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Preserving Kenya's Past in the Digital Age: A History of Archives and Public Memory

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Abstract
This study examined how the historical development of Kenya's archives, from colonial record-keeping to the present digital archive, has shaped what the public can know about the past and what will be available to future historians, and whether digitisation addresses the resulting gaps. It employed a qualitative documentary analysis of institutional records from the Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service (KNADS), legislation, archival catalogue descriptions, press reports, and published scholarship. It identifies three related ruptures in Kenya's documentary record: the deliberate destruction and removal of colonial records at independence, known as Operation Legacy; the gap between the scope of KNADS's mandate and its resources and more recently, a mismatch between the pace at which government business has moved onto digital platforms and the development of systems to preserve born-digital records. Additionally, more recently, a mismatch between the pace at which government business has moved onto digital platforms and the development of systems to preserve born-digital records. The study concludes that digitisation is not the same as preservation: it has widened access to some materials while leaving older inequalities in place and leaving born-digital records exposed. The study recommends that, for public memory, who can consult the record, and whether today's government records survive to be consulted, depend on decisions about preservation and not only on the digitisation of services. The study contributes an integrated account of colonial archival loss, institutional capacity, digitisation and unequal access, and draws policy implications for digital preservation and public memory in Kenya.

Key terms: Born-digital records, digitisation, Kenya National Archives, migrated archives, public memory.

INTRODUCTION

This study examined how the historical development of Kenya's archives, from colonial record-keeping to the present digital archive, has shaped what the public can know about the past and what will be available to future historians, and whether digitisation addresses the resulting gaps. Archives are not neutral warehouses of paper. Through what they collect, preserve and make available, they shape whose past can be told and whose is left out (Schwartz & Cook, 2002; Trouillot, 1995). In Kenya, this selection has been shaped over more than a century by colonial administration, the decisions of the independent state, and, over the last twenty years, the uneven spread of digital technology in government record-keeping. The result is a documentary record that is substantial but fractured: the Kenya National Archives holds extensive public records and newspaper runs from the colonial period, yet large parts of the wider record have been destroyed, removed, or never captured in a form that can be preserved.

This study follows three related lines of inquiry. The first is institutional: the formation and development of KNADS and the institutional capacity within which it has worked since its establishment in 1965 (Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service, n.d.-a). The second is the missing colonial records, including those destroyed or secretly shipped to Britain on the eve of independence, which the British government acknowledged publicly only in 2011 (Anderson, 2011; Linebaugh, 2022, 2025). The third is the digital-era problem at the centre of the article's research question: whether the move of government business onto digital platforms has been matched by systems that preserve records that are born digital rather than scanned from paper (Musandu, 2022).

Existing scholarship has examined the migrated archives (Anderson, 2011; Linebaugh, 2022, 2025) and, separately, digitisation and born-digital records in Kenya (Musandu, 2022; Datta & Muthama, 2024). It has given less attention to how these concerns connect, that is, to how colonial-era loss, institutional capacity, digitisation and unequal access together shape the preservation of public memory. This article addresses that gap.

The central research question is: to what extent has digitisation in Kenya addressed the loss, under-resourcing and unequal access that mark the national documentary record, and what does it leave unaddressed, particularly for born-digital government records? The article has three objectives: (1) to trace the institutional development of KNADS and the limits of its capacity; (2) to assess the evidence for the destruction and removal of colonial records and for their partial return; and (3) to evaluate the evidence on whether the digitisation of government services and of archives has widened access and preserved records. The Discussion and the Conclusion answer the research question directly.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative historical case study of one national archival institution and its surrounding record-keeping environment. It combines institutional history with legal and policy analysis. Four groups of sources were used: (1) institutional publications and web pages of KNADS on its history and digitisation programme (Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c) and a paper by a KNADS librarian (Namande, 2011); (2) legal and policy texts, namely the Public Archives and Documentation Service Act and the Access to Information Act, 2016; (3) the catalogue description of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office migrated archives held by The National Archives (UK), series FCO 141; and (4) peer-reviewed scholarship, press reports and civil-society reports. Sources were selected because they bear directly on one of the three objectives and because their origin is identifiable, whether an institution, a legislature or a named scholar or publication. Official, archival and scholarly sources were preferred. Press reports were used mainly to establish events and details, such as the history of the Moi Avenue building and recent transfers of digitised files, that the other sources do not document.

