AFRICAN RENAISSANCE – A CALL TO REALITY: SOUTHERN AFRICAN ARCHIVES – HOW SHOULD WE COLLECT?[1]

Ilse Assmann

South African Broadcasting Corporation

"The past is myself, my own history, the seed of my present thoughts, the mould of my present dispositions. The past is not only a resource to deploy to support a case or assert a social claim … Literate or illiterate, we are our memories."[2]

"Under the gaze of the laughing stars the Old One sits,
his kaross wrapped around his age-blasted shoulders,
staring at the semi-circle of eager expectant faces before him
– the fresh, pure, open faces of … children.
The fire dances in the middle of the round clay fireplace
like a virgin revelling in the simple joy of being alive.
Suddenly the Old One feels a great burden on his shoulders
– a heavy responsibility towards the ones sitting so expectantly around him.
He sighs – a harsh, rasping sound – and clears his throat, spitting and
blowing his nose into the fire.
As his father and his father's father did before him.
And he begins the story – the old, old story that he knows he must repeat
exactly as he heard it so long ago:
"Indaba, my children …"[3]

When President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa announced his dream for Africa and called it the African Renaissance, he did not envisage a rebirth, but rather a rediscovery of what Africa once was: a people free in mind and soul, capable of original thought, confident to live and to embrace life holistically, united with itself, nature and God: "The beginning of our rebirth as a Continent must be our own rediscovery of our soul". Mbeki also refers to the African Renaissance as a "journey of self-discovery and the restoration of our self-esteem."[4] Mbeki's own definition of the African Renaissance embraces "marriage of memory and dream, of past and future".[5] His objective is to free the African mind from the enslavement that colonialism brought, which almost crushed the African soul and distorted, banished, and almost destroyed this memory.

It is in this context that I would like to explore the archives of Southern Africa: archives as places of memory and archives that need preservation desperately. Ethel Kriger, South African archivist, asks whether the tracings in people's memories, shared in collective texts, conveyed and performed by storytellers, are not already archive. An archive that does not need provenance, custody and appraisal, since this would compromise the intrinsic validity of the African archive. She answers herself:

> "Africa's ways of memorising and archiving are well established, are lived functions, consistent with the cultural expectations and needs of remembering and knowing."[6]

Verne Harris, Director of the South African History Archive, maintains that there:

> "has been archive in … Africa for as long as humans have inhabited this part of the world. Collective stories, passed from generation to generation, rock paintings, signs patterned into dwellings, clothing, shields and so on; markings, temporary and permanent, on human bodies; these and many other forms of archive carried the narratives, messages and beliefs of people for millennia."[7]

The living archive of Africa finds itself juxtaposed with the internationally accepted techniques of archiving: the archive is a mirror of reality, the archivist the custodian and the record progressing through a life cycle. In African discourses the story, as a bearer of memory, is part of public discourse with ancient roots.[8] This links with Jacques Derrida's "definition" of the archive concept:

> "the concept of archives shelters in itself this memory of the name arkhe (the original, the beginning)."[9]

The people, or the "storytellers", become the archons (guardians) as well as the archeion (house of shelter).

Credo Mutwa, South African Zulu Sangoma (traditional healer), says in his book *Indaba, My Children*:

> "It is through these stories that we are able to reconstruct the past of the Bantu of Africa. It is through these stories that intertribal friendship or hatred was kept alive and burning: that the young were told who their ancestors were, who their enemies were and who their friends were. In short, it is these stories that have shaped Africa, as we know it – years and years ago…"[10]

The following piece of praise singing, from the intitiation rites of boys from a Basotho tribe, serves as an example:

> "The white house of the white child
> Where shall it sit?
> When the bushes have burnt
> By the flame that burnt
> The flames of an old veldfire
> From the molala-hlolo (a type of grass)
> The 'maripana' (a type of rabbit) with the mark
> The little mark on the stomach
> On the black stomach
> A black that looks the same"

This has been interpreted by Basotho as follows: This praise singing probably refers to the war between the Boers and the Basotho: We do not know what will happen to

the white child's house if the grass and the bushes are set alight. The white child will not be able to hide because we will notice him by the little mark he carries (colour). It will be easy because we, the Basotho, are all black. [11]

Archival repositories are realms of memory, though what is kept is no longer a living memory, but an organised lost memory. Archivists therefore have become builders of their own houses of memory.[12] This raises the question: could the internationally accepted way of archiving not force Africa's living archive into a house of memory that suits the archivist dealing with those records? Ever since the West learned the language of Africa, they have written down the African stories they've heard and made them available to the world. And so some of these stories have been preserved. Or have they? By giving the stories a peculiarly Western flavour and interpretation in order to understand the context in which they were told, have the writers of these stories not built a new memory, one that is not true to the original? In their series 'The Story of Africa – Living History", the BBC pronounces:

> "that in the past, the story of Africa has been told and defined by others and these 'others' have been considered authorities on the subject. The representation of African events and characters by non-Africans has led in many instances to the creation of a negative portrayal of Africa… Africans have their own particular system of recording past events, situations and traditions which is based on collecting oral testimonies. Most Western societies regarded this method as untrustworthy." [13]

Fortunately though, oral traditions and history have undergone a process of validation and are now being used as a source.

