

Accessing collective memory: the role of oral history in building an inclusive archives reflecting a people's archives

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to discuss accessing oral history in building an inclusive archives from communities that once dwelled in the Kruger National Park. In March 2022, in the Daily Maverick, the South African Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, Barbara Creecy stated that there is a need for a shift to an Africanised conservation approach that embraces the diverse cultures, traditions and knowledge systems in South Africa. It is, thus, important for wilderness areas in South Africa to undertake projects to collect and share indigenous knowledge that can be captured and used to conserve wilderness areas.

Design/methodology/approach – The research methodology that was applied for the purpose of this study is a multimethod approach but is dominated by a qualitative approach.

Findings – During three interviews, three focus groups of five persons and three onsite visits, several concerns were identified as requiring more investigations and efforts to ensure archives can be publicly accessible.

Originality/value – History on Africa has largely been written by the global north and kept behind expensive paywalls (Fengu, 2022). The oral history projects being undertaken in South Africa are to be commended in for filling gaps in the historical discourse neglected by the colonial and apartheid dispensations.

Keywords Oral history, Archivists, Indigenous knowledge, Sustainable development, Heritage, Climate change

Paper type Case study

Introduction and background

Although the Kruger National Park is best known for its rich biodiversity concerning its fauna, flora and the vast wilderness, there are many cultural and historical sites and related histories that have not been disclosed. Many of these are hidden in archival collections and oral histories. These narratives are as much a part of the history of the Kruger National Park as the tales of Harry Wolhuter and James Stevenson-Hamilton. Better awareness of these cultural and historical sites and the legends and narratives associated with different areas in the Kruger National Park substantiate why the areas should be preserved and the wildlife conserved for the benefit of future generations. The sustainability of the game reserve must not only be to protect wildlife from exploitation and extinction. The reserve should be a sanctuary to protect the histories, legends, cultural and historical sites that are important to the communities that once lived within its boundaries.

The archival record in most mainstream South African archives reflects the colonial legacies. Thus, the genesis of archival systems in most African nations is traceable to the colonial era and is deeply rooted in the western ways (Ngoepe *et al.*, 2020). Most African countries' archival systems, especially the former British colonies and protectorates, have been

modelled around the work of Sir Hilary Jenkinson of primary value and secondary value (Jenkinson, 1922, cited in Ngoepe and Saurombe, 2016). It is, therefore, understandable that the archival systems in African nations have been largely affected by the historical events, which were mostly entrenched along inequality, oppression, marginalisation and other forms of social injustices, such as slavery, colonialism and apartheid (Callinicos and Odendaal, 1996). As a result of this bias, its collection largely consists of records that were generated mostly after the arrival of the colonialists. This points to the existence of a worrying gap in the archival collection, not only in South Africa, but elsewhere on the continent. Thus, most archival collections in African countries do not account for the pre-colonial era, and in cases where an attempt has been made, it has been haphazard. Moreover, the current archival system is reluctant to accept oral history as an authentic source of archival records. Ngoepe (2019), for instance, argued that the western way of understanding archives is given more preference, thereby sidelining the traditional/African way, which is mostly oral history. Traditionally, African history has been primarily based

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on orature, and this means that there were no written records about African culture as it was passed orally from one generation to another. This is the reality that archival systems that were built on western foundations have failed to appreciate or acknowledge (Ngoepe and Keakopa, 2011). This may also explain why most archival collections in African archives do not reflect much about African communities but were/are more preoccupied with documenting the colonialists' history. These western-influenced archives believe that only written records are the true and authentic documentation of a people's history, and not oral-based narrations, which they criticise as being subjective. Indeed, many people consider the truth to be in the recorded form only, while forgetting that the other way of indirectly accessing the past is through oral history. Moreover, they disregard the fact that the recording of social events was never part of most African communities as they relied on memory to store their history, and this was transmitted orally from one generation to another (Ngoepe, 2019).

