

# Archival Management and Preservation in Ethiopia: The Case of East Gojjam

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## ABSTRACT

Archives are the literary heritages of societies which can serve as testimony of the past activities and events. Due to this high value they need to be carefully selected and preserved to prevent destruction. Ethiopia is among few African countries which have many written documents about its history which dates back thousands of years.

In East Gojjam Administrative Zone there are many archives which were produced after the beginning of modern bureaucracy particularly in the post 1941 period. However the management and preservation of these archives in the area is destructive. This paper aims to investigate the management and preservation of archives from their creation as a record to their final retirement. Descriptive study design was used and data was collected through observation, interview and document analysis including archives. The research finding shows that archives of East Gojjam Administrative Zone are not properly handled and so they are deteriorating continuously. The researchers strongly argue that archives do not get recognition as heritage by different stakeholders in the area and so the record and archive management system should be reconsidered.

**Keywords:** Archive; Record; Preservation

## INTRODUCTION

Archives are non-current records which are preserved for their enduring value [1]. From the beginning of the writing system people always created documents and try to preserve them for different values [2]. People can create documents for private or public purposes in order to accomplish their day to day activity. After the end of their active use documents can have long term (permanent) value as evidence for research [3].

Ethiopia is one of the few African countries which have old tradition of written language [4]. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church particularly played a pivotal role in this case by training many people to read and write Ge'ez, preserving the written materials under its control and providing protection from looting. Kings of the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia had their own chroniclers, who were responsible to record the daily activities of kings. Some sources also indicate that the Muslim population of the coastal areas of Ethiopia recorded their activities [5].

One of the legacies of colonialism in Africa was the contribution herein the system left many written documents about the period though it was white centered. But many historians used those

sources to write the history of colonialism in many African countries. Ethiopia was not colonized during the period of active colonial conquest. But the country established and developed modern bureaucracy beginning from the early 20th century and so written documents for government activities increased from time to time [6].

“Ethiopia is one of the countries boasting of a centuries-old tradition and history of writing [7]. The country has also unique library system in which different written document preserved under the protection of monks [8]. Before the Italian occupation of 1935-1941 “Archive records were kept in a traditional way that is manuscripts were stored and rewritten in churches and monasteries [9].

Archives are vulnerable for destruction unless people preserve them carefully. To urge for careful preservation of archives, Kathpalia wrote: “no document can last for long if it is not stored under proper environmental conditions and suitably housed” [10].

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Archives are one of the important heritages of a country. They are

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the basic imputes to write the country's history. They are useful to know about political administration, local history, lives of individuals and families [11].

Anais Wion, Paul Bertrand and Noal Mellott's article describes the value of archives and the meaning of archives in Ethiopian context. Accordingly, Ethiopian studies are not using archives properly [12].

These archives were produced in different levels of the government. But there is no similarity among the document producer organizations as far as the preservation of archives concerned. While some organizations preserved them and make access for historians, others destroyed and burnt them for different reasons. In the center the Ethiopian National Archives and Library Agency is a responsible body to select, preserve and make access to public. It has also authority to decide for the removal of documents which are out of use [13]. But many local government offices destroyed documents in the name of "dead files".

East Gojjam is one of the areas which are highly affected by the problem of destruction of documents. In all of the wärädas within it there is scarcity of documents about the history of the area during the imperial period, the Darg regime and even the current government.

The Department of History and Heritage Management is facing a big problem in relation to the quality of senior essay projects which are conducted by graduating students. This is mainly because students are not using written documents/ archives as evidence. Rather they simply use oral information which, in most cases, obtained from a single person. According to students this is because of the absence of archival materials in different wärädas. Therefore we decided to conduct this research in order to identify the factors for the unavailability of archives and to find solutions for the effective preservation of archives in East Gojjam.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

There is great problem of preserving archival documents in East Gojjam administrative zone. Therefore conducting research on the issue will help to show the value of archives for the document creating organizations. It also will contribute to avoid the use of fake information in the process of reconstructing past activities of human society.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

### General objective

The general objective of this study is to investigate archival management and preservation in East Gojjam Zone.

