THE ROLE OF ARCHIVES IN PRESERVING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS IN ZIMBABWE: IS (RE) INVENTING THEMSELVES THE ANSWER?

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Abstract

The management of indigenous knowledge (IK) should take a centre stage in the archive. However, archivists in Zimbabwe do not seem to be seriously concerned with preserving IK. Their disposition is largely influenced by their notion of an archive based on the Western epistemologies that dominated their training as archivists. IK was only considered for preservation if it complemented the written "official record". Archivists need to change that mindset and reinvent archival practices in order to play a prominent role in the preservation of IK.

Keywords: Archives, Indigenous Knowledge, Orientation of Archivists, Zimbabwe

Introduction

Do archives have a role in the preservation of indigenous knowledge (IK)? Yes, they do, as evidenced by some few articles appearing in *Archives and Manuscripts: Journal of the Australian Society of Archivists, ESARBICA Journal: Journal of the Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives* and the awarding of the Mander Jones Award by the Australian Society of Archivists in 2003 to the "Archives and Indigenous Peoples" special

issue of the International Council on Archives' journal, *Comma: International Journal on Archives* (2003.1), for its contribution to archives in Australia (International Council on Archives 2004). A search for "archives and indigenous knowledge" on the worldwide web yielded seven hits. On the other hand, "indigenous knowledge and archives" had 52 300 results. Are the two search strategies different? Is the case that archives as a science is subordinate to knowledge? Whatever answers one comes up with, it is clear that the management of IK in the archive is important, and there is a need to develop models for preserving IK on the basis of an archival theory rooted in indigenous realities.

How far have archivists gone in preserving indigenous knowledge in Zimbabwe? This question is important because we are suspicious of the orientation and identity of many practising archivists in Zimbabwe and their notion of what an archive is. They have been trained in the Jenkinsonian and Schellenberg traditions where an archive is conceptualised as static documents that emanate from the conduct of business and are preserved for posterity with or without selection. These archivists have continued to perpetuate these theoretical underpinnings of archival practice.

Furthermore, until about 2003 most of the archivists tasked with preserving the nation's collective memory had a background in History, which perpetuated the Western notion of viewing oral history as complementing the written record. No wonder the oral history was documented by archivists and Native Commissioners to complement the colonial archive or "official records" and not the national archive. The "official records" were selective and Eurocentric. The structure and configuration of the colonial archive is a reflection of the power relations which were at play when it was constructed. The role of the archives was to foster the colonial power relations that were in existence at the time. These were relations that marginalised and denigrated IK and did not regard it as an important voice in the archive of the nation. The aim was to ensure that IK was forgotten by "shaping and maintaining a [certain] group's identity (past, present, future) by adapting history, selecting what is to be stored from the present, and choosing what direction to take to preserve the (new) identity" (Wessel and Moulds 2008:291). In short, the archive was not politically neutral. The following words from the French philosopher

Jacques Derrida partly explain the role of the archive during the colonial period:

> There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratisation can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation (Derrida 1996:4).

The constitution and interpretation of the archive was alien to the indigenous communities. Can such archives have a role to play in embracing IK if they are not deconstructed and refigured? Should we re-invent the archive or refigure the training of archivists in Zimbabwe? For how long shall we wait as the archivists continue to reinforce the colonial stereotypes in constituting the archive? How does the archivist renegotiate the boundaries of power and knowledge in the existing archive? Is there a need for a paradigm shift? What ethical issues arise in trying to document communal knowledge? Should archivists partner with parallel structures such as IK centres to capture and preserve that knowledge, or must indigenous knowledge be totally integrated into the existing archive instead? These are some of the many questions which we try to address (albeit inconclusively) through this narrative.

We clearly recognise there are other narratives that may come up with a different position to the one that is posited here and that should be understood. There are as many narratives as there are archivists who are trying to grapple with their role in preserving indigenous knowledge. However, many postmodernists such as Verne Harris, Sello Hatang, Heather MacNeil and Terry Cook will agree with us, as they also subscribe to the notion of diversity of the human experience and the need to recover marginalised voices in the face of Western hegemony. Such an approach advocates a “total archive”, which is “more expansive [and] inclusive”, and accommodates all voices in “every archival activity” (Cook 2001:29). That archive will make the preservation of IK part and parcel of nation’s heritage warehouse.

Starting with the definitions of IK and archives, we ask whether or not IK and archives are strange bedfellows. Then we turn to the role of archivists in integrating IK into the archive, a modern archivist’s perspective on preserving IK, oral curation, establishing an indigenous knowledge centre (IKC) as a strategy to preserve

indigenous knowledge, possible models for an IKC, intellectual property rights and copyright.

Defining IK

The value of IK is growing (Anyira, Onoriode and Nwabueze 2010:1), but IK is gradually disappearing. Archivists and archival institutions who are entrusted with the role of preserving this knowledge need to gain as broad an understanding as possible of the concept so as to ensure that IK preservation strategies are effective and tailor-made for each society from which such knowledge is tapped. They also need to appreciate the complex nature of the subject and employ the best definition that suits them.

While indigenous knowledge (IK) as a concept has attracted the attention of many scholars, the definition of the term remains elusive and only a working definition can be employed. This is particularly true in view of the fact that the concept has been given a variety of names such as “indigenous knowledge”, “traditional knowledge” and “local knowledge”. Ranasinghe (2008:1) also posits that “native knowledge, traditional knowledge, cultural knowledge and civilisation knowledge are synonymous terms”. This further complicates efforts to arrive at a universal definition of indigenous knowledge.

In acknowledging the complexity of indigenous knowledge and the lack of a universal definition of the term, Langill (1999:4) suggests that indigenous knowledge be viewed as cultural knowledge in its broadest sense, including all of the social, political, economic and spiritual aspects of the local way of life.

The documentation of IK, especially for preservation for future generations, is a matter for immediate action, especially in view of the following factors:

- Families are now dispersed due to economic and political reasons, and there is limited time for interaction to pass on IK from one generation to the other;
- Basic primary and secondary education curricula in sub-Saharan Africa is delivered with very limited IK due to the former colonial prejudice towards IK, which was incorrectly believed to be inadequate as compared to “legitimate

knowledge", which is considered more scientific and reliable; and

- Generation gaps in societies have resulted in the dwindling trust and belief in IK among younger generations.

Archives and IK: Are they strange bedfellows?

As in the case of IK, the definition of archives is widely contested. Until recently archivists largely depended on Sir Hilary Jenkinson's (2003:237) definition of archives as:

> the documents accumulated by a natural process in the conduct of affairs of any kind, public or private, at any date; