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Decolonising the archives: languages as enablers and barriers to accessing public archives in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Under a democratic dispensation in South Africa, which recognises eleven official languages, language is still used to divide and segregate people and different cultures. The examples of how languages have divided South Africa from colonial times to the current dispensation are evident in archival collections housed by the country's public archives services. A qualitative study was undertaken to identify all the languages of the different archival collections held by the public archives services in South Africa. Utilising a postmodernist ontology, this paper investigates the challenges pertaining to the large volumes of collections where access is restricted due to language barriers with limited assistance to provide translation services.

KEYWORDS

Languages; decolonisation; oral history; linguistic challenges; postmodernism

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the challenges public archives encounter when addressing languages as enablers of access to public archives.¹ Simultaneously, languages can be a barrier to researchers and users of archives, which effectively hamper access to archival collections. The issue of language is a sensitive issue in South Africa since under the colonial and apartheid dispensations, language was used as a means of controlling access to certain information. Even under a democratic dispensation, where eleven official languages are recognised, language is still used as a tool to divide and segregate different people and different cultures. The example of how languages have divided South Africa from colonial times to the present-day dispensation is visibly evident in the archival collections housed by South Africa's public archives services. Public archives, both at the National Archives and those in the country's nine provinces, bear witness to the cultural divide in South Africa. Problems with accessing public archives, from the diaries of the first European colonist Jan van Riebeeck from the 1650s to the oral history projects with the South African National Parks,² are evidence of how languages are barriers that make many of the archival collections inaccessible to users.

This article provides an overview of the different archival collections at the National Archives of South Africa, provincial archives and the National Film, Video and Sound Archives. Secondly, the article highlights the challenges encountered when consulting archivalia from these institutions. And, finally the article discusses the enablers of

capturing oral histories in a person's mother tongue that allow the country's previously disadvantaged persons to tell their stories and ensure that these are captured for posterity. Although South Africa has eleven official languages, these are dominated by English and Afrikaans. This article will trace the different languages used in archives both from South Africa's colonial and apartheid dispensations. South Africa's language dynamics have been utilised to exclude people and now when there is a democratic dispensation, people are still not able to effectively access information held in the public archives. This article explores the factors that inhibit access to the public archives in South Africa.

Theoretical framework

This study was based on the Breath of Life workshops conducted by archivists and linguists at Berkeley University in California.³ These workshops were conducted in an attempt to promote the importance of the indigenous knowledge and languages of Native American groups and, consequently, preserve the remnants of their culture. The importance of oral history and oral traditions and the preservation of languages for future generations to familiarise themselves with languages that do not fall in the mainstream of the United States of America is one of the aims of these projects.⁴ The histories and oral traditions are all important characteristics of the Native American populations. These workshops were conducted regularly and good working relationships were forged between archivists and linguists in pursuit of recording the traditions and narratives of the Native American community.⁵ The Breath of Life workshops have enabled generations to forge good relationships as the elders share their stories and cultural traditions.⁶ South Africa has several projects that have been undertaken by the national and provincial archives to trace traditions and narratives from communities that were sidelined during the colonial and apartheid dispensations. The annual National Oral History Conference, held each year in October, is an example of such an initiative that focuses specifically on oral history projects covering a wide range of themes.⁷

Oral history and traditions are two areas that the national and provincial archivists can ensure are collected and the stories of previously marginalised groups can be captured and made available to interested persons. In an article by Schellnack-Kelly and Jiyane, the differences between oral histories and oral traditions are discussed in relation to climate change and the importance of capturing indigenous knowledge.⁸ According to these authors, it is important for the public archival institutions to engage in projects that capture indigenous knowledge and enable communities that had previously been sidelined to contribute and leave a heritage that can be accessed by the millennials.⁹ More efforts need to be made to inform the general public of collections that exist. More users need to be encouraged to include archival records in their research. Archival institutions must prove their worth in order to avoid being sidelined from necessary resources.

