

**THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF MALAYSIA
AND THE EMERGENT NATIONAL LIBRARY**

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by

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I am highly honoured by your kind invitation to address you on the National Archives of Malaysia and the emergent National Library. In accepting it I bring you warm greetings from my colleagues in the National Archives.

Since every event or every given situation must necessarily have its historical explanation, I intend to approach the subject from this angle. It may strike you as shocking, amusing or, at least, strange in the light of your own experience in this country that I am here to learn from as much as possible.

I have read a paper on the Commonwealth Archives here written by Sir Harold White in 1957 in which there is the interesting reference to the "paradox that times of crisis often produce the most important social advances". It was during the last world war, in 1942, he wrote that the Commonwealth Government set up a committee of senior officials to look into the problem of preserving archives, primarily war archives. This measure eventually led to the nomination of the War Memorial and the National Library as the first Archival Authorities for Service and Civil Departments respectively until the creation of the Commonwealth Archives Office in 1961 which took over over-all responsibility. Indeed the father of modern national archival institutions itself, the French National Archives, was born out of the blood and thunder of the French Revolution. It is remarkable that at a time when institutions that had been evolved gradually since feudal times were being destroyed, there emerged the wisdom and the desire not only to have every move and achievement of the New France displayed and glorified but also to have the records of the ancient regime preserved in the same institution.

In Malaysia, there is evidence that the need for a centralised archives administration was felt earlier in official circles, but it took the outbreak of the Second World War and a Circular Despatch from the Secretary of State for the Colonies to bring action. Dated March 1948 this Circular directed that, in order to assess the destruction of records brought about by the war and to consider what steps should be taken to preserve those that survived, a survey of the

existing record situation be undertaken. The questionnaire he enclosed, prepared by the British Public Record Office, took longer than expected to be completed and returned for it was not till three years later in August 1951 that this was done, but the information collected for the first time of huge amounts of records that had already been lost and of arbitrary destructions that were taking place jolted the colonial government into appointing a Committee on the Preservation and Destruction of Official Records headed by the Solicitor-General. This Committee submitted their report to the Government in January, 1956, in which they recommended that there should be established machinery for the systematic preservation and destruction of public records under the guidance of an Archivist, that all State and Settlement Governments should be invited to participate in the establishment of a unified scheme for the whole country and that a senior official from the Public Record Office, London, should be sent for to survey the state of the records and to make recommendations for their future control and administration.

The report was accepted in toto. In May 1957, the following year, Mr H.N. Blakiston, an Assistant Keeper in the Public Record Office, arrived for a two-month visit to undertake the special assignment. On 1st December, exactly three months after the country achieved independence from Great Britain, the new department of the Public Record Office, fashioned after the British institution, was set up and placed in the Prime Minister's portfolio.

The first head of the Department, Tan Sri Haji Abdul Mubin Sheppard, a senior Malayan Civil Service officer, had a very busy time recruiting staff, finding adequate accommodation, purchasing equipment and attending to many other administrative matters. Highly important in the long term was the fact that he was able also to lay the foundations for a centralised national archival system, to gain recognition for the archivists possessing a basic honours degree and a post-graduate diploma in Archives Administration as a new body of professional men and women, to send young recruits overseas to obtain these qualifications and to start transferring to the Department valuable records rescued from years of neglect or on the verge of being destroyed in various agencies throughout the country.

The next phase of development, logically, would have to be concentrated on reorganisation and consolidation so as to put the department on a proper archival footing adhering to international standards and practices. This took place in 1963 when, on the recommendation of Tan Sri Haji Abdul Mubin Sheppard himself, he was succeeded by a Unesco Archives Expert in the person of Dr F.R.J. Verhoeven, a Dutch archivist of wide experience, to whom I was to be deputy and counter-part. The timing was almost perfect as it coincided with the return of our first batch of qualified archivists from overseas.

This period saw the introduction of a country-wide records management system, the setting up of repair and photo-reproduction facilities, and the inclusion of new activities dealing with audio-visual records, private records,

economic and business records, historical monuments records and historical documentation. To truly reflect the wider functions of the department from one solely responsible for government records to one dealing with all kinds of records deemed to be of enduring national or historical value, the name of the department was changed to the National Archives of Malaysia in November 1963.

When Dr Verhoeven's Unesco mission came to an end, I was asked to take over the National Archives on 15th February, 1966. The consolidation work continued but sooner than realised perhaps we were already facing new tasks brought about by rapidly expanding activities as well as by additional responsibilities. The long overdue *National Archives Act* was introduced to Parliament and passed giving the department a legislation of its own for the first time. To house the steady in-flow of records as a result of the successful records management system and to provide the requisite reference facilities to government agencies, a purpose-built Records Service Centre building was constructed for occupation by the end of that year. To adequately accommodate the expanding National Archives proper, planning for a permanent National Archives building, as the second phase in the building project, was put in hand and a suitable site selected. Last but by no means the least we were charged with the new responsibility to prepare for the establishment of a National Library which has a history of its own to which I shall return in a moment.