The oral narratives and rock paintings in Southern Africa are forms of "audio and visual" collections: oral narratives as an audio record, and rock painting as a visual record. Oral narratives in themselves provide no absolute truths, but are in most cases the only way to the truth. In fact, Credo Mutwa says that oral history is a

> "strange mixture of historical fact and legendary fantasy, a strange mixture of truth and nonsense. (These) stories are not supposed to have an ending. Each Guardian of his tribe's history is supposed to add to what his tribe experiences during his lifetime. A person not familiar with Africa and its people might find it difficult to understand the stories, let alone read between the lines."[14]

One must distinguish between oral history and oral tradition. Some people use both terms to mean the same thing. However, oral histories.

> "establish and record clan and tribe identities, the right of particular lineages to rule, and the right of households to land. Traditional oral histories glorified the achievements of founding ancestors and successive generations of kings."[15]

Oral histories have also become a modern day tool to reconstruct events, especially where illiteracy is still prevalent. Oral traditions, on the other hand, take many forms: poems, songs, music, to name a few. The stories involve and teach their listeners about solving problems, pass on traditions, strengthen cultural identity and values

and they entertain. Oral traditions are particularly interesting. They are endangered as a vital part of Africa's memory, owing in part to "-isms" such as capitalism, industrialism and "urbanism". It is in these stories told over many generations, handed down from grandparent to child, that Africa has continued to live and to survive. As we have heard, oral narratives of cultural values become part of every person's life at a very early age. Youngsters are being taught morals and cultural values by using folklore and narratives from a very early age. These oral narratives, then, exemplify the skills for survival.

Rock paintings in Southern Africa provide the living African archive with a visual memory, long after the practice ceased and in this sense does not rely on people to narrate their memory. Rock painting of this region may be classified into four groups: The Bushman (or San) Rock Paintings, the Bushman (San) rock engravings, the Herder rock art, and the Iron Age farmer rock art. Rock paintings are no longer interpreted in a narrow sense, but are seen today as a rich source of symbolism and religion. According to Professor David Lewis-Williams,[16] from the Wits Rock Art Institute, the San rock art and engravings sum up the essence of Southern Africa's history and greatness, its tragedies and triumphs. The same may be said of the Khoi-Khoi herders and the Iron Age Farmers who used white finger-painted geometric designs.

The key to understanding this art is religion, although it has been established that the Iron Age farmers also used their art as a form of protest, in particular a reflection of the struggle for land and self-determination. The Iron Age farmers' art is the youngest rock art form in this part of Africa. It is also the rarest of all the rock art traditions on the continent. The *late white tradition*, as it is called, came down to Southern Africa with the Iron Age farmers during the Bantu migrations. Elements of this tradition can be traced all the way up to Tanzania and Uganda. N.M. Katanekwa, Director of the National Heritage Conservation Commission in Zambia, claims that "in Zambia for instance rock art is the only primordial text we have to decipher the country's history."[17] Late white rock art is easily distinguishable by its colours and its form. The colour is predominantly white and was applied by finger daubing, which accounts for its being known as 'late white' rock art. This art form reflects, among other things, changes such as the coming of the white farmers, and later art is dominated by depictions of steam trains, soldiers, settlers and guns. It captures a people's tragedy, although it was intended to be more than a mere historical record. It helped people to overcome the stresses of the time and acted as a kind of catharsis in an effort to make sense of the changing world around them.

According to Dr. Ben Smith, Director of the Wits Rock Art Institute:

> "Rock art epitomises a key aspect of the shared heritage of humanity and is a cultural resource that is widely threatened. It gives us an understanding of the economic and social activities of yesteryear and affords an insight into the beliefs, practice, intellectual life and cultural patterns of man long before the invention of writing."[18]

The question, then, is how long before there are no more people to remember what their grandparents told them? How long before there will be no visual trace of histories and traditions, of religions and value systems? It is disturbing already that the Africans living in cities and towns have no knowledge of their traditions or histories. Centuries of living memories might be forgotten in another 100 years,

unless Africa does something about it. Most Southern African archives are realising the need to collect oral histories and oral traditions. The Wits Rock Art Institute has just appointed an archivist to take care of all the images, copies of rock art and artefacts of rock paintings found in Southern Africa.

According to Dennis Maake, Head of the National Film, Video and Sound Archives of South Africa (NFVSA), the issue of

> "orality is serious. There is a Zimbabwean saying that says: when an old person passes away a whole library burns down. We are reaching the stage where our libraries are burning away rapidly. No one remains to replace these libraries. We need to unite as brothers and standardise collecting and preserve this dying orality. This is what African renaissance means."[19]

The NFVSA has embarked on an extensive programme to record the oral histories and oral traditions of South Africa. However, a lack of financial resources has slowed down the process. At the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) the Radio Services have compiled programmes about the cultural aspects of the various indigenous language groups in South Africa for a long period. These programmes have been preserved in the SABC Sound Archives. Interestingly, Ikwekwezi FM (isiNdebele's radio service) has a regular programme in which a traditional healer, in full gear, advises listeners who send in questions about marriage, divorce, children, health, etc.

