Aluka’s Struggles for Freedom in Southern Africa collections are built in close partnership with archives, libraries, and other repositories of historical material in Southern Africa. These institutions contain rich archival resources that are often unknown to outside scholars, and yet critical to an understanding of the region’s history. The institutions are eager to use digital technologies to make their resources more widely available, but many have been constrained from doing so by resource limitations.

This was the case for one of Aluka’s first partners in Southern Africa, the Arquivo Histórico de Moçambique (AHM). AHM, founded in 1934, is the country’s principal repository of historical documents. Shortly after independence in 1974, AHM became administratively linked with the University of Eduardo Mondlane in the capital city Maputo. As a result, it is now heavily used by researchers and students at the university. AHM is currently raising support internationally for the relocation from its present antiquated building to a new location with improved facilities.

The Arquivo Histórico de Moçambique is currently raising support internationally for the relocation from its present antiquated building to a new location with improved facilities collections on the precritical history of Mozambique, particularly the 19th century, but the vast majority of its historical material dates from the 20th century. Collectively, the documents encompass a vast amount of data on the political, economic, and social history of Mozambique from local, regional, and national perspectives. In addition to this material, AHM has a substantial set of local newspapers and periodicals and a wealth of maps, photographs, oral histories, and audio-visual material. Having more materials available online would reduce the burden on the archives staff and help preserve heavily used materials, many of which are in fragile condition. In addition, AHM was eager to attract the attention of a greater number of international scholars from surrounding countries and from outside Africa.
In 2004, Aluka signed a formal collaboration agreement with AHM. The agreement set up a process whereby a national advisory committee, consisting of leading Mozambican scholars, archivists, and public intellectuals, co-chaired by the Director of AHM (Professor Joel das Neves Tembe) and a leading historian at the University of Eduardo Mondlane (Professor Arlindo Chilundo), is responsible for selecting materials to be digitised. The documents so selected are intended to illuminate the five broad historical themes that are the principal focus of the project (see www.aluka.org for a description of the themes). Overall, the material selected and digitised will have sufficient depth and significance to allow undergraduates to write research papers and to serve as a point of departure for graduate students and faculty who want to conduct more in-depth research on Mozambique.

Aluka helped establish a digitisation lab to scan Arquivo Histórico de Moçambique collections in house; this lab includes two high-end, large-format flatbed scanners, four computers, an upgraded server, black/white and colour printers, a photocopier, and the software needed to operate the equipment and edit the digital files. Although most of the equipment was purchased locally, suitable scanners were not available in Mozambique and had to be imported, resulting in lengthy customs delays. But by April 2005, all the equipment had been delivered and set up in a newly renovated, secure room at AHM. AHM provided a three-person team to staff the lab, including a project manager who had attended a training course offered by another of Aluka’s regional partners, Digital Innovation South Africa at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Aluka staff provided additional on-site training on operating the new equipment, creating meta-data records, processing OCR text files, and editing the digital files.

To date, the national advisory committee has selected more than 50,000 pages of documents deemed to meet the criteria outlined above. These include Mozambique’s leading weekly journal ‘Tempo’; key articles from the principal newspaper ‘Noticias’; reports from the Native Affairs Departments, the Portuguese Military Command, and the Secret Police; publications from nationalist movements; and interviews with leading figures in the liberation struggle. The digitisation lab began operations in the fall of 2005, and by the end of 2007 had scanned 28,623 high-quality images, beginning with a complete run of Tempo from 1974 to 1980. Copies of the digital files have been provided to Aluka for distribution through its online digital library, access to which will be made available at no cost to universities, libraries, and other educational and cultural institutions in Mozambique and throughout the African continent. This partnership with the highly visible Aluka project will also help to publicize the critical importance of the AHM for scholars and students interested in the history of Mozambique and the broader region.

For more information, regarding the Arquivo Histórico de Moçambique (AHM), please visit http://www.ahm.uem.mz/home.htm.