As noted by Ritchie, since 2004, the biggest development has been the spreading of oral history around the world. Oral history projects have developed in areas that have undergone social and political upheavals, where the traditional archives reflect the old regimes, particularly in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Asia, Africa and Latin America (Ritchie, 2014). The events in Ukraine with the blatant destruction of cultural heritage by the Russian invasion is testimony of how important it is for oral narratives to be captured and preserved for future generations. In Africa, the colonial and apartheid dispensations were also responsible for their attempt to destroy indigenous knowledge and suppress the narratives associated with local communities. However, currently in Africa, there are also forces that seem intent on destroying the heritage and narratives associated with the past under the colonial and apartheid dispensations. In South Africa, there is a need for urgent attention to be paid in preserving and capturing oral histories and narratives that represent all the communities in South Africa. South Africa needs to be careful that it too does not become recolonised by countries only interested in the natural resources that the country possesses. In South Africa, the oral narratives associated with different communities located in the wilderness areas need to be captured and methods found to ensure that such collections can be shared with interested persons and the youth to ensure they do not forget these narratives.

The events in Ukraine with the blatant destruction of cultural heritage by the Russian invasion is testimony of how important it is for oral narratives to be captured and preserved for future generations (Azoulay, 2022). UNESCO recorded that over 150 cultural sites have been completely or partially destroyed because of the war with Russia (Azoulay, 2022). In Africa, the colonial and apartheid dispensations were also responsible for their attempt to destroy indigenous knowledge and suppress the narratives associated with local communities. In South Africa, the oral narratives associated with different communities situated in wilderness areas need to be captured and methods found to ensure that such collections can be shared with interested persons and the youth to ensure that these narratives are not forgotten. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the archival collections and oral history projects

undertaken by archivists and other scholars in South African wilderness areas.

Problem statement

Archives are national treasures and are mandated to generate, keep, use and offer records of a shared national history (Sutherland, 2017). This is emphasised by Randall (2007) who argued that archivists have a moral obligation to grant equal voice in the archive collection to those who have been voiceless or marginalised. The expectation is that archives should become tools for enhancing and promulgating social justice and inclusion agendas, for questioning attitudes, changing thinking and re-configuring practices (Evans and Wilson, 2018). However, in Africa, archives reflect not only the historical biases of colonialism, but the discrimination of the minority ethnic groups (Callinicos and Odendaal, 1996). This probably explains why, over the years, archives have functioned as institutional strongholds of power and privilege in support of a prevailing hegemonic system (Evans and Wilson, 2018). Zinn (1977) observed that the most powerful elements in the society have the greatest capacity to find documents, preserve them and decide what should be publicly available. This highlights the historical discrepancies inherent in the archival system, where the weak and poor are sidelined in terms of the archival collection and access.

The marginalisation of the poor and the subjugation of the vulnerable communities in archival collections is a sign of discrepancies in the systems and reflects a bigger problem in society. Thus, the failure to represent all constituencies in society, in terms of archival collections, is tantamount to robbing citizens, especially vulnerable communities, of their fundamental and democratic right of participating in the process of storytelling and leaving a legacy that can be captured and shared through archival collections. Moreover, the failure by archives to embrace the diversity of identities and experiences of a society can be seen as lack of value and respect for the marginalised communities.

Despite being widely criticised for being rooted in biases and supporting and upholding a system that subjugate the vulnerable communities, archives continue to function as the perpetrators and conduits of social exclusions because they are failing to embrace the diversities of the societies they represent. Yet, the general expectation is that archivists, as the custodians of national heritage, should use the power of archives to promote diversity and social justice (Archival Platform, 2015). Evidence from the South African National Parks Board archives system was inherited from the British colonial officials and apartheid dispensation, who decided on what could be collected and in what format and form. This has led to the exclusion of important elements of the society. In view of this, the researcher is/was compelled to explore the building of inclusive archival systems for the South African National Parks Board and one that promotes access to such collections to ordinary members of the public.

Literature review

Locating inclusive archives in literature

According to Ketelaar (1992:15), an inclusive archive entails the “transformation of archives into archives of the people, by the people, for the people”. Ketelaar (1992) added that

building inclusive archives can only be possible if the archivists try to understand and listen to the indigenous people by capturing their stories. Of noteworthy is that inclusive archives, in the truest sense of the word “inclusive”, denote an archival system that does not exclude or discriminate against any segment of the society, regardless of social status, class, level of education, religion, ethnicity, gender and sexuality.