### Specific objectives

**The study will have the following specific objectives:**

- Analyze the extent of destruction and preservation of archives.
- Find the factors for the destruction of archives in East Gojjam.
- Examine the role of government officials in preserving archives and documents in East
- Gojjam Zone

## METHODOLOGY

Our study area is East Gojjam administrative Zone which is part of Amhara region. We choose this area because we have many students, both regular and summer, who conducted many historical researches on this zone but with scarcity of archival materials.

### Study population

Our study population is all governmental archives of East Gojjam administrative zone.

### Study design

We used descriptive research design. We collected data about the handling system of archive in East Gojjam by using methods like observation, interview, and consulting written documents (both primary and secondary).

### Sample size

We have two levels of governmental offices which are included in our sample: the zonal and the warada level offices. In the Zonal level, the East Gojjam Zone Administrative Office, the East Gojjam Zone Education Desk, East Gojjam High Court and the East Gojjam Agriculture offices whereas in the Warada level, the Education, Administrative, Agricultural offices and Warada Courts of nine wärädas in East Gojjam Zone are included in our sample.

### Sampling Technique

We will use two types of sampling. We selected four governmental offices in zone and wäräda level through purposive sampling. These are administrative, educational, agricultural offices and courts which, in our assumption, have large volume of archives than other offices. From the 18 wärädas of East Gojjam we selected nine wärädas randomly.

### Data analysis

It is apparent that the study requires sweeping collection, investigation and analysis of the accessible sources on the subjects under the study. Thus it was conducted through meticulous data collection from various sources of information. The source collected through various data collecting tools was carefully checked, categorized into concepts and qualitatively analyzed.

### Operational definition

Archives- are non-current records of the government from their creation as a record to their final fate.

Record - A document created, received, maintained and used by an organization.

Archive Workers-are individuals who are/were employed in different governmental offices to collect, protect from danger, and make easy access of records and archives. Dead Files- are records which's use for their creator organizations are ended.

### Record management and preservation before the introduction of BPR

Before dealing with archive management, it is better to see document creation and preservation in the study area across historical periods.

During the imperial period most of the governmental documents were written on paper by mangol be'er (an instrument used for writing and drawing with ink which had red, green and blue colors). This material was imported from England. Those documents were written by calligraphic writers who had excellent handwriting [14]. Though the researchers could not able to get sources about the actual time of the beginning of pen, most of the documents which were produced in the late period of the imperial period are written by pen.

When we see document preservation during the imperial period, all government offices had record keeping divisions. While some offices had their own independent record keeping department, others had in group. Record keeping offices had their own workers who were responsible for safe preservation of documents. The major responsibility of archive workers at the time was arranging documents to be accessed by the organization (the creator of records) and protect them from destruction [15].

The Archive workers create folders either alphabetically or thematically. A copy of any formal document of the organization must be sent to the record keeping office known as archive. To confirm that archive workers received those documents, archive workers had to sign on a form which was established for confirmation. Then if a document is needed by the document's creator no one had authority to take that document than the archive workers. They take that document; give to the person who needed the document through signature on the confirmation form. If the archive worker leaves his office permanently, he was expected to transfer the entire document one by one for the one who would replace him/her [16]. In this way the opportunity to lose those documents was very less.

In the late period of the imperial regime pen became widely used to create documents and continued throughout the Darg regime though side by side typewriting machine was used. Most of the activities conducted during the imperial regime in relation to archive creation and preservation continued during the Darg regime.

During the Darg period in addition to documents sent to and created by organizations, books and newspapers were also collected and preserved by archive workers. However, newspapers were sold after their active use ended [17]. The head of archive workers had many responsibilities including:

Make sure that files and other documents carefully protected and when they are needed easily and timely accessed to those who requested them; investigate and apply document management and preservation ways, prepare classification code; provide letters, telegrams and all written documents received from other organizations or individuals to the respective concerned bodies without dalliance; follow up entering letters transferred to different offices whether the documents returned to archive center; preserve files which are not used repeatedly or archives in a place easy to access when they are needed [18-21]. These responsibilities of an archive worker can at least prevent the destruction of archives in the name of "dead file".