To conclude the archives story, I might give you some information and statistics that could be of interest to users or potential users. Our access policy we believe is among the most liberal in the world for all records of more than twenty five years old are open for consultation. It is true that the law provides for exceptions in very special circumstances, but this provision has never been invoked. There is no discrimination whatsoever against foreign users, all that we need is a suitable letter of introduction from their sponsoring institutions. But the visitor has to be forewarned that as I have indicated earlier our archives have suffered a great deal over the years through neglect, looting and indiscriminate destructions, particularly during the last war, such that to-day we are left with numerous gaps in our archival heritage. Precious little has survived of the records of the pre-British colonial period which would have included the records of the Dutch and Portuguese administrations of Malacca and of the various Malay Sultanates. Therefore, one of the major tasks of the National Archives to-day is to try to fill up or supplement these gaps by obtaining microfilm copies of the relevant materials from various centres in Europe, particularly in London, The Hague and Lisbon. As you can appreciate this is a very costly undertaking especially at the present stage of our development when limited funds have to be stretched to cover many priorities.

However, this serious shortcoming is somewhat off set by our liberal access policy for the recorded daily attendances of users have more than doubled in the last five years reaching a record figure of 1,490 in 1969. With the establishment of two new universities within the last two years this figure is expected to rise very sharply.

We also provide the normal photo-copying facilities like microfilming and xeroxing at cost. We are, however, more interested in exchanging microfilms with those of Malaysian interest materials that we do not have in our holdings.

How did the National Archives get involved with libraries? Viewed in retrospect this was a strange accident of history, since libraries have a much longer history than archives in my country. Right from late last century libraries of various types are known to have existed in various parts of the country; subscription libraries, municipal libraries, special libraries and, of course, college and school libraries. All these libraries were admittedly in varying degrees of development, some a little more fortunate than others, though seldom very much so. However, in this scheme of things, it was quite obvious that the two most important kinds of libraries that could be expected to provide leadership and coordination were missing - the National Library and the State Public Library. The State Governments*, apparently quite satisfied with whatever library services that were already available, considered it the Federal Government's responsibility to take the lead.

Unfortunately, as inevitably the case with any newly independent country, the Federal Government was quite bogged down with many overriding commitments. It was also most unfortunate that the subject of "Libraries" was placed in the portfolio of the Minister of Education who had other more pressing demands (like a new national education policy) on his time and resources. The matter was therefore left in abeyance.

By 1962, however, the Government had to take cognizance of the growing demand from various organisations, including the University of Malaya, the Library Association, the National Union of Teachers, the Press and individuals, urging for the establishment of a National Library. Questions began to be asked in Parliament. One local foundation offered a gift of half a million dollars for the building if the Government would match it dollar for dollar. With all this unflattering agitation in the background, on 11th April the Government decided to relieve the Minister of Education of the responsibility by transferring the subject of "Libraries" to the Prime Minister's portfolio. With this move you might say "Archives" and "Libraries" became strange bed-fellows with far-reaching consequences.

Sure enough, although it took more than a year, on 2nd November, 1963 the Prime Minister's Department wrote to the Director of the National Archives asking him "to undertake to consider and submit to this Department your views concerning the setting up of a National Library in the Malaysian capital." I could not help thinking, however, that as soon as the officer writing this letter had sent it off, he must have thought that was the last he had heard of the subject.

*This reference excludes Sabah and Sarawak which joined Malaysia only in 1963.

Having been loaded with such a grave and important task at an early stage of our own development - the National Archives was barely six years old then - and fully conscious of the fact that none of us were librarians, we had to ponder over it most carefully. Quite naturally we entered into a series of consultations with interested institutions and individuals, particularly librarians, both in the country and abroad. It was at this time, I recall with pleasure and gratitude, that we had the timely visit of Sir Harold White, who was on his return journey from a library conference in Manila. We had a most useful talk and have continued to enjoy his interest and sympathy ever since.

Eventually we Managed to submit to the Government a comprehensive memorandum recommending steps we thought should be taken as preparations for the setting up of the National Library. On 16th February, 1966 following our recommendation, the Government decided to appoint a National Library Committee of senior officials headed by the Chief Secretary to the Government. I was to be the Secretary and chief executive.

This Committee is both advisory and executive in function for it is not merely charged to produce a voluminous report, but is empowered to implement its own decisions, with prior reference to the Government as necessary.

