

Isabel Schellnack-Kelly
Unisa - Department of Information Science

Accessing collective memory: case study of a South African nature conservation institution

Abstract

As a government body, South African National Parks (SANParks) is responsible for nature conservation, tourism and socio-economic development of communities neighbouring the national game reserves. Government bodies, like SANParks, fall within the scope of public entities that must comply with the South African national archive legislation. According to Sections 3(a) and (b) of the National Archives and Records Service Act, No. 43 of 1996, two of the objectives of the National Archives are to preserve public and non-public records with enduring value for use by the public and the State; and to make such records accessible, while promoting their public use. Section 12(1) of the National Archives and Records Service Act requires public records that are regarded as having enduring value to be made available to the public, when the period of 20 years has elapsed, since the end of the year in which the records have come into existence. SANParks has a wealth of information stored in its archives, which should be made available to interested members of the public. As remarked by Ngoepe (2019), SANParks has the capability of enabling the South African National Archives to build an inclusive archive in South Africa by participating and opening their collections for public access. Apart from discussing the challenges associated with accessing such archival collections and the lack of interest in assisting SANParks in ensuring the availability of their collections, this paper proposes potential solutions to make valuable collections, including oral history collections, housed by South African government bodies available to interested members of the public.

Introduction

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.

As noted by Ritchie (2014), 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 African 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.

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 emphasized 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 & Wilson 2018). However, in Africa, archives reflect not only the historical biases of colonialism, but the discrimination of the minority ethnic groups (Callinicos & 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 & 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.

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”, denotes an archival system which 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 origins 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 & 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 2011:175). 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 is 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 utilise 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 which once lived within the boundaries of the different game parks are efforts to address this situation (Kotze 2022, Khadambi 2022, Madzhutla 2022).

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 which acknowledges that the manner which archives are collected and arranged does reflect the metanarrative of the archival institution and the archivists involved in the collection of such material.

Data collection

For data gathering, the following approaches were appropriate: interviews, focus groups, observations, social media, emails and other textual sources (Carr, Zhang, Ming and Siddiqui 2019:307). A variety of data collecting strategies were regarded as appropriate in this research project to obtain useful data. The researcher conducted 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 discussion sessions with archival staff from SanParks, and specifically staff working at the Kruger National Park, and archivists from the National Film, Video and Sound Archives during May, June, September and November 2022, several themes 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 on-site visits to the Kruger National Park. These sites were: the Masorini archeological 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 which the British royal family stayed when they visited South Africa in 1947, which are located at Pretoriuskop Camp. The Masorini archeological 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 thousand 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 their 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. This 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) (Information shared by Itumeleng Khambudi in 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 show-cased of this visit to South Africa, unlike Kenya whose archives were widely used in documentaries concerning the British Royal Family.

During the discussions with archivists from SanParks and National Film, Video and Sound Archives, it became clear that there are several themes that require further investigation. These themes are:

- i) "Include information and experiences concerning forced removals that occurred during the apartheid dispensation,
- ii) Liberation routes that were utilised in national parks, such as the Kruger and Mapungubwe national parks.
- iii) Information associated with historical sites in these national game parks requiring the perspectives of all rangers that have worked in the national parks.
- iv) Associations of fauna and flora with indigenous knowledge systems
- v) Discussions concerning the management of elephant populations and rhino anti-poaching undertakings." (Onsite discussions with archives staff in Skukuza in June 2022, including Thanyani Madzhutla).

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, Muluazi and Njobvu 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

History about 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 digitized 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 in order 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.

References

- Archival Platform. 2015. State of Archives: an analysis of South Africa's national archival system. Available at: www.archivalplatform.org/news/entry/executive_summary/ (Accessed 4 August 2021).
- Azoulay, Z. 2022. Ukraine: over 150 cultural sites partially or totally destroyed, Unesco Press Release, 23 June 2022. Available at: <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/ukraine-over-150-cultural-sites-partially-or-totally-destroyed#:~:text=According%20to%20a%20new%20count,cultural%20professionals%20in%20the%20field.,> Accessed 07 September 2022.
- Bryman, L. 2012. *Social research methods. 4th ed.* New York: Oxford Press Inc.
- Callinicos, L. & Odendaal, A. 1996. Report on archives in South Africa, conveners of the Archives Sub-Committee of the Arts and Culture Task Group (ACTAG). *SA Archives Journal* 38: 33- 49.