Cook (2011:181) gave a more comprehensive definition of inclusive archival system as “the one which reflects the multiple voices, and not only the voices of the powerful, but the powerless as well”. Cook (2011) further stressed that an inclusive archival system is shaped by an appraisal that respects diversity, ambiguity, tolerance and multiple ways of understanding archives, celebrating differences rather than monoliths, multiples, rather than mainstream narratives, the personal and local, as much as the business and official. Cook (2011) described an archival system that is total or inclusive in all senses of the word.

In Canada, the concept is referred to as “total archives”, and its origin is traceable to the archival lexicon during the 1970s. It was used to describe a particular way of managing archival systems. As understood in the Canadian context, it denotes that publicly funded archival institutions should acquire, preserve and make available, for public use, both government and private sector records in all media forms (Millar, 1998). The foregoing shows that the essence of inclusive archive is the collection of archival records, which tell a complete, balanced and non-discriminatory story of a people. An inclusive archive seeks to understand, appreciate, embrace and truly reflect the diversity of the society.

Effects of postmodernism in the building of inclusive SANParks archives

The origin of the concept of postmodernism in relation to archival science is traceable to the 1980s, and is attributed to Hugh Taylor, a Canadian. However, its full development, as a theory, is credited to the studies by Terry Cook, an archivist (Tognoli and Guimarães, 2010). Cook (2011) described postmodernism as the dominant intellectual trend in this era and as having a direct influence on all disciplines, including archival science. Postmodernism challenges the archival concept that:

Dominated the documentary characteristics in the 20th century, such as neutrality and impartiality, by denaturalising what society assumes as natural and what has been accepted as normal and rational for years (Cook, 2011, p. 175).

The proponents of postmodernism advocate for the deconstruction and reformulation of traditional archives as the best ways of reflecting the diversity of contemporary times (Cook, 2011:175). In other words, the reinterpretations, deconstructions and formularisations of traditional archives are embodied in postmodern archival science (Cook, 2011). Thus, postmodernism can be instrumental in the building of inclusive archives due to its ability to question what society traditionally assumed and accepted as normal and rational. For years, no one questioned the bias that has resulted in the creation of a systemic flaw within traditional archives, leading to the “marginalization, erasure, and oppression of historically underrepresented communities” (Zinn, 1977:22). Thus, archives have failed to reflect inclusivity, due to the systemic

flaw inherited from the traditional system. This is where postmodernism is deployed to reinterpret, deconstruct and formalise the archives by building an inclusive archival system.

Strategies to make archives more accessible

Creating better awareness and respect for the country’s cultural diversity has been lost along the way, and there is an urgent need for collaborative partnerships to address this.

It is the contention of this article that under the colonial and apartheid governments the role of the public archives was regarded primarily as providing additional storage for government records rather than from the perspective of their potential contribution to nation building. Schellnack-Kelly and Jiyane (2017) noted that although there have been initiatives to capture socio-political narratives on the armed struggle and cognisance of the projects undertaken by South African National Parks to capture indigenous knowledge and oral histories, little effort has been made to disseminate the information available in a medium appropriate for use by the so-called millennials.

The opportunity to use information technology to provide better access to and active engagement with a younger audience has been woefully neglected by South African heritage institutions. Schellnack-Kelly and Jiyane (2017) further contend that wider access to the archives under South Africa’s democratic dispensation is vitally important. The two reasons cited by Schellnack-Kelly and Jiyane (2017) are: firstly, that public entities must ensure that the voices of communities marginalised by the previous dispensations are captured and made available for dissemination to all sectors of South African society. Secondly, such public entities should not preserve information purely because of their aesthetic value or from a heritage perspective. The archival repositories must ensure effective access to and dissemination of the information and knowledge from a wider spectrum of information sources. This is crucial to meeting contemporary challenges effectively such as sustainable development, eradication of poverty and tackling climate change.

