

ARCHIVING TO THE LAST BREATH: A TRIBUTE TO IVAN MUNHAMU MURAMBIWA

By
Livingstone Muchefa



From left: Ivan M. Murambiwa, Hon. Minister of Home Affairs Cde K.D Mohadi (centre) and the Permanent Secretary Mr M. Matshiya at the 2015 ESARBICA General Conference, Victoria Falls.

It is an honour to write this tribute to Ivan Munhamu Murambiwa – a teacher, an archaeologist, an archivist, a Director, an administrator, a scholar and a clansman. He stood out to be someone special and rare in his ways of carrying himself. His professional journey was aptly reflected in his 2012 published memoir “Archiving to the last archivist standing: the National Archives of Zimbabwe under sanctions”¹. The paper was published by COMMA, an ICA affiliated journal dedicated to articles on records, information and archives management aspects. The article brings out the methods and initiatives he used as Director at National Archives of Zimbabwe to stay afloat during the sanctions regime. Reading through the paper, one also realises how bravery was a core attribute of his leadership credentials.

On the 2nd of November 2020 I had resolved to resign from the National Archives of Zimbabwe where I had served as an archivist since April 2008. I had decided that Ivan would be the last person to consult because my instincts were telling me he would have some reservations, he still wanted me to remain at NAZ. My fear was that he would influence me to remain an archivist. This was not a baseless assumption. There were several pending projects in which

I had been involved. In 2008 when I joined NAZ three senior archivists left for greener pastures. It was in the middle of severe economic hardships. In 2016 another crop of seasoned archivists also left. The 2008 brain-drain quickly exposed me to middle-level management issues. That way, several times I would have to knock at his door and ask a few questions for guidance. His engagement would always be camouflaged with politeness, you would feel the encouragement in his tone. The 2016 brain-drain then brought the relationship closer as I became part of the management team.

On the 2nd of June 2013, I had accompanied him to Nairobi, Kenya for an ESARBICA Biennial Conference as a junior archivist. It is one of the most popular traditions within ESARBICA (an acronym for Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives) to bring junior archivists and offer them some training and allow them to attend the main conferences. It has a membership of about twenty-two countries (with about sixteen very active members). It was our first such long journey together. There I was stuck in the aisle seat of the plane. Ivan suggested that I should try and make some presentations in the junior archivists' workshop. I had not done that before, so I was hesitant. The workshop theme was Disaster Preparedness in Archival Institutions. With a few tips I went ahead to register my intention to make a presentation. I did so well, so he said.

At that conference, Zimbabwe was selected to host the next conference in 2015, this meant that Ivan was to become the President of EASRBICA for the following two years. It was his second stint as President of ESARBICA. In his acceptance speech, he gave a thrilling anecdote of the historical relationship between Nairobi and Harare dating back to the liberation war period. His historical facts were so apt. The speech was punctuated with humour leaving audience in stitches. That was Ivan.

Back home he was setting up a national committee to prepare the hosting of this important conference in June 2017 (ESARBICA is a biennial event). The committee was national because the parent Ministry of Home Affairs and the Cabinet had taken this as an opportunity for international re-engagement following its bruised international relations. Ivan then suggested we could get assistance from a few veteran archivists like Peter C. Mazikana, a former Deputy Director and renowned consultant to help in the technical committee. He then requested that I assist him in running the Conference Programme. This was essentially the hub of it all. The conference that had been anticipated to bring an average of three hundred guests brought more than five hundred guests, with some countries such as Mozambique bringing between seventy and eighty people. For me this was one of his landmark achievements in the field. ESARBICA had not hosted such numbers before.

Some few months before this June 2015 ESARBICA Conference he called me to come to his office. Getting into his office, I saw him seated in a very relaxed way. "What are the main challenges you are facing as a section (Public Archives and Research)?" This section at NAZ is primarily concerned with the provision of access to the public. I had a lot of issues, which I felt needed serious attention. These included several complaints and requests by researchers over unprocessed archives. Researchers often felt our priorities were not right in selecting what to process. Resultantly two papers were produced for the conference. We co-authored a paper titled 'Assigning value to the archive: Archivist versus User'. Another one was co-authored by myself, Tafadzwa Chigodora and Ivan Murambiwa titled, 'A historical account of backlog challenges at the National Archives of Zimbabwe and access implications'. He would emphasise that we need to communicate with our clients, especially on issues that are controversial.