- Carr, E.M., Zhang, G.D., Ming, J.H.Y and Siddiqui, Z.S. 2019. Qualitative research: An overview of emerging approaches for data collection. *Australasian Psychiatry*, 27(3): 307-309. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1039856219828164> (Accessed 6 June 2022).
- Cook, T. 2011. We are what we keep; We keep What We Are': Archival Appraisal Past, Present and Future. *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 32(2): 173–189. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00379816.2011.619688>, Accessed 6 June 2022.
- Creswell, J.W and Creswell, J.D. 2018. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 5th ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Evans, J. 2022. Indigenous communities crucial to protecting biodiversity, says Minister Creecy, *Daily Maverick*, 31 March 2022. Available at: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-03-31-indigenous-communities-crucial-to-protecting-biodiversity-says-creecy/>, Accessed 19 April 2022.
- Evans, J. & Wilson, J.Z. 2018. Inclusive archives and recordkeeping: towards a critical manifesto. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 24(8): 857–860. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2018.1428671>, Accessed 6 June 2022.
- Fengu, M. 2022. Rhodes, UCT partner to decolonise historical archives, *City Press*, 30 August 2022. Available at: <https://www.news24.com/citypress/news/rhodes-uct-partner-to-decolonise-historical-archives-20220830>, Accessed 07 September 2022.
- Field, S. 2008. Turning up the volume: dialogues about memory create oral histories, *South African Historical Journal* 60(2):175-194.
- Hamooya, C., Mulauzi, F. and Njobvu, B. 2012. To digitise or not to digitise Library and Archival materials: a cost benefit analysis for Zambia. Paper presented at Zambia Library Association General Conference, August 2012. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Felesia-Mulauzi/publication/334398318_TO_DIGITISE_OR_NOT_TO_DIGITISE_LIBRARY_AND_ARCHIVAL_MATERIALS_A_COST_BENEFIT_ANALYSIS_FOR_ZAMBIA/links/5d273fec458515c11c266e25/TO-DIGITISE-OR-NOT-TO-DIGITISE-LIBRARY-AND-ARCHIVAL-MATERIALS-A-COST-BENEFIT-ANALYSIS-FOR-ZAMBIA.pdf, Accessed 7 September 2022.
- Jenkinson, H. 1922. *A manual of archive administration*. Oxford: Clarendon Press

- Ketelaar, E. 1992. Archives of the people, by the people, for the people. *SA Archives Journal* 34: 5-16.
- Khadambi, Itumeleng. 2022. Discussions at Skukuza, Kruger National Park, 13 June 2022. [INTERVIEW].
- Kivunja, C & Kuyini, AB. 2017. Understanding and applying research paradigms in educational contexts. *International Journal of Higher Education* 6(5): 26-41.
- Kotze, Brenda. 2022. Interview at National Film, Video and Sound Archives, 15 May 2022. [INTERVIEW].
- Madzhutla, Thanyani. 2022. Discussions at Skukuza, 13 June 2022. [INTERVIEW].
- Millar, L. 1998. Discharging our Debt: The Evolution of the Total Archives Concept in English Canada, *Archivaria* 46(Fall): 103-146, Available at: <https://www.archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12677>, Accessed 6 June 2022.
- Mojapelo. MG. 2017. Contribution of selected chapter nine institutions to records management in the public sector in South Africa. MINF Dissertation, University of South Africa, Pretoria.
- Moss, W.M. and Mazikana, P.C. 1986. *Archives, Oral History and Oral Tradition: A RAMP study*, Paris: UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
- Ngoepe, M. 2019. Archives without archives: a window of opportunity to build inclusive archive in South Africa. *Journal of The South African Society of Archivists*, 52:149-166. Available at: <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/jsasa/article/view/191336>, Accessed 6 June 2022.
- Ngoepe, M. and Keakopa, S. 2011. An assessment of the state of national archival and records systems in the ESARBICA region: a South Africa-Botswana comparison. *Records Management Journal*, 21(2):122-134, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1108/09565691111152071>, Accessed 6 June 2022.
- Ngoepe, M., Maseko, A. and Tsabedze, V. 2020. So far we have travelled – are we there yet? An exploration of national archival expedition in Eswatini *Information Development*, 37(4):647-657, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0266666920966030>, Accessed 6 June 2022.

- Ngoepe, M. and Saurombe, M. 2016. Provisions for managing and preserving records created in networked environments in the archival legislative frameworks of selected member states of the Southern African Development Community. *Archives and Manuscripts*, 44(1):24–41, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01576895.2015.1136225>, Accessed 6 June 2022.
- Ramothwala, Portia. 2022. Discussions at Skukuza on 13 June and 15 September 2022. [INTERVIEW]
- Randall C. J 2007. Archives for All: Professional Responsibility and Social Justice, *The American Archivist*, 70(2 Fall – Winter): 252-281. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.70.2.5n20760751v643m7>, Accessed 6 June 2022.
- Ritchie, D.A. 2014. *Doing Oral History. A Practical Guide*, E-Book, Oxford University Press: Oxford, New York.
- Roos, H. 2015. Eoan, Our Story: Treading New Methodological Paths in Music Historiography, *Historia*, 60(2):185-200.
- Schellnack-Kelly, I. and Jiyane, V. 2017. Tackling environmental issues in the digital age through oral histories and oral traditions from the iSimangaliso Wetland, *Historia*, 62(2): 112-129.
- Sutherland, T. 2017. Archival Amnesty: In Search of Black American Transitional and Restorative Justice. *Journal of Critical Library and Information Services*, 1(2):1–23. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.42>, Accessed 6 June 2022.
- Taylor H.A., 1987, Transformation in the archives: technological adjustment or paradigm shift? *Archivaria*, 25(Winter):12-28. Available at: <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/11451>, Accessed 6 June 2022.
- Thompson, P. 2000. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tognoli, N.B. & Guimarães, A.C. 2010. Postmodern archival science and contemporary diplomatics: New approaches for archival knowledge organization. Available at: <https://repositorio.unesp.br/handle/11449/117663>, Accessed 6 June 2022.
- Vansina, J. 1985. *Oral Tradition as History*, London: James Currey and Heinemann.

Zinn, H. 1977. Secrecy, archives and the public interest. *The Midwestern Archivist*, 2: 14-26. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41101382?seq=1>, Accessed 6 June 2022.