Though the quality of rooms was very poor (since most of the buildings of government offices were constructed from wood and mud) good attention was given to archives. That means one or two rooms on the average were assigned for archives of a government office or many offices with one archive center [22].

After the coming of the current government Archives and Library division of East Gojjam Zone became under east Gojjam Culture Tourism and Communication desk. At the beginning the desk showed its concern to protect records and preserve archives by preparing trainings for record and archive workers of different wärādas [23]. Despite this effort there was huge destruction of archives in Amhara Region generally and East Gojjam Zone particularly [24].

The Amhara National Regional State Parliament wrote the following letter to the region's plan and Economy bureau:

According to the recent investigation on the preservation of archives by experts from Culture Tourism and Communication Bureau in the capitals of zones many archives are out of use and even sold through bid and in kilos in the name of "dead file". As a result the use of archives as a source of current information and future evidence for history is threatened and so until national law is enacted the destruction of archives carelessly should be stopped with relentless effort [25].

Here the concern of experts from Culture, Tourism and Communication Bureau on the one hand and the Parliament on the other is very interesting. However the researchers couldn't find additional effort and supervision from both sides. Probably lack of regular follow-up from regional and zonal authorities was the cause for the destruction of archives.

## THE CURRENT SITUATION OF ARCHIVES

### Record creation

As Michael Roper and Laura Millar described, "Archives are the elite body of records" [26]. Thus it is better to see the current record creation in the study area for clear understanding of the management of its elite bodies. Public records have grown from time to time due to population growth, expansion of governmental activities and development of modern duplicating machines [27]. The case of East Gojjam is not different from this fact. Comparing with the previous regimes nowadays there are many governmental offices and institutions. This led to the creation of large volume of document for the day to day activities of respective offices. Letters, reports, plans, investigative studies and many other types of documents are produced every day. The use of computer and duplication machines further eased the creation of many copies to be distributed to many offices. With the introduction of BPR various process units, known as yasera hidat, came to emerge with in a single government office which can send and receive information independently.

### Management

Organizations need to manage documents throughout their life-cycle in order to exploit the potential uses of both records and archives. Once documents are created they will be registered on protocol books and a copy will be preserved on archive center known as mazgab bet. Until the application of a system known as Business Processing Reengineering (BPR) a copy of all formal documents were to be sent to the archive centers of each respective government offices independently or in pool [28].

The introduction of BPR in 2008 came up with many changes. It was identified that to solve the problems of hierarchical bureaucracy with many non-value adding works /staffs/ positions, nepotism,

etc; BPR is seriously implemented in all public institutions gradually” [29]. One of the “non-value adding works” in many government offices became records and archive center (mazgab bet in Amharic). After the introduction of BPR the government offices of East Gojjam can be divided in to three categories as far as their document management concerned.

The first group is offices which employed archive workers and manage the preservation of records and archives just similar to what had been in the pre-BPR period. All files created and received are registered and received by archive workers and when files are needed the archive workers are expected to provide them on time. The workers are expected to create an orderly preservation of documents to be accessed easily [30]. The East Gojjam Higher court and all local courts have this type of archive and document management.

The other category of document preservation is partially they used full time archive workers where as other part of documents preserved by respective concerned individuals in the office. In these offices documents are categorized in to two. The first and the major concern of these offices is personal (yāglāsāb) files which are managed by full time workers. All personal profiles of the workers like employment agreement, promotion demotion, appointment, complains and other types of documents which are related to individual employees are categorized under personal files. For these files there are archive workers who will receive, preserve, protect and establish a system of easy access. The second category is documents of different issues known as yāguday files. These are documents out of personal issues. Letters, reports plans and other types of documents are handled and preserved by different officers in the organization [31].

The aim of BPR is to shorten processes and accomplish activities within a short period of time. As a result every process unit (known as yasera hidat) has its own seal so that it can send and receive letters. Copies of outgoing and entering letters are expected to be preserved in these yasera hidats mainly by their respective secretaries. However there is no training given to those secretaries and experts about record and archive management. For instance education offices at the wārāda level have problem of archive workers who can manage the profiles of teachers. They repeatedly raised the issue to zone and regional education offices to employ archive workers or at least to get training on record keeping. But the Amhara National Regional State Education Bureau respond to them that they themselves must keep the records of teachers in their respective wārādas. Unable to keep the personal profiles of teachers by education experts, some wārādas are forced to employ temporary archive workers through contractual agreement. The possibility to lose files is very high since there are no mechanisms to check whether documents are preserved well or not. Here documents have no great attention after their active use ended and even when workers leave their office permanently they are not expected to transfer documents while they transfer other properties like chair and computer. This indicates that archives and documents are not regarded as properties [32].

No separate room is given for yaguday files and shelves are also not enough and safe to preserve documents. When a folder became full it will be replaced by another new folder with the same code and name. Then the former folder became out of shelf, put either on the head of the shelf or on the floor; gradually removed from the room and transferred property administration office. Here archives put in unsafe rooms where useless properties are stocked

together. Archives which are found in these rooms are vulnerable for destruction by insects, water, rat and the like Figure 1.

Civil service and education offices are examples of the second category. Civil service office managed the personal documents of its employees and the employees of all sector offices except education office. In Education office though there is no permanent archive worker, they employed temporarily in order to preserve personal profiles. Therefore the profiles of workers under this office do not go to civil service office.

The third group is offices which manage their documents without full time archive workers at all. The majority of offices in East Gojjam Zone preserved manage documents by respective yasera hidats. In these offices it is very difficult to get documents which are out of current use [33].

Generally, archives of East Gojjam are not well preserved and always they are open to insects, rat, water and even fire. As a result of this the very impotent heritages, a testimony of the past achievements and failures are continuously on destruction. Among the cases of destruction of archives in East Gojjam, in Enemay wārāda the former Bichena Awrajja archives were stored in open, muddy, vulnerable to rain and unauthorized people. In the same wārāda education office archives were stored in similar way. In Hulet Eju Enese warada agriculture office archives were stored and closed in a room vulnerable to insects and hence partially destroyed by them. In the same wārāda civil service office the former Motta Awraja education office archives were destroyed due to less attention given to archives when the old building was ruined for the construction of new building. Baso Liban warada Administration archives are stored together with retired properties [34,35].

## CAUSES FOR THE DESTRUCTION

Once the researchers investigated the current situation of archives and concluded that archives are on the process of destruction, the next step was finding the causes for the destruction. Hence the following are the factors for the destruction of archives in the study area.

### LACK OF AWARENESS

One of the needs of every organization to protect both archives and records is preparing the staff to be aware of the need to preserve archives and records. If the staff is well aware of the importance of archives, it can be easy to preserve archives and to create awareness on others. Most of civil servants in the area (those who create and



**Figure 1:** Non-Personal (yaguday) files which are transferred to property administration store and dumped with retired properties in destructive manner, Goncha Siso Enese Wārāda Administration.

receive documents) have very limited understanding on the uses of non-current documents. For them non-current documents are useless materials which are creating shortage of rooms and shelves and should be drove out from the office by any means. They always wanted to burn them but they need to be supported by law. Unable to burn non-current documents (in fact there is no legal support to burn non-current files except the directive issued by Amhara National Regional State Finance and Economic Bureau), most of the offices of the area put them in their respective stores where other old and useless properties are collected.

Even those who believed themselves have concern on documents have partial understanding on the importance of archives. According to these people (most of them had been served as archive workers) documents should be preserved because they are useful for individuals to serve as evidence for pension, transfer of ownership and the like. That means their understanding is related to current and personal, profiles and they don't think about the uses of archives for historical investigation. As a result most of documents what they called Yaguday files were destroyed since they have no strong connection with individuals.