Importance of oral history collections

Oral history, as proposed by Thompson (2000) and Field (2008), can be used to transform both the content and purpose of historical discourse. The gathering of oral evidence is a valuable restorative undertaking to include communities and individuals, which were marginalised under previous dispensations. It also broadens the scope of the historical discourse and makes it possible for heritage entities to infuse life into their collections, allowing greater community participation and representation in these collections (Roos, 2015:185). Oral history is a valuable undertaking in the process of collecting indigenous knowledge and using it innovatively to formulate sustainable, workable solutions to address contemporary challenges (Field, 2008). In this light, it is contended that oral history and the collection, preservation and accessibility of oral evidence by means of digitisation can be used to interpret forgotten narratives, generate interest and broaden indigenous knowledge.

Oral tradition, an important element in the concept of indigenous knowledge, is often associated with communities whose history and narratives have been largely neglected (Moss

and Mazikana, 1986). According to Vansina (1985), there are five broad categories of oral tradition. These are formulas (described as rituals, slogans and titles); lists of placenames and personal names; official and private poetry (including historical, religious and personal poetry, chants and songs); stories (historical, didactic, artistic or personal); and legal and other commentaries (Vansina, 1985: 14, 16, 17, 19). Many of these examples of oral traditions have been largely neglected in South Africa, particularly in the rural areas, it is the responsibility of heritage institutions such as the national and provincial archives to collect as much information as possible on these oral histories and make it accessible to as wide an audience as possible. The current situation is that the public archives do not draw any distinction between oral history and the oral tradition. However, the projects being undertaken by the South African National Archives together with the South African National Parks in the collection of oral histories from communities that once lived within the boundaries of the different game parks are efforts to address this situation (Kotze, 2022; Khadambi, 2022; Madzhutla, 2022).

Research objectives

The research objectives for this article are the following:

- identify the archival groups that can be found in the archives of SanParks;
- explain how these archival groups have been arranged;
- the groups that have not been arranged and described, explain how such collections are accessed;
- identify the problems that are encountered when providing access to collections that have not been adequately arranged and described; and
- how have oral history collections been integrated to complement the written archives of SanParks.

Research methodology and design

The research methodology that was applied for the purpose of this study is a multimethod approach but is dominated by a qualitative approach. According to Mojapelo (2017), the qualitative approach gives the participants the opportunity to reflect their thoughts, interpretations and understanding by describing and explaining the situation in their environment. The aim of this article was to obtain findings in an organised manner, rather than statistical results or procedures. This ensures that the approach adopted by the study is appropriate to yield correct results. The research design is a case study, with the focus being on the South African National Parks, and specifically archives at the Kruger National Park. The research paradigm as discussed above is a postmodernism approach that acknowledges that the manner in which archives are collected, arranged and arranged does reflect the metanarrative of the archival institution and the archivists involved in the collection of such material. This worldview is the perspective or a school of thought and shared beliefs that informs the meaning or interpretation of research data (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017, p. 27; Bryman, 2012, p. 714) contends that the research paradigm dictates research scientists in a discipline on what influenced the decision of what to be studied, how research should be done and how results should be interpreted. Bryman (2012, p. 630) further contends that research paradigms constitute how

different researchers look at the world and how they believe the world can be understood, and they are at the core of understanding the choices made by researchers in conducting research.

Data collection

For data gathering, the following approaches were appropriate: interviews, focus groups, observations, social media, emails and other textual sources (Carr *et al.*, 2019, p. 307). A variety of data collecting strategies were regarded as appropriate in this research project to obtain useful data. Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that in qualitative interviews, the researcher can conduct face-to-face and focus group interviews with SanParks' and National Film, Video and Sound Archives archivists and supporting staff on matters affecting the management of archival collections, use of social media sites and the collection of related oral history.

Research findings and discussion

During three interviews, three focus groups of five persons and three onsite visits at the Kruger National Park with archival staff from SanParks and archivists from the National Film, Video and Sound Archives during May, June, September and November 2022, several concerns were identified as requiring more investigations and efforts to ensure archives can be publicly accessible concerning the management of natural resources, species of fauna and flora and social ecology associated with the areas occupied by the national parks in South Africa.