The sources were read chronologically to build the timeline in Figure 1, and thematically for evidence on three processes: the destruction and removal of records, institutional capacity, and digitisation and access. Documented events, such as the transfer of files to Kew, were kept distinct from scholarly interpretations of why they occurred. Each major

historical claim was checked against at least one official or archival source, or, where available, an authoritative scholarly source. Figures 2 and 3 are analytical devices that summarise the argument. They are not measurements.

The study relied on published and publicly available sources. It does not use interviews or unpublished files held at KNADS or at Kew, and it cites FCO 141 at series level, relying on published scholarship for the contents of individual Kenya files. Some institutional web pages are undated and may change. Evidence on the preservation of born-digital records across government is limited to the studies available, chiefly Musandu (2022), and institutional and press sources may present the institution favourably. These limits were addressed by using more than one source for major claims, qualifying claims where evidence is thin, and stating where an argument rests on a single study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Founding and Growth of the Kenya National Archives

The building that now houses the Kenya National Archives on Moi Avenue, Nairobi, was not built to hold records. According to the Daily Nation (2020), construction began in 1928 for the National Bank of India and was completed in 1931. The building was later used as commercial bank premises, including by the Kenya Commercial Bank. The government of Kenya acquired the building in 1965, two years after independence (Daily Nation, 2020). The Public Archives and Documentation Service Act was assented to on 24 November 1965 and came into force on 25 January 1966. It established KNADS (Public Archives and Documentation Service Act, 1965). The new institution was placed under the Vice President and Minister of Home Affairs, and it served as both a cultural and academic institution and a central body for state record-keeping (Republic of Kenya, Ministry of Sports, Culture and Heritage, n.d.).

KNADS's initial mandate was broad: to advise public offices on records management, collect and preserve public and private records of national significance, and ensure records are available to researchers and citizens (Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service, n.d.-a). In practice, limited resources were used to implement this mandate. According to the Daily Nation (2020), the archive today houses about 40,000 public records, government records from the ministries, newspaper runs since 1901, and the Murumbi African Heritage Collection, a specialised collection of rare books and pan-African art. The volume of records the Kenyan state creates each year appears not to have been matched by staffing and budget at the national repository. This point bears directly on digitisation. Systematic figures on staffing and funding over time are not available in the sources used here.

A change in the legal mandate of the archive followed when an amendment to the Act (Act No. 2 of 1990) added the National Documentation and Information Retrieval Service to KNADS to deal more extensively with Government publications and information retrieval in general (Public Archives and Documentation Service Act, 1965; Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service, n.d.-a). Technological modernisation started on a small scale, when UNESCO funded a pilot project in Kenya on archival networking in the late 1980s, and in 1994 KNADS officially created an information and communication technology section. However, initially, this was intended to automate manual finding aids using the UNESCO CDS or ISIS software, rather than to digitise document images themselves (Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service, n.d.-b). From 2007, the department has also started digitising selected archival materials, prioritising those in high demand by researchers or physically susceptible to deterioration (Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service, n.d.-b). Namande (2011), a KNADS librarian, reviews the department's digitisation work and the challenges it met.