Surprisingly, there are heads of Culture and Tourism offices in some wärädas who express non-current records in government organizations are useless and cannot be recognized as heritages. For them the literary heritages are only the products of religious institutions. Though this idea is strongly opposed by experts who are working in East Gojjam Culture and Tourism Office, we can understand that there is some gap in creating awareness about the uses of archives for stakeholders.

Due to lack of awareness archives are stored in ruins of buildings, no formal transfer of archives when workers leave office, destroyed by termites and other insects and sometimes burnt after a committee decided them to be destroyed.

## GAP ON LAW

There are records and archive legislations in many countries throughout the world. But the main problem of those rules and regulations is they "lacks provision for life-cycle management of records from their creation to their eventual disposal by destruction or by transfer to the National Archives". Countries need to enact and implement "comprehensive and up-to date records and archive legislation" for successful system of archive and records management throughout their lifecycle. Nationally the National Archives and Library Agency and Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage have legal concern on written heritages. Particularly the National Archives and Library Agency is a responsible body to collect preserve and protect archives from destruction. But the authority of the agency is limited only on federal government offices, Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa cities. This left the archives of nine regional states out of responsible body. In fact the proclamation for the establishment of National Archives and Library agency gives a hint that it can cooperate with regional states. However, one of these states, the Amhara region, still does not establish archive center. Therefore, as part of the Amhara region, there is no organized body which have the authority to collect, preserve and protect archives in East Gojjam. Since 2012 Debre Markos University has established an Archive Center after collecting archives from East Gojjam Zone Administration and East Gojjam High Court. However the university has no legal authority to enforce additional government offices to provide archives for

the archive center. That means the possibility to collect archives by the university from different governmental institutions depend on the good will of individuals at the head of those offices.

In 2010 the Amhara National Regional State Capacity Building and Civil Service Bureau issued a directive on the management of records and sending statistical data. The concern of this directive is mainly the personal profiles of employees which ignore other types of documents and even has no mention to archives.

Ironically there is a law which facilitates the destruction of archives. The Amhara National Regional State Finance and Economic Development Bureau issued a Directive in 2006 for the destruction of files more than ten years old. The introductory part of this directive clearly express that there are many archives from regional to wäräda level governmental organizations which's creation dates back to the reign of Emperor HaileSELLASSIE. According to this directive the existence of these archives to the date of the issuance of the directive by itself was a problem which was caused by the absence of clear and single archive disposal directive. Supported by this directive, there are many individuals who are proudly speaking about the destruction of their organization's archives. Though this directive is applicable for the files of finance and economic development office only, there are other offices which burnt their file using this opportunity. The best example for this case is Enemay Wäräda. The Finance and Economic office of this wäräda burnt many archives in 2013. When this office destroyed its files, documents of other offices like culture and tourism were also destroyed together. In addition to influencing other offices to destroy their non-current records, the directive has strong effect on the attitude of most of the workers in different offices to assume files which have ten years old are not useful.

Therefore, at both national and regional level there is a gap on law about records and archives as a result of it the archives of East Gojjam Zone and probably other areas of the country are highly affected [11].

## Shortage of rooms and materials

Archives are vulnerable to a number of factors for its deterioration like acidity, water, insects and rodents. Therefore they should get attention to be stored in conditions which are cool, dry and stable, with minimum exposure to natural or artificial light. Based on the economic situation of our country it may be difficult to fulfill the above conditions for the stores of local archives. But at least basic materials for archives like shelves, folders and storage rooms should be fulfilled to preserve them.

With the rise of the number of governmental offices the volume of archives also increased in an astonishing rate. In some offices a roomful documents may be produced within a year. This creates shortage of rooms which are needed for offices and to store other materials. As stated in the introduction of directive number 5/1998 E.C:

It is known that there are archives of finance which were stocked from the reign of Emperor HaileSELLASSIE and creating shortage of stores and shelves...in order to select [archives] which are more than 10 years for removal and to prevent future stoke...it [ANRS Finance and Economy Bureau] issued this directive.