In 2017 we drove together to Mutare, the eastern mountainous town of Zimbabwe, which is its fourth largest city and some 280km away from the capital. We were attending a workshop to draft a Bill on Traditional Leadership. That's when we discovered we were of the same clan Hungwe (Fish Eagle). Our relationship shifted from that of boss and subordinate to fellow clansmen or brotherhood. He had interesting histories of the Hungwe people. He was born of a mother from the Mukarakates. His father was Isaac Kajau. He was born in a family of seven. His grandfather was Milton Matonhodze son of Chikurupati (name derived from an instrument used in gold mines) who was born around 1880.² Chikurupati was son of Matonhodze, also son of Nduna. Nduna was a Nguni name³, a name given to him for being a trusted lieutenant of the expansion of the Ndebele Kingdom. Nduna was son of Chirwa, of one of the oldest chieftainships. The family is settled around Chivhu area. It is interesting to note that Ivan's lineage is known for mostly two things, being gifted soldiers as well as being of chieftainship.

Back to archiving, in 2017, South Africa was supposed to host EASRBICA but because of other challenges requested another member country to host it. It was hardly twelve months away from its traditional calendar in the month of June when Malawi accepted on condition that they received assistance from Zimbabwe which had successfully hosted it in 2015. Ivan pledged to help and went on to suggest some bilateral arrangements between Zimbabwe and Malawi. Mazikana, Prof Lovemore Zinyama, myself and Ivan became the team to assist Malawi. His initiatives in handling delicate and crisis moments always worked. The conference was a success.

He was a true historian and a patriot. His eagerness for the next generation to have access to documented history was evident. He was an ardent heritage manager and a stabilising factor. Just after the Operation Restore Legacy in November 2017, I came to appreciate his vision as a heritage manager in a

different way. The Operation Restore Legacy was a military intervention in Zimbabwe that culminated in the resignation of long-time leader, President Robert Mugabe, and his replacement by his former vice president, Emmerson Mnangagwa. Ivan and fellows had interviewed the new incumbent (Cde ED Mnangagwa) years back recordings which exceeded 2 hours. These had been kept classified upon request by the informant. This was one of the many oral history interviews under the 'Capturing a Fading National Memory' project which was launched in 2004 with the main aim being to collect and preserve memories of the 1896/7 uprisings and the liberation struggle of the 1960-70s. This project was spearheaded by the National Archives of Zimbabwe in collaboration with the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe, and the History Department at the University of Zimbabwe. It covered more than 10 districts. The approach was to target under-documented areas as reflected in the archival collection.

In November 2020, I was deciding to quit archiving and my thoughts were with this cadre who remained at the helm of an institution during very difficult times. Ivan had not been well for some months now and I had not been able to see him. After receiving my email about my intention to become a curator and leave archiving, he expressed his pleasure that I remained in field of heritage management. In June 2021, he had a strong comeback with a video in which he was educating the nation on the commemorations of the International Archives Week and the effects of covid-19 on the institution. It was insightful.

The untimely death of Ivan Munhamu Murambiwa on 7 August 2021 robbed the nation, archaeological and archival professions of a man who had stood to the last breath. His achievements stand out:

A man who had rose from being a Teacher to a Director of NAZ as well as twice President of EASRBICA

- A former Eastern Regional Director of National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe.
- The launch of Community Archives Project which led to establishment of community archives in Arcturus Mining School, Harare Girls High School, Zion Christian Church (ZCC) centre in Masvingo, Mbungo, Zvishavane.
- The man who had launched a National Digitization of films collection commencing at NAZ
- He had successfully listed the Nehanda/Kaguvi trial dockets on the UNESCO Memory of the World Register in 2013.
- A lecturer of Heritage studies, Archaeology and Records and Archives Management
- He had successfully repatriated Cabinet Records of between 1976 -1980 of the Smith regime from Rhodes University.

- A prolific writer, publisher and columnist in local newspapers
- He pioneered and coordinated a national project entitled Capturing a Fading National Memory” which aimed at documenting liberation war history from grass root levels.
- In his bid to promote social cohesion and unify the whole nation he pioneered the One Nation, One Zimbabwe Project that aimed at documenting the history of the underdocumented to fill in archival gaps to ensure the voices of the marginalised are audible and to bridge the gap on same to remove all silences in the archives.
- Ivan was an Instrumental Resource person in the Cabinet Committee on Place and Street Names as he sat on the Technical Committee on same, contributing to the building up of archival information in line with the Alterations Act which is housed in the Ministry of Local Government and Public Works.



On a National Clean-up campaign day, he would join the rest of the staff in grass-cutting then later give a talk.

Notes

¹ Murambiwa I.M. ‘Archiving to the last archivist standing: the National Archives of Zimbabwe under sanctions’, *Comma* 2012, (1), 59–66. The title of this paper also informed the title of this Tribute.

² Chikurupati was a name given to him for his excellent skills in using this mining tool.

³ The name is also best understood in the context of the family relations with the coming of the Nguni people.