The year 1966 was a very crowded one indeed for as a result of the appointment of the Committee and in pursuance of its aims a new National Library Services Division was set up in the National Archives, the first qualified librarian was appointed to head it - incidentally she was trained in this country, at the University of New South Wales - a new legal deposit legislation was introduced to parliament and passed whereby we were entitled to receive two copies of every publication, including Government publications, published in the country to form the basis of our Malaysian collection, and new supporting staff were recruited.

In 1967 more staff, professional and non-professional, were recruited to cope with expanding activities. An additional task of producing the Malaysian National Bibliography, which initially would be issued annually, was undertaken.

In 1968, as a prelude to inter-library co-operation, a Union Catalogue scheme covering some twenty libraries in and around Kuala Lumpur was introduced.

Last year, however, our activities were seriously hampered by shortage of staff and lack of office and storage space. We had to send one probationer librarian overseas - to this country, in fact - to obtain her library qualification and one vacancy was not filled till late in the year. To cope with the space problem, after much effort we managed to obtain an old building, formerly used as an officers' mess, which happens to be just about two houses away from the Deputy Prime Minister's residence - a constant reminder to him, I hope, that we are in need of permanent accommodation soon. The whole Division shifted there last January.

The intention is that this Division, as its name suggests, should be

strengthened and expanded as rapidly as possible, taking on whatever new tasks it can, so that eventually it can be detached from the National Archives to form the National Library proper. I am not able to say when this will happen as it is up to the Government to decide, but the National Library Committee has given us 1971 as the target year and assuming that the present rate of development continues, I am confident we will be ready for it next year. We will have a very humble beginning no doubt, probably operating on a shoe-string budget, but formally established as a new institution in its own right it will have a much better growth potential.

What kind of a National Library do we want? If I were speaking to a Malayan audience I would start off explaining and assuring and reiterating the fact that we are not thinking of a grand building, that we are not asking for such a building at this stage. This is because almost always when talking of a National Library the public there would visualise immediately a very expensive building that would be a burden to the tax payer, and this tends to frighten politicians and administrators. We will face the music when the time comes.

Tonight, however, I can dispense with this preliminary and talk about the concept and functions of the National Library that we envisage. In view of the existing library situation in the country that I mentioned earlier it will have to be the leader and the apex of the whole national library system. It will of necessity comprise three main departments; one dealing with the normal national library functions, the second responsible for the promotion and development of the public library services in co-operation with the State Governments and the third responsible for the co-ordination of inter-library co-operation with special libraries which are the most advanced in the country. In the long run it is thought that this set-up in a small developing country would ensure that a uniform high standard of service is maintained, duplication and wastage reduced to the minimum and co-operative endeavours in staffing, inter-library loans, bibliographical activities and any other areas exploited to the full.

The functions as already approved by the Government are as follows:

“Main functions

- (a) Provide advice on all library matters to Government.
- (b) Provide leadership among the nation’s libraries.
- (c) Serve as a permanent depository for all publications, including Government publications, issued in the country.
- (d) Acquire by gift or purchase other printed materials from the past and the present relating to all aspects of Malaysia.
- (e) Provide bibliographical services; develop union catalogues, publish the national bibliography, issue catalogue cards, index serials and prepare selective reading lists.
- (f) Serve as a co-ordinating centre for co-operative library activities such as inter-library loan and planned acquisition programmes.

- (g) Provide services to Government.
- (h) Provide a central reference service of high quality especially in subjects that are important to national development but are not adequately covered by other libraries.
- (i) Provide training courses in librarianship and set standards for library performance.
- (j) Serve as a national and international exchange centre.
- (k) Promote international co-operation with similar institutions.

Related functions

- (l) Encourage and assist State Governments and local authorities to establish public libraries of their own.
- (m) Provide public library services for both urban and rural areas where such services are not available or inadequate.
- (n) Maintain liaison with special libraries.
- (o) Maintain liaison with subscription libraries.
- (p) Maintain liaison with school, college, and university libraries.”

In performing these various functions, we highly value co-operation from older and well established institutions all over the world. The closest co-operation we are having at the moment is with our immediate southern neighbour, Singapore, with whom we have a joint committee on microfilming to determine priorities and to ensure that we complement each other, a joint committee on bibliographical services as well as many other activities sponsored by the library association of both countries. There is a move now to widen the geographical area of these co-operative activities to cover Southeast Asia, along the lines of the Southern Asian Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives which was inaugurated in Kuala Lumpur in July 1968 and comprises six member countries: Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, the Republic of Vietnam and Malaysia.

Now my having been so kindly invited to your great country to learn as much as I can from your experience – and what a wealth of experience it is culminating in admirable achievements – I see as the beginning of a future of very close co-operation between your country and mine as well. I need not remind you of course that such co-operation would fit ideally with the historical relationships of our two countries which share the common traditions of the British Commonwealth, the British administrative system, the English language, the democratic way of life, love for freedom, and which have co-operated before through many vicissitudes and in the face of many challenges.

Thank you.