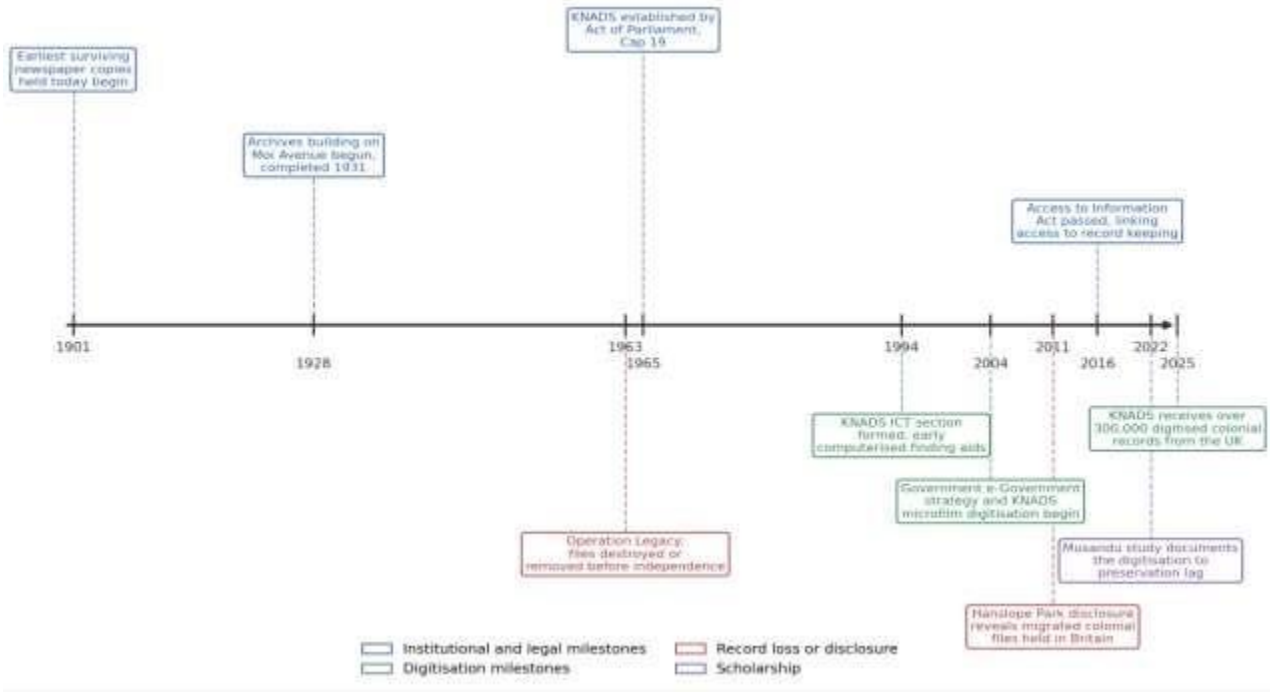

Figure 1. Timeline of Kenya's Archival History, From the Earliest Surviving Newspaper Holdings to the Recent Transfer of Digitised Colonial Records, Based On Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service

Source: (n.d.-a, n.d.-b), Daily Nation (2020), Anderson (2011), Linebaugh (2022, 2025), Musandu (2022) and the Access to Information Act (2016).

Missing Colonial Records and the Migrated Archives

The question of what is missing looms large in any history of Kenya's archives. In the lead-up to independence in 1963, British colonial officials carried out what has become known as Operation Legacy, destroying sensitive administrative records on site or removing them from Kenya (Karinge, 2022; Linebaugh, 2025). Comparable destruction and removal of records took place in other territories approaching independence, notably in East Africa in the early 1960s (Linebaugh, 2025). What made the Kenyan case distinctive and consequential was a 2009 lawsuit against the British government by five elderly Kenyans who had survived detention and torture during the Mau Mau uprising of the 1950s (Karinge, 2022).

During the litigation, the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office acknowledged that it had kept a large body of colonial administration files from many former colonies secret at Hanslope Park, Buckinghamshire, since the early 1960s (Anderson, 2011; Karinge, 2022). The episode is now commonly referred to as the Hanslope Park disclosure, and the files became known as the migrated archives. In 2012 and 2013, they were transferred to The National Archives (UK) at Kew, where they form the series FCO 141, Records of Former Colonial Administrations: Migrated Archives (The National Archives (UK), n.d.). The Kenya files in the collection concern the administration of the Emergency, and scholars have used them to document detention and interrogation policy (Anderson, 2011; Linebaugh, 2022, 2025). These records were relevant to the historical record of torture that informed the eventual settlement, which involved an expression of regret by the British government, payments of approximately £19.9 million and a memorial in Uhuru Park, Nairobi (Karinge, 2022). Scholarly interpretations of why the migrated archives were concealed have changed over time. Early discussion, including Anderson's (2011) analysis, asked whether the episode reflected deliberate conspiracy, bureaucratic bungle, or the loss of institutional memory. More recent research is less willing to accept a purely bureaucratic explanation. Linebaugh (2022),

drawing on research that includes work at the Kenya National Archives, uses the term colonial fragility for the British government's embarrassment about the colonial record and argues that this embarrassment shaped how the files were handled. In her later book, Linebaugh (2025) develops this argument into a broader account of British efforts to conceal and Kenyan efforts to reveal evidence of colonial rule.

