

# **DECOLONISING THE ARCHIVES, LANGUAGES AS ENABLERS AND BARRIERS TO ACCESSING PUBLIC ARCHIVES**

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**SESSION NUMBER 1.4**

**LEIGH WHICKER ROOM – 23  
OCTOBER – 13H30 – 15H00**



# INTRODUCTION

Purpose of this paper is to investigate the challenges that public archives encounter when confronting languages as enablers of access to public archives. Language can also become a barrier to researchers and users. The issue of language is a sensitive issue as it is also a means of controlling who has access to certain information.

In South Africa, there are nine provinces each with a provincial archives, one national archives which is situated in Pretoria and one national film, video and sound archives also situated in Pretoria.

# INTRODUCTION CONT.

South Africa is a country that recognises 11 official languages but as I will explain later that there are many languages in South Africa that have not been recognised by the government.

In South Africa's colonial and apartheid dispensations languages were used to segregate people and unfortunately it is still the practice under the democratic dispensation.

The examples of how languages have divided South Africa from colonial times to the present day dispensation is very evident in the archival collections housed by South Africa's public archives service.

# INTRODUCTION CONT.

Access to public archives whether from the 1650s diaries of Jan van Riebeeck to the oral history projects with the South African National Parks Board are evidence of how languages are barriers that make archival collections difficult for users to consult.

This paper will provide an overview of the different archival collections at the various public archives and highlight the challenges users encounter when consulting archivalia from these institutions.

This paper will also discuss the enablers of capturing oral histories in one's mother tongue which allows South Africa's previously disadvantaged persons to tell their stories and ensure that these are captured for prosperity.

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was conducted based on the Breath of Life Workshops that were conducted by archivists and linguists at Berkeley University in California to enhance the importance of indigenous knowledge and languages of American Indian groups in efforts to preserve remnants of their culture. The histories and oral traditions are important characteristics of the American Indian populations. This is a similar case to many communities in South Africa. In South Africa many communities hold a special significance with their indigenous knowledge and need this knowledge to be preserved for future generations. South Africa's public archivists have undertaken several projects to trace traditions and narratives from communities that were side-lined by the previous colonial and apartheid dispensations.

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK CONT.

In my investigation, I also considered the differences between oral histories and oral traditions. Two esteemed authors were consulted being Paul Thompson and Jan Vansina. Oral histories can be described as valuable restorative undertakings that include communities and individuals which were marginalised under previous dispensations. Oral traditions are an important concept of indigenous knowledge related to capturing experiences related to customs and cultures such as rituals, songs and narratives that are familiar to different culture groups.

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK CONT.

In research conducted by a colleague and myself, differences between oral history and oral tradition were discussed in relation to climate change and the importance of capturing indigenous knowledge to help with sustainable development projects. More efforts need to be made by the public archivists to inform the general public of collections that exist, which may encourage more users to include archival records in their research.

In an article by Kamatula, Mnkeni-Saurombe and Mosewu (2013) on archival institutions of Tanzania, Botswana and South Africa, it was noted that archival institutions need to provide access to their collections if they want to be regarded as worthwhile to the general population. In Tanzania, it has also been noted that it is difficult for people to access the colonial records as the majority of these records are in German and are thus not accessible to the majority of Tanzanians.



# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK CONT.

In Tanzania, proposals have been made to have the archives translated into a language that would make the collections more accessible but this would be a costly exercise. This is similar to the situation in South Africa where many of the older archival collections are in Dutch and Afrikaans making many of the collections inaccessible to the majority of the population.

In order to counteract these situations, it is essential that archivists establish good relationships with linguists to ensure that archival collections can be more easily available.



# PROBLEM STATEMENT

Languages can either be used as tools to include different persons or they can be deliberately used to prevent the spread of information. The use of different languages in archival collections can be problematic for researchers. This dynamic is certainly evident in archival collections held by the South African National Archives, the provincial archives and National Film, Video and Sound Archives. With South Africa's eleven official languages, efforts need to be made to capture the voices of those that were excluded under the colonial and apartheid dispensations. Although efforts have been done to undertake oral history projects, there is little interest from the public to use such collections. The issue of language is a major factor inhibiting the access of South Africa's public archival collections.

# METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study was undertaken in order to identify all the languages of the different archival collections held by the national, provincial and National Film, Video and Sound Archives. Data was collected by examining collections described in the online database of the National Archives, called NAAIRS, and by on-site visits to the National Archives, provincial archives and National Film, Video and Sound Archives.

A postmodernist ontology was applied for the purpose of this research project. The notion that there is no objective truth or a singular historical narrative was applied. This means that as a researcher I was conscious of the fact that information can be selected consciously to develop any narrative. Language and lexicology (Hedstrom 2002) are applied as methods to gain or control access to information sources contained in and shaping the narrative revealed in the information sources.

# METHODOLOGY CONT.

South African public archivists need to be “agents of democratisation” (Kirkwood 1996). This means that the archivists need to involve themselves in collecting narratives from communities and individuals that were side-lined by the colonial and apartheid dispensation. It also implies that archivists should not be using the different languages to exclude users from accessing archival collections.

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

# DISCUSSIONS AND FINDINGS

South Africa's official languages are: English, Afrikaans, isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, Siswati, Tshivenda and Xistonga.

Under the colonial period from 1700s, Dutch and English were the main languages that dominate archival collections.

In the South African National Archives in Pretoria, the collections of the 1800s when the Transvaal Province was dominated by the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek, these collections are all in Dutch.

After the South African War, from 1902 until the early 1960s the collections are predominantly in English.

From the 1960s, when South Africa gained her independence from Britain, the collections are mostly in Afrikaans, with a small percentage of records in English.

# DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS CONT.

The collections of public archives from 1960 to 1994 are generally in Afrikaans, as this was the preferred language of South Africa's public service.

The only public archives which are in English are those housed in the archival repositories in Pietermaritzburg and Durban.

It is only more recently that collections can be found in the official languages of isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, Siswati, Tshivenda and Xistonga.

# DISCUSSIONS AND FINDINGS

Many inventories and databases found in the archives are either in Afrikaans or in English. None of these inventories have been translated into any other official language. For researchers unfamiliar with Afrikaans, it can be quite a challenge identifying the contents of archivalia.

Filing systems approved by the National Archivists from the 1960s to the mid-1990s are predominantly in Afrikaans. It is also been noted that the public sector has little regard for the “apartheid-related records” that are still being stored in basements in public bodies. Many public officials have little regard for these records, many of which should have been transferred into archival custody.

# DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Oral history projects have been undertaken by the NFVSA relate to themes such as forced removals of communities, forced relocations of people to make way for the game parks, introduction of the homeland system, land dispossession and imposition of Bantustans leaders. These efforts are to be commended however, none of these collections have been digitised. More needs to be done to promote the use and further undertakings to accumulate more such collections and to ensure that they are preserved so that current and future users can access the information.

Archival sources can provide valuable information for development plans, addressing socio-political and socioeconomic ills caused by the colonial and apartheid dispensations. By decolonising the archives, new users may emerge to ensure that the archives do not disappear or be relegated as non-functioning entities in post-apartheid South Africa.



# DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

While efforts have been made to capture South African narratives in the official languages, there are many languages that are spoken in South Africa that have not been considered. These communities also have narratives and experiences that should be captured for use by researchers and other interested persons.



# CONCLUSION

According to Chowdhury (2015), the main goal of information services is to facilitate discovery and access to relevant information to meet the requirements of users. This implies that archives facilities should ensure that archival collections are open for use and discovery by researchers. Finding aids must be in languages that researchers can relate to.

African societies use memory to store historical information. In South Africa, archival collections have largely catered for the colonial and apartheid legacies. It is high time that collections should also represent communities that were sidelined.

Measures need to be considered to ensure finding aids and the archival collections can be made available to all South Africans in languages that facilitate information sharing and storytelling. Archives should be resources that facilitate learning, teaching, research and enjoyment (Tanner and Deegan 2011).