The Basotho claim that the SABC Sound Archives in Bloemfontein holds a complete archive of their culture. The same regarding cultural broadcasts can be said about the Namibian Information Centre of the NBC. The NBC has quite an extensive collection of audio-visual and audio material on oral traditions, but the scope of the collection has also been affected by the lack of financial resources.[20]

What does the future hold for Africa's living archives? Research done in 1996 showed that technology in Africa was far behind the Western world. In the West there is talk of a bookless society within the next 50 to 100 years. In Africa we are still talking about a pre-book society, in other words, a society that still cannot read books. Yet Africa will have to find solutions to the problem of preserving its memory, whether it is the preservation of a "lost" memory, or one that is frozen in time. According to Lekoko Kenosi, the Western world has already provided some solutions and Africa should take advantage of those. And as Timothy Tapfumnaeyi, Archivist at the Zimbabwe Radio Archives, has said:

> "Technology interfered with our living archives. All we will have is stories on tape. There will be no longer hand-downs from generation to generation. The only way out now is to use the same technology and to record and keep the stories in the Archives…"[21]

Or, as Jochen Kutzner of the Namibian National Archives put it:

> "African renaissance has created a stronger awareness of what should be collected and preserved."[22]

The time has come to take drastic action and to prioritise the collection of these stories.

African archives are at a crossroads. There are no easy answers to the questions that come to mind: Does being an African archivist require a new body of knowledge, a new methodology regarding the treatment of archives and new practices? How do African archivists appraise oral records? Do they have to? How do they arrange and describe oral testimony for researchers?[23] This is for the African archivists to decide. However, these archival functionalities that exist in every archive should not distract archivists from their real task: to preserve and maintain the oral and visual memory of Southern Africa that is changing forever, in a way it deems fit.

Ke a leboga ditsala, badira mmogo le nako ya lona.

Endnotes

1. This article was presented as a paper at the 2001 ARSC-IASA Conference in London.
2. EV Tisani, "Oral Histories in South Africa: Creation of Opportunities for Human Discoveries", a paper delivered at the SASA Conference "Renaissance in Archives", Johannesburg, September 2000.
3. VC Mutwa, *Indaba, My Children* (London, Kahn & Avrill, 1985), p. vii.
4. From the text of his speech appearing on the ANC website: www.anc.org.za/andocs/history/mbeki/1998/tm0813.html
5. V Harris and S Hatang, "Archives, Identity and Place: A Dialogue on What it (Might) Mean(s) to be an African Archivist", *ESARBICA Journal* 19 (2000).
6. Ethel Kriger, "If you want to travel by night, and you need a lamp, set out on your journey!: A Replique to Archives, Identity and Place: A Dialogue on What it (Might) Mean(s) to be an African Archivist", *Esarbica Journal* 20 (2001).
7. V Harris, "Nascence, Renaissance and the Archive in South Africa", a paper delivered at the SASA Conference "Renaissance in Archives," Johannesburg, September 2000.
8. Adopted from Verne Harris and Sello Hatang, "Archives, Identity and Place: A Dialogue on What it (Might) Mean(s) to be an African Archivist", *ESARBICA Journal* 19 (2000).
9. From the definition "Archives/Arkhe/arkheion/archons" (Derrida AF: 4) appearing on the website: www.carleton.ca/~mflyynnbu/archives/archives.html
10. VC Mutwa, op. cit., p. vii.
11. Taken from a text Secret Songs (Dikoma) from the Boys School. Trad., provided by G van Tonder, Lesedi FM, SABC.
12. From the text by Eric Ketelaar, Research in and on Archives: www.asap.unimelb.edu.au/mscf/roundtables/r10/r10/-ketelaar.html
13. From the text The story of Africa: Living History: www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/storyofafrica/1chapter1.html
14. VC Mutwa, op. cit., p. 353.
15. Taken from a text by André Proctor. The text use the concepts 'oral history' and 'oral tradition' as synonyms. http://www.mg.co.za/mg/saarts/hist-histry1.html (2001).
16. D Morris, "Rock Art. Windows into other Worlds", *Indwe SAA In-flight Magazine*, August 2001.

17. BW Smith, “Zambia’s Ancient Rock Art” (National Heritage Conservation Commission, Zambia, 1997).
18. Ibid.
19. From a questionnaire, drafted by the author: Dennis Maake: National Film, Video and Sound Archives of South Africa, 2001.
20. From a questionnaire, drafted by the author: Susan de Klerk: Namibia Broadcast Corporation, 2001.
21. From a questionnaire, drafted by the author: Timothy Tapfumnaeyi: Zimbabwe Broadcast Corporation, 2001.
22. From a questionnaire, drafted by the author: Jochen Kutzner: Namibia National Archives, 2001.
23. Lekoko Kenosi, “Revisiting the Harris-Hatang Dialogue”, *Esarbica Journal* 20 (2001).

Early Iron Age Drawing: from *Himba*: Nomads of Namibia (Cape Town, Struik, 1990).

Late Iron Age Drawing: from *Readers Digest* (1988).