The destruction and removal of records left a gap at the centre of the documentary record for the final colonial period, which the files transferred to Kew in 2012 and 2013 could fill only in part (The National Archives (UK), n.d.; Karinge, 2022). Even that transfer illustrates a further inequality, discussed in Section 6: the most important surviving evidence of the colonial state's conduct in Kenya was physically held in Britain, claimed by the British government as its own, and accessible mainly to those who could travel there.

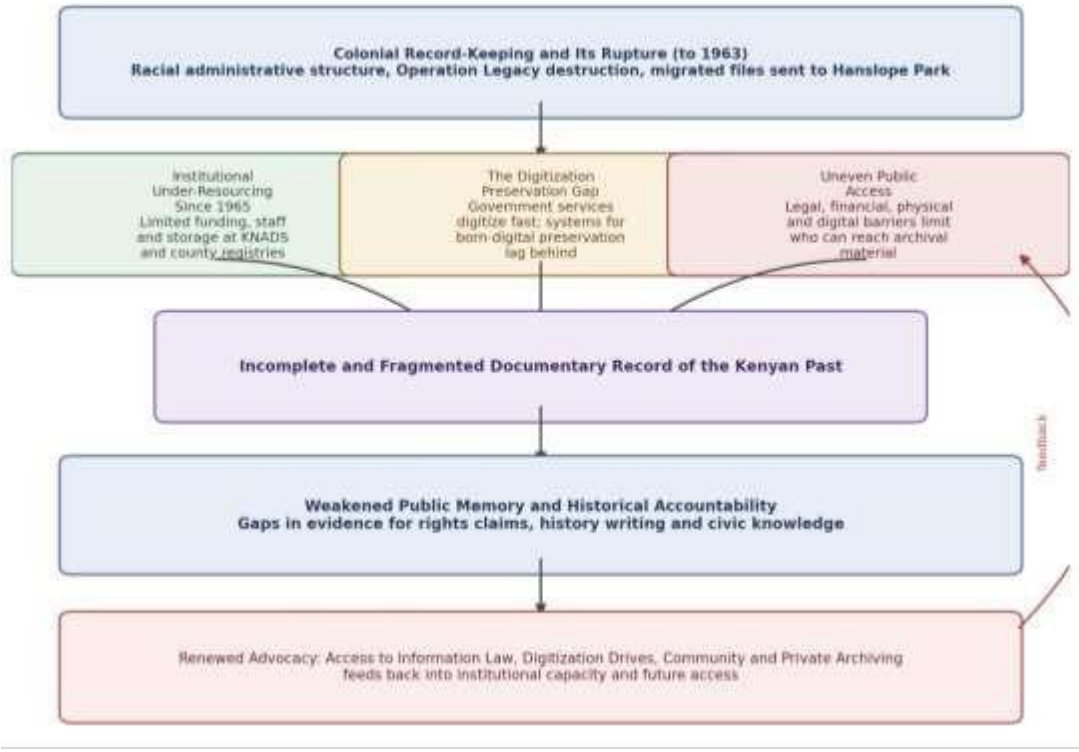

Figure 2. A Structural Model Showing How Colonial Record Destruction, Institutional Under Resourcing, the Digitisation-To-Preservation Gap and Uneven Access Converge To Produce a Fragmented Documentary Record, With a Feedback Loop through Legal and Digitisation Reform

Digitisation Efforts and the Born-Digital Preservation Gap

Kenya's government has expanded its digital services over the last two decades. The national e-Government strategy, launched in 2004, aimed to modernise government operations and service delivery. It was followed by public investment in connectivity infrastructure, including a national fibre-optic backbone, and by platforms such as the eCitizen portal and the Huduma Centre network, which delivers government services in person alongside digital channels (Datta & Muthama, 2024; Firestone & Schott, 2017). At KNADS, digitisation began on a parallel, smaller scale, starting with the automation of finding aids in 1994 and moving to direct digitisation of archival materials from 2007, focusing on newspapers, audio-visual materials, and microfilm considered most at risk (Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service, n.d.-b). This expanded on an older microfilming programme that, since the 1970s, had microfilmed colonial-era correspondence series such as the Colonial Office 533 files for 1905 to 1951 and long runs of newspapers, including the Daily Nation from 1960 onwards, and which was itself to be digitised

from 2004 so that the microfilmed content could be accessed and shared online (Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service, n.d.-c).

