. The world over, electronic resources are becoming preferred because of their inherent benefit of wide outreach. As a step forward in making prints in hard copy format available online for our teeming users, it becomes essentially necessary to digitally scan the Customary Court records so that users can gain access to the information online.

**Work plan for preservation and digitisation of the Customary Court Records**

The material to be preserved and digitised is the Customary Courts Records (CCR) of the Western Region, Nigeria (1900 – 1960s). Essentially the records comprise proceedings of Customary Courts in the following five divisions; (i) Ekiti (Ikere, Aiyede, Igede, Ado, Ijero, Arigidi, Irun etc) (ii) Ogun (Shagamu, Ijebu-Remo, Ijebu Ode etc) (iii) Ake (Abeokuta, Òru-Awa, Ago-Iwoye, Abigi, Ariyan, Òtele/Ogbere Ikenne, Òta etc) (iv) Ondo (Igbara-Odo, Owo, Ile Olují, Òlara, Òdanre etc) (v) Osun (Ifetedo, Obokun, Edunabon, Òpetumodu, Òlesa, ÒIle-Ife etc).

Considering the fragile state of the volumes, an overhead scanner and a Canon EOS 7D camera with EF 17-40mm f/4 USM lens will be used for digitisation. This will ensure that the volumes are not damaged during the digitisation process.

Each volume of the CCR will be systematically scanned from front cover to back cover. That is, all the pages including the inside front, back pastedowns and any blank pages will be copied. The images will be saved as uncompressed TIFF format. None of the images will be enhanced. Weights will be used to hold the volumes down when necessary and whoever is digitising will use hand gloves so has to preserve the original volumes. Moreover, a ruler and colour checker will be included on every digitised page. There will be sufficient space in-between to ensure that the edges of the pages are fully captured. For quality control, the quality of the images will be checked at the end of each day and backup in different locations (on the hard driver and the server). An MD5 checksum for error detection will be included when the files are stored.

To ensure that the metadata of the digitised records meets standards, the file naming convention for the copied CCR will be based on the system of listing archival materials according to the arrangement in archives, that is, the hierarchy of collection which is:

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Collection ===> Series ===> File ===> Item
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The collection (CCR) will be given the code CCRHOL. Each of the five divisions will represent the series, the sub-divisions will represent the file while the volumes will represent the item. These will be added to the code using an underscore.

Thus, the file naming convention to generate the unique identifier for each of the volumes will be:

For Division one – Ekiti, sub-division – Ikere, Volume (Vol) 1:

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CCRHOL_EKitiIkereVol1
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The Filename for the pages (front cover to back cover) in a volume will be:

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CCRHOL_EKitiIkereVol1_1.tiff
```
Thus, the metadata will be created using the following format:

1. Identifier
2. Title
3. Description
4. Date
5. Resource type
6. Language
7. Format
8. Date digital
9. Master image
10. Publisher (Electronic version)
11. Contributing institution
12. Collection
13. Source
14. Rights
15. Notes
16. Filename
17. Upload Files

This is how the metadata for the material to be copied will be prepared. This will be incorporated into the daily workflow.

The activities that will be carried out during the project will be in seven phases:

1. Cleaning and fumigation of the volumes of the CCR.
2. Binding of the loosed volumes of the CCR.
3. Salvaging and restoration of the deteriorated volumes of the CCR.
4. Sorting by divisions, chronological listing, labelling, relocation and reorganization of the volumes on the shelves.
5. Metadata creation and uploading of the copied CCR on a dedicated website.
6. Copying of the CCR.
7. Awareness seminar/workshop, presentation of output and writing of the report.

Phases 1 and 2 are the preliminary works that the library would put in place before the project kicks off. The collection is estimated to be about 13,000 volumes (thirteen thousand). The library staff will do the cleaning and binding of the volumes. These preliminary works are essential for the volumes to be made ready for digitisation.

Phase 3 involves salvaging and restoration of the deteriorated volumes. This will require special skills in archiving. The library administration plans to send some of the staff for training on salvaging, restoration and conservation of deteriorated materials. The staff will include librarians and some of the library assistants. This will constitute the project team for restoration and conservation of the manuscripts which will be supervised by a senior librarian. The team will form a task force and work for specified hours per day to salvage and restore the deteriorated volumes.

Phase 4 will take place after the restoration is completed. Library research assistants will be trained to sort the volumes of the CCR by divisions and sub-divisions, list chronologically based on the divisions and sub-divisions, assign in-house call numbers and label the volumes. After which, the labelled volumes will be relocated to a new room allocated by the library for
the CCR. The volumes will be arranged on the shelves chronologically based on the divisions.

Phase 5 will be carried out before digitisation of the CCR. Metadata will be created for the CCR copied images. This will be strictly adhered to by the research assistants who will be involved in digitising the collection. At the end of each day, the copied images will be uploaded to a dedicated website that would have been created before the digitisation process start. The copied images will also be backed-up on an external hard drive. This will take-off after the restoration and run through the course of the project.

Phase 6 will be carried out until all the materials are digitised. Although the volumes vary in sizes, on the average, each of the volumes is about 600 pages. Two (2) volumes will be digitized daily by two research assistants giving a total of 80 volumes per month. The two research assistants will be trained in the technicalities of digitisation and will be solely involved in the digitisation of the CCR running two shifts.

An overhead scanner, a Canon EOS 7D camera and EF 17-40mm f/4 USM lens will be used for the digitisation. Also, a free open source web-based application, Omeka, will be downloaded from http://omeka.org/ and use to create metadata schema of the CCR. A dedicated website will be developed through which the digital material created will be made available online. External hard-drives (2TB) will be purchased for storage of the digitized material.

**Cost evaluation**
According to Alegbeleye (2002), preservation includes all the managerial and financial considerations, storage and accommodation provisions, staffing levels, policies, techniques and methods involved in preserving library and archival materials. Thus, taking all these into consideration, the equipment and resources to be used for the project were identified and highlighted. Moreover, vendors of these materials were identified, contacted and invoices collected. Cost for staffing, that is, research assistants and travels for training and purchase of equipment and consumables were also estimated based on the institutional regulations. A comprehensive budget was thereafter prepared.

**Sourcing for Funding**
Possible funders for such project have been identified both locally and internationally. Proposals have been put up and will be sent to the funders.

**Conclusion**
For an effective conservation and digital preservation of the endangered material, it is expedient to have a good and comprehensive plan before execution. Therefore, all the laid down steps would be followed in detail and taken into consideration in the execution of the project. If the plans are sound it will be easy to achieve the project. We will be able to conserve and preserve the endanger material for a long time. These will ensure continued access to the records by researchers, archivists, historians, legal professionals and the general born. A general awareness would also be created

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