Finally officials decide for either withdrawal or destruction of archives to make the room free. Their action, most of the time, starts from the oldest archives. For instance in Enemay Wäräda,



**Figure 2:** Archives of the former Bichena Awrajja Administration after dumped improperly in old and unsafe building, Enemay wārāda police office.

the former Bichena Awrajja archives moved in a disorganized manner from the former relatively safe room to another old room which is open, dusty, vulnerable to rain and other problems. Similarly documents of East Gojjam Administration Office moved to another temporary room which is not safe for archives Figure 2.

Files should be preserved in safe shelves which have access to air. As researchers observed in the sample offices of East Gojjam zone, there is shortage of shelves to preserve documents orderly. When shelves are fully occupied by documents, in order put new documents the older ones will be out of shelf and put on the floor until moved to store to join useless properties.

Though it is minor shortage of file box is also another factor for ineffective archive preservation on the study area. When folders to insert new files needed and not available in the office, workers drop the old files from the folder and insert the new files. Than the fate of old files withdrawn from the folder will be destruction [15].

### Absence of archive workers

In East Gojjam zone most of documents are managed by workers whose major task is not related to documentation. Among the government offices we observed, there are archive workers in courts, civil service and education offices. As it is already described above, the task of archive workers in civil service and education offices is partial i.e, they preserve personal (yagelasab) files only. Moreover there is no similarity among the education offices of different wārādas in employing archive workers as some wārādas employed archive workers others not depending on their available budget.

Even those individuals who are assigned to keep documents are not trained in record and archive management. Secretaries of each yasera hidats are expected to manage documents without enough training on it. One of the reasons for the request of employing archive worker in education offices of wārādas, particularly Teacher, Director, Supervisor Yasera Hidat, is the absence of training for those people who are conducting the activity.

The absence of archive workers in many other offices led to disorganized archive preservation and the loss of archives since the preservation depends on the attitude of those officers [18].

### Re-structures of governmental offices

There was repeated reorganization of offices by splitting and uniting them. For instance the former Culture, Tourism and Communication Minister was reorganized to Culture, Tourism and Parks Development. Culture, Tourism and Parks Development again reestablished as Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Similarly

the former Youth, Culture and Sport are now structured as Youth and sport. The problem here is in which office shall the records and archives stay? Offices in most cases opted to take documents which are necessary for the day to day activities only and left other archives without responsible body. When these offices are merged or separated, huge destruction of archives were occurred. Most of the time one of the two offices would establish their offices out of the former compound and they move with documents of individuals (Yagelasab files). They left Yaguday Files (since they don't agree with the importance of them after the end of their active period) in the former compound. These files would be needed by neither office and finally they would be destroyed [22].

## CONCLUSION

Though large volume of archives still existed in some government offices of East Gojjam, large volume of archives are either destroyed or in the process to be destroyed. The management of documents from creation to final transfer of archives to archive center is not established. Only personal records are managed by archive workers and the rest files are under the custody of respective experts who are not well trained on archival management. The personal records are relatively preserved better while other files are handled carelessly. Therefore the literary heritages of the community, evidence of the past activities are continuously destroyed. Lack of awareness by officials and employees of different bureaus, gap on law about records and archives and lack of resources like shelves and rooms are the major factors for ineffective archive management.

## RECOMMENDATION

Based on the results of the investigation the researchers recommend the following tasks to save the destruction of archives of the area and to make them useful for researchers.

- Debre Markos University shall prepare trainings on the uses of archives for both officials and workers of different governmental offices in order to create belongingness.
- East Gojjam Zone Culture and Tourism Office shall write a circular letter to all government offices of the zone not to destroy documents.
- East Gojjam zone culture and Tourism office shall follow up the preservation of archives and initiate to enact a law that forced all government offices to save and protect archives in a conducive manner.
- East Gojjam administration shall take the responsibility to construct rooms for archives and fulfill necessary materials like shelves and folders for archives.

• Amhara National Regional State Culture and Tourism Bureau shall establish an archive center which will be responsible for collection, preservation and protection of archives from destruction there by East Gojjam zone archives will be protected.

• Amhara National Regional state civil service Bureau shall consider the destruction of archives in different offices due to the absence of archive workers and so shall assign workers for archives in different government offices.

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