Three sites of significance were pointed out during onsite visits to the Kruger National Park. These sites were: the Masorini archaeological site, near the Phalaborwa Gate; the site where a communities' cattle were destroyed and the community moved from living in the parks borders to outside the game reserve, situated between the Numbi Gate and Pretoriuskop Camp; and the third site was the buildings that the royal family stayed when they visited South Africa in 1947, which are located at Pretoriuskop Camp. The Masorini archaeological site was inhabited by the Sotho-speaking BaPhalaborwa during the 1800s. This community developed an extensive industry of mining and smelting iron ore. These iron products were traded with Arab, Chinese and Portuguese merchants for over a 1,000 years. The iron products were traded for glass beads, ivory, animal products and food (Onsite visit, November 2022).

Chief Nyongane was a royal headsman within the boundaries of the Kruger National Park. He was known as a wiseman who provided advice to James Stevenson-Hamilton and Harry Wolhuter related to the conditions for living and settlement of employees in the game park. He also provided fresh milk to the Parks' rest camps. In the 1930s, this chief was given 90 days' notice to remove himself, his family and possessions from the Kruger National Park to see residence elsewhere. In 1939, veterinary health authorities enforced disease control by eliminating all cloven-hoofed animals. This resulted in the culling of cattle, and the animal carcasses were dumped into mass graves. His was the fate of this chief's cattle. The site between Numbi Gate and the Pretoriuskop Rest Camp marks the site where the cattle were destroyed (Onsite visit, June 2022).

On 27 March 1847, the British Royal Family, King George VI, Queen Elizabeth and Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret visited the Kruger Park. Huts were purposively built for this visit. These huts were furnished and mosquito-proofed for this occasion (Onsite visit, June 2022). It is worth noting that despite all the attention in 2022 around Queen Elizabeth's platinum jubilee that no South African archives were showcased of this visit to South Africa, unlike Kenya whose archives were widely used in documentaries concerning the British Royal Family.

During discussion sessions, several themes were identified as requiring more investigations and efforts to ensure archives can be publicly accessible. Five overall themes emerged from these discussions; these are:

- 1 include information and experiences concerning forced removals that occurred during the apartheid dispensation;
- 2 liberation routes that were used in national parks, such as the Kruger and Mapungubwe national parks;
- 3 information associated with historical sites in these national game parks requiring the perspectives of all rangers that have worked in the national parks;
- 4 Associations of plants and animals with indigenous knowledge systems; and
- 5 discussions concerning the management of elephant populations and rhino anti-poaching undertakings.

During discussions with the archival staff at both the South African National Parks and the National Film, Video and Sound Archives, they have considered the advantages of having their collections digitised. Several cultural institutions in many parts of the world are investing on digital projects for several reasons, such as providing access, reduction of over-handling of materials, assisting in promoting the collections and visibility of the institutions (Hamooya *et al.*, 2012). These scholars further contend that the main advantage of digitisation is the increased access of library and archival information to researchers. This is possible because digitised materials can be accessed by more people at different times and with less effort. By digitising and placing the materials online, the materials become available to people all over the world.

Conclusion

As noted by Msindisi Fengu from *City Press* (2022), decolonising knowledge is a large project that requires a starting point, and which will hopefully continue with the next generation. History on Africa has largely been written by the global north and kept behind expensive paywalls (Fengu, 2022). The oral history projects undertaken by the South African National Parks and the National Film, Video and Sound Archives are to be commended in filling gaps in the historical discourse that were neglected by the colonial and apartheid dispensations. The collection of archives that are currently at Pretoria and Skukuza need to be digitised and made accessible to researchers and interested members of the public. All the national parks in South Africa rely on the interests of the millennials to ensure these areas can continue their tasks of safeguarding these wilderness areas as well as preserving the narratives of communities that dwelled and worked in these areas. The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated the importance of being digitally connected for organisations to

remain relevant. This also applies to the archival holdings of the South African National Parks and the National Film, Video and Sound Archives.

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