Archival institutions can only be regarded as worthwhile if they are able to provide access to their collections. As discussed by Kamatula, Mnkeni-Saurombe and Mosewu, unless there are active engagements between the archives and members of the public, the funds allocated to archival institutions may be directed elsewhere.¹⁰ In their article Kamatula, Mnkeni-Saurombe and Mosewu discuss the purpose of public programming in archival institutions and in particular investigate the public archives of Tanzania, Botswana and South Africa.¹¹ It was noted by these researchers that Tanzania experiences

challenges in accessing its colonial archives as the majority of the records are in German and are thus not accessible to the majority of Tanzanian citizens. These collections in German relate to archival collections when Tanzania was under German colonial administration. Recommendations have included the possibility of having the archives translated into a language that would make the collections more accessible to a wider audience.¹² However, in reality such an exercise would be costly, and it is doubtful that it would be conducted within the South African context. Nevertheless, good relationships must be established between linguists and the archivists to assist in making archival collections more easily available.

The focus of this paper is to highlight the need to collect oral histories from modern, diverse communities in South Africa. The second focus of the author's research has been to ensure that archival collections that are housed at the national and provincial archival institutions in South Africa are accessible to all citizens and interested persons. These archival institutions need to undertake projects that unlock archival collections by ensuring that manual and digital finding aids open up collections and make them accessible in languages that are understood by all South Africans.

Problem statement

As previously stated, language can be utilised as a tool to either include people or, conversely, to prevent the spread of information. The use of different languages in archival collections can be problematic for both seasoned and novice researchers. This dynamic is certainly experienced in archival collections held by the South African National Archives, provincial archives and National Film, Video and Sound Archives. South Africa's eleven official languages are a challenge most institutions face in their mission to adequately satisfy the needs of all South Africans in having access to information in their mother tongue. It is necessary for the National Archives and associated public institutions to undertake efforts to capture the voices of those that were excluded under the colonial and apartheid dispensations. Although these endeavours are to be commended, it is also important for the archival institutions to attract users to these collections. If there is no public interest to use collections, then endeavours such as the oral history projects undertaken by the National Film, Video and Sound Archives may be regarded as a waste of time and money.

Methodology

A qualitative study was conducted in order to identify all the languages of different archival collections held by the South African National Archives, provincial archives and the National Film, Video and Sound Archives. Data were collected by examining collections described on the database of the National Archives and Records Services called NAAIRS, and through on-site visits to the National Archives, provincial archives and National Film, Video and Sound Archives.

A postmodernist ontology has been applied for the purposes of this research project. According to philosophers Michel Foucault, Jean Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, there is no objective truth or a singular historical narrative.¹³ Applying a postmodernist ontology means that the authors of any narrative are aware that information can be consciously

collected to develop a particular narrative. Scholars such as Cook, Ketelaar, Harris, Cox, Nesmith and Derrida challenge the achievement of neutrality and objectivity of archivists.¹⁴ Additionally, Hedstrom contends that language and lexicology are applied as methods to gain control of or access to information, regardless of format or medium.¹⁵ In order for South African archivists to become relevant in a democratic South Africa, they need to become 'agents of democratisation'.¹⁶ This means that the public archivists have to involve themselves in collecting narratives from communities and individuals that were sidelined by the colonial and apartheid dispensations. However, the author has noted that public archivists also conceal information by using different languages to exclude users from accessing archival collections.

The archive and the metanarrative

According to Derrida and Foucault, the archive is linked to storytelling, and Derrida has contended that the archive is constructed in a creative form and expression.¹⁷ In the words of Derrida, postmodernism implies that in the archives profession archivists and information scientists deliberately select information to formulate a particular narrative.¹⁸ Evidence of this will be from the archives that are selected for preservation during the appraisal process. Under the apartheid dispensation, records were preserved that championed the regime. Few efforts were undertaken to collect archives and narratives relating to disenfranchised communities.¹⁹ The archive can be composed from collections of archival material, records, images, data, personal recollections from people and their relations to power.²⁰ The metanarrative is determined by the description of information sources that orchestrate how the creators and archivists will contribute to the elements composing the official melody.²¹ The notion of the archive and metanarrative challenge the South African public archivists to consciously acknowledge the subjectivity involved in the selection of descriptions of information sources and to be cognisant of the contributing role that language plays in controlling and restricting access, transparency and openness to information sources, and to be aware of their role in contributing to the narrative of post-apartheid South Africa.