The main empirical observation in this article, and the one best supported by the literature, is that two digitisation processes have moved at different speeds. They are the digitisation of ongoing government activity and the digitisation and preservation of the historical archive. Musandu (2022) found a significant lag between the digitisation of government operations and the development and implementation of protocols to preserve born-digital records, such as email, government websites and cloud-based databases. Musandu situates this finding within a wider body of studies by archivists in the Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (ESARBICA), which report similar gaps between institutions' use of ICTs and archival capacity in the region (Musandu, 2022). Comparable difficulties have been reported for the National Archives of Nigeria, where a study found that most collections were not being digitised despite a stated programme, because of limited funding, the lack of a digitisation policy and a shortage of trained staff (Balogun & Adjei, 2019).

The Information and Communication Technology Authority (ICTA), established in 2013, was expected to help close this gap by overseeing ICT standards across government ministries, counties and agencies (Musandu, 2022). Musandu (2022) argues that policy documents in this area have tended to overlap and have not produced a system to capture and retain born-digital government records at scale. His central finding is that email, online data and government websites could disappear before they are ever collected for the historical record, even as the volume of digitised and digitally created government information grows.

Another related, but analytically separate, issue in the digitisation of Land Records in Kenya is explored in detail in Datta and Muthama (2024). They studied the role of digitising one of the largest series of public records, the National Land Information System, popularly called Ardhisasa, and found that digitising such a large-scale public record series is far from a simple technical exchange of digital files for paper ones. It relies, instead, on extensive 'archival labour' performed by land administration staff, who are not necessarily archival scientists but have been trained in survey and land law, and who have to sort, verify, and reconcile the paper and digital copy of the same record as the system is being put together (Datta & Muthama, 2024). This finding offers a structural explanation for the difficulty of closing Musandu's preservation gap: preserving digital content requires far more work than digitisation itself, because the live digitisation project must be maintained and reconciled with the paper system. A reliance on the former does not necessarily free up time and resources for the latter.

Recent developments point to a developing state response. In December 2024, the United Kingdom formally handed over to Kenya a collection of digitised colonial-era records comprising 2,658 files and more than 300,000 images dated 1907 to 1968 (Mwirigi, 2024). In August 2025, it donated equipment and software to support public access to the collection at KNADS (Muia, 2025). The Kenya National Digital Master Plan 2022 to 2032 (Government of Kenya, 2022) sets the current national digital agenda. These developments expand access to digitised historical material and to digital services. They are not, however, evidence of a system for capturing and preserving records that exist only in digital form, because the UK transfer concerns digitised copies of existing paper records. Whether the Master Plan provides for born-digital preservation lies outside the evidence reviewed here.

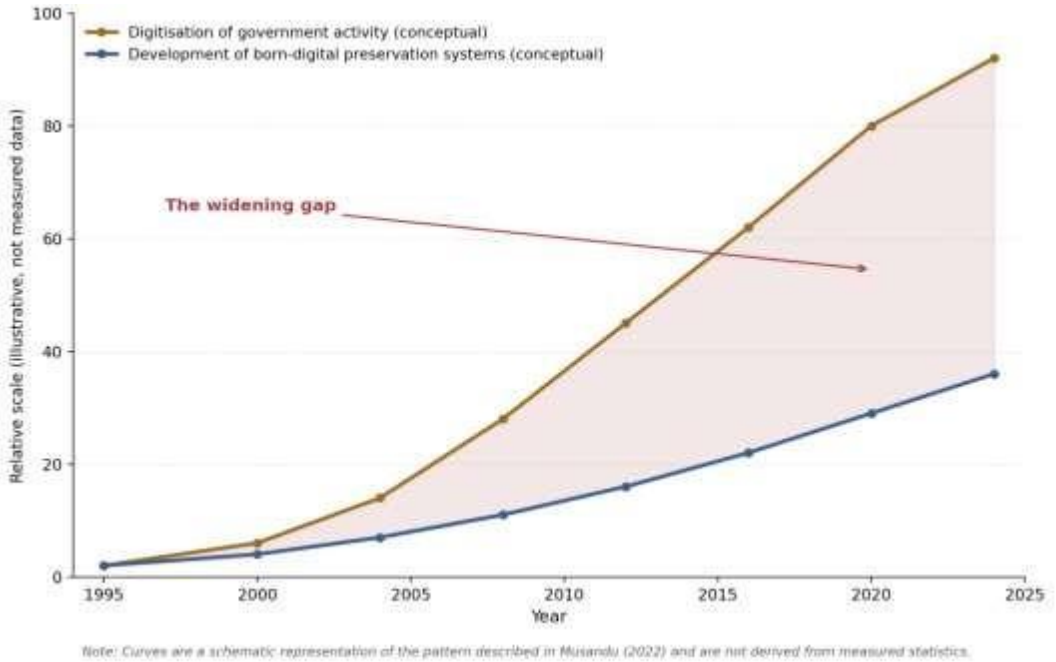

Figure 3. The Digitalisation to Preservation Gap in Kenyan Public Records

The conceptual illustration above is of the pattern Musandu (2022) describes: government activity has digitised faster while systems for preserving born-digital records have developed much more slowly, producing a widening gap. The curves are schematic and are not derived from measured statistics.

Unequal Public Access to Historical Materials

Where records exist and have been catalogued, access in Kenya is uneven. The legal basis for access has improved since independence. The original Public Archives and Documentation Service Act (1965) allowed for public access to public archives, but in general terms that left considerable discretion to the archives (Public Archives and Documentation Service Act, 1965). The Access to Information Act, 2016, which came into effect in 2016, gives concrete effect to the constitutional right of access to information under Article 35. It requires public bodies to create and maintain adequate records, keep them in good order and, within three years of the Act applying to them, computerise their records and information management systems to facilitate access (Access to Information Act, 2016). The Act also gave the Commission on Administrative Justice oversight and enforcement roles and established an online system for requesting access (Open Government Partnership, n.d.). In practice, however, access to Kenya's documentary heritage remains tiered, as Table 1 summarises. At the most open end, a few digitisation projects have placed large volumes of Kenyan documentary heritage online for free. The clearest example is the digitisation of the McMillan Memorial Library's collection by the social enterprise Book Bunk, which has restored Nairobi's public libraries since 2017 and began a digitisation project two years later.

It produced a digital catalogue of 137,705 books for Nairobi's oldest public library, and worked to safeguard gazettes, colonial-era photographs, county council minutes and newspapers that were rare or endangered (Kiunguyu, 2022). The project also identified another gap in the record, the absence of ordinary Kenyans' stories and memories, and began a crowdsourced collection of audio and images called The Missing Bits (Kiunguyu, 2022). That this project was led by a social enterprise rather than funded through ongoing state programming is one example of access to Kenyan digital archives being achieved through non-governmental initiative. A single case does not establish a general trend.

Table 1. Tiers of Access to Kenyan Archival and Historical Material

Access Tier	Groups Most Likely to Use This Tier (Illustrative)	Principal Barriers
In-person reading room access	Nairobi-based researchers, university-affiliated historians, and foreign scholars able to travel and fund extended stays	Physical distance from Nairobi, cost of travel and accommodation, limited opening hours, and finding aids that assume prior archival training
Digitised catalogue and microfilm access	Researchers who can locate and interpret KNADS finding aids, and institutions with microfilm reading equipment	Incomplete digitisation of the collection, catalogue records that are not searchable online in full text, and uneven metadata quality
Open online digital access	Internet users who can reach the published collection, where a digitised collection such as the McMillan Memorial Library holdings is openly published	Only part of Kenya's documentary heritage has reached this tier, and some such projects depend on external or philanthropic funding rather than sustained state investment
Statutory right of access	Any citizen making a written request under the Access to Information Act	Awareness of the right may be uneven, response timelines may not be met, and the underlying record may not exist in a retrievable form if it was born digital and never captured

Table 1. above Illustrates tiers of access to Kenyan archival and historical material, the groups each tier is most likely to serve, and the principal barriers associated with each. The tiers and groups are analytical illustrations drawn from the sources cited in this study, not empirical estimates of who uses each tier.

On the other end of the spectrum, those looking for the most sensitive and historically significant material (for example, the migrated colonial archives discussed in Section 4). For extended periods, access to these has been determined by British, not Kenyan, law and institutions, because the records were held at Hanslope Park and then at The National Archives at Kew, not in Nairobi (Karinge, 2022; Linebaugh, 2025). The UK transfers of digitised copies in 2024 and 2025 have begun to change this (Mwirigi, 2024; Muia, 2025). This has meant that studying the colonial state's own record of its behaviour in Kenya has largely depended on the researcher's ability to travel to and work in the former colonial power's archival system, a continuity of colonial-era inequality. Access to land records is another unique challenge, more of a verification issue. Datta and Muthama (2024) report that in the land digitisation system, paper and digital records can differ, and that an official decision, not a public process, determines which version is used. The unequal access is not solely a question of the presence of a digital record for citizens seeking to establish a land claim, however, but whether that record can be trusted to portray the authoritative version of that record (Datta & Muthama, 2024)

Discussion

Digitisation as Partial Solution

The evidence reviewed in this study supports one main interpretive argument. Digitisation in Kenya has improved access to some historical materials. Still, it has not, by itself, preserved records, closed the gap left by colonial removals, or removed unequal access, and it has left newly created digital records without a comparable preservation system. In answer to the research question, digitisation has therefore

addressed the loss and unequal access that mark the documentary record only in part.

Three findings support this answer. First, digitisation has delivered real gains in access. The Book Bunk project has made material from the McMillan Memorial Library available online (Kiunguyu, 2022), and the UK's 2024 handover and 2025 equipment donation have begun to bring digitised copies of colonial-era records into KNADS (Mwirigi, 2024; Muia, 2025). Second, the gains are uneven and do not amount to preservation. Datta and Muthama's (2024) study of land records shows that digitised records require ongoing archival labour and can diverge from paper originals, so access to a record does not guarantee it is authoritative. The tiered access described in Section 6 shows that the most sensitive colonial records remained, for long periods, under British control and hard for Kenyan researchers to consult. Third, the most serious gap concerns records that never existed on paper. Musandu (2022) reports that government digitisation has outpaced the development of systems to preserve email, websites and databases. Digitising the historical archive does not address this problem, so projects that improve access to older material cannot solve it.

These findings connect colonial archival loss, institutional capacity, digitisation and unequal access in the following way. The colonial removals created a documentary gap and an inequality of access based on location (Linebaugh, 2022, 2025). Limited institutional capacity constrains the state's ability to close that gap or to extend preservation to new records (Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service, n.d.-a; Musandu, 2022). Digitisation, as the cases above show, redistributes access without necessarily addressing either capacity or preservation. This pattern aligns with Musandu's (2022) argument and Datta and Muthama's (2024) finding that digitisation depends on sustained human labour. It extends them by linking both to the longer history of colonial loss documented by Linebaugh.

The study does not claim that born-digital records are already being lost on a scale comparable to the destruction of colonial records, because no study reviewed here measures that loss. Instead, it argues that the risk is plausible given evidence of a gap between digitisation and preservation, and that it deserves attention before records are lost. The argument rests on a small number of studies, chiefly Musandu (2022) for born-digital records and Datta and Muthama (2024) for land records, and further research on other government record series is needed.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The study made the following conclusions. First, the destruction and removal of colonial records at independence, documented through the migrated archives, left a gap in the record for the final colonial period and placed key evidence outside Kenya (Anderson, 2011; Linebaugh, 2022, 2025). Second, KNADS, established by the Public Archives and Documentation Service Act of 1965 and in operation from 1966, has built its collections and digitisation capacity over time, but the sources reviewed point to a gap between its mandate and its resources (Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service, n.d.-a, n.d.-b; Musandu, 2022). Finally, digitisation has widened access to some materials, but access remains uneven, and digitisation has not been matched by systems to preserve born-digital government records (Datta & Muthama, 2024; Musandu, 2022).

The study contributes an integrated account of how colonial archival loss, institutional capacity, digitisation and unequal access together bear on the preservation of public memory in Kenya, connections that earlier work has treated separately.

Recommendations: The study recommends that, for public memory, who can consult the record, and whether today's government records survive to be consulted, depend on decisions about preservation and not only on the digitisation of services. It further recommends the following policy implications: First, KNADS needs a mandate, funding and staffing that explicitly cover born-digital records. Second, preservation requirements, including capture, format migration and secure storage, should be built into government digital systems, including those supported by ICTA, rather than added afterwards. Third, digitisation projects, including those led by non-governmental organisations, should be paired with arrangements for long-term preservation and for public access on clear terms. Fourth, the record-

keeping duties of the Access to Information Act, 2016, including the duty to computerise records management systems, should be monitored and reported on. These recommendations rest on a small body of evidence and should be tested through further empirical work on government record series.

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