In order for archival institutions in Africa to remain relevant and to attract users, they need to ensure that their holdings are accessed and represent all the people of the country. An effort has to be made to collect archival collections that represent the voices of the previously oppressed. The need for decolonisation of the archives is crucial if these institutions want to attract new users and yet keep the seasoned researchers that regularly visit the national and provincial archival institutions.

Discussion and findings related to archival collections and languages

As mentioned previously, South Africa has eleven official languages. These are English, Afrikaans, isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, Siswati, Tshivenda and Xistonga. In South Africa, archives collections are largely in Afrikaans and English. The South African National Archives and Records Service has nine million government archival records dating back to the 1700s.²² Archival services are provided by each of the nine provinces, although the more established government archival collections are provided by provincial archives that existed before the 1994 transition to a democratic

dispensation. Provinces with established archives, such as the Western Cape in Cape Town, KwaZulu-Natal in Pietermaritzburg, and Free State in Bloemfontein, and the National Archives in Pretoria, grant access to well-managed collections dating back to early settlements of colonies established by the Dutch and the British during the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. The reason for this can be explained by examining the history of the country and the development of the government archives services from 1876 to 2020. South Africa's oldest archival records date back to 1651, with the first Dutch colonial settlement in the Cape of Good Hope. In 1876, the Cape Government, under British rule, appointed a commission to collect, examine, classify and index the archives of the colony. This task was assigned to a clerk from the Treasury Department who was given the responsibility of the Archives Depot. In 1881, this clerk was replaced by the Librarian of the House of Assembly and the Registrar of the Colonial Records. The first archival records to be collected were those relating to the establishment of a refreshing station from the 1650s onwards. These archival records are mostly in Dutch and English. From the 1820s to 1910, the archival records created by government departments were predominantly in English, as this was the period that the Cape Colony was under British administration.²³

In 1910, the Union of South Africa was proclaimed. During this transition, the two British colonies: being the Cape Province and Natal, amalgamated with the two independent states, the Free State and Transvaal, although they were still centrally administered through the newly-established head office in Cape Town. During this period, the Archives Service in South Africa was geographically decentralised with archives repositories established in the four provinces of the Cape, Natal, Orange Free State and Transvaal, but they were all administered by the central administrative control of a head office. Between 1910 and 1948, the Archives Section operated under the Department of the Interior. In 1944, the function of Chief Archivist was moved from Cape Town to Pretoria, and this is where the current National Archivist is based.²⁴

Under the colonial period from the 1700s, Dutch and English were the languages that dominated official archival collections. The South African National Archives in Pretoria houses archival records from 1829 onwards. The archival collections are divided into four main groups, being the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR), 1829–1900; the Transvaal Colony, 1900–1910; the Transvaal Province, 1910–1994; and National Government archival records from 1910 onwards.²⁵ The collections belonging to the Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek are all in Dutch. After the South African War (1899–1902), from 1902 onwards, the collections were predominantly in English, as are the archival collections from 1910 to 1960, when South Africa was a British colony. After South Africa gained its independence from Britain in 1961, the collections of government archives from the 1960s to 1994 were generally in Afrikaans, as this was the preferred language of South Africa's public service. As noted on the webpage of the South African National Archives relating to the online database: 'Each of these records refers to an individual archival unit. The information on the system is generally based on the original descriptions given to the archival records by the offices that created or received them. The data is therefore in natural language and does not include controlled vocabulary based on authority lists of thesauri. A significant portion of the data is in Afrikaans as are archives to which they refer. The rest may be in English.'²⁶ It is only more recently through deliberate actions by the public archivists that collections that are in other official

languages of isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, Siswati, Tshivenda and Xistonga were collected.²⁷ In discussions with a representative from the Gauteng Provincial Archives, it was confirmed that efforts are being undertaken to collect and preserve oral history narratives from communities and individuals that were sidelined by the apartheid dispensation.²⁸

The many inventories and databases found in the National Archives and provincial archives tend to either be in Afrikaans or in English.²⁹ None of these inventories have been formulated in any other of the official languages. For researchers unfamiliar with Afrikaans, it can be quite a challenging experience to identify the contents of files. Filing systems that were approved by the National Archivist from the 1960s until the mid-1990s were also predominantly in Afrikaans. Such descriptions thus provide challenges to researchers unfamiliar with the language. The finding aids, both in paper form and the digital database, tend to be dominated by descriptions in Afrikaans, although English descriptions do exist. In the electronic database, there are no descriptions in languages such as isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, Siswati, Tshivenda and Xistonga. In a study conducted by Schellnack-Kelly, it was noted that currently the public sector has little regard for the apartheid-era records that are being stored in basements in public bodies.³⁰ Public sector records are stored by government structures at national, provincial and local levels. The records that are regarded as having archival value are required to be transferred to archival repositories managed at national and provincial levels.³¹ However, the sentiments from public officials showed contempt for the records that were predominantly in Afrikaans. Many of these records should have qualified for transfer to an archives repository, but there is little regard from public officials to taking care of them.

Finding aids also need to be written in the other languages such as isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, Siswati, Tshivenda and Xistonga. Languages also requiring attention include isiCamtho, Khoe, Nama and San, Lobedu, Northern Ndebele, Phuthi and sign language.³² While efforts are undertaken to capture South African narratives in the official languages, it must be remembered that there are other languages that characterise the South African landscape. Many of these languages have not been declared as official languages, but the narratives of these communities are just as important as the samples which have been captured by the national and provincial archives.

The oral history projects that have been undertaken in recent years by the National Film, Video and Sound Archives include themes such as forced removals of communities in Marabastad, forced relocations of people to make way for the game parks, introduction of the homeland system, land dispossession and imposition of Bantustan leaders.³³ These collections are only accessible on the premises of the National Film, Video and Sound Archives. None are available as digitised collections online. These collections provide a valuable insight into the lives of communities previously sidelined by the colonial and apartheid dispensations. They allow the voices of communities and individuals to be part of the country's archival heritage. More needs to be done to promote such collections and to ensure that they are preserved so that current and future users can access the information they contain. This information can be valuable for national development plans addressing socio-political and socioeconomic ills caused by the colonial and apartheid dispensations. The use of oral history collections can ensure that the public archival services can also be decolonised and collections be made available to persons who have

not previously visited or had an interest in archival collections collected by the national and provincial archival institutions. By decolonising the archives, it is possible that new users of the archives will emerge, thus ensuring that the archival profession does not disappear or become relegated to non-functioning entities in post-apartheid South Africa.

Conclusion

According to Chowdhury, the main goal of information services is to facilitate discovery of, and access to, relevant information in order to meet the requirements of users.³⁴ This implies that archives facilities should ensure that archival collections are open for use and discovery by researchers. Finding aids must be available in languages that researchers can relate to. In South Africa, the archival collections have largely catered for the colonial and apartheid legacies. It is high time that collections should also represent communities that were previously sidelined. Measures need to be considered to ensure finding aids and archival collections can be made available in all South African languages to facilitate information-seeking and storytelling.³⁵

The focus of this research has been around language and the accessibility of finding aids and archivalia in the context of South Africa's national and provincial archives services, and at the National Film, Video and Sound Archives. Broad initiatives need to be undertaken to have archival collections that represent all South Africans. It is thus necessary for all cultures and language groups to be accommodated by the archival institutions. Initiatives like those undertaken by the National Film, Video and Sound Archives with the South African National Parks Board to collect oral histories and oral accounts from communities that resided in and along the borders of the national game parks are to be commended.³⁶ However, such collections are not easily accessible to ordinary South Africans.

The South African national and provincial archives battle to attract adequate funding from national and provincial coffers. It is thus a challenge to undertake oral history projects with communities in remote areas of the country. It is recommended that the national and provincial archives should consider partnering with educational institutions interested in assisting with collections of oral history. Linguists and archivists could form partnerships to collect and classify such collections. South Africa could indeed utilise the model from the Breath of Life workshops conducted by Berkeley University in California.

The digitisation of oral history collections in South Africa could facilitate better accessibility of archives. The archives could thus be opened up to more South Africans. Respect and acknowledgement of all the languages used for communication in South Africa should be evident in the South African archives. This would facilitate the decolonisation of the country's archival landscape and ensure that an archival legacy is available to all South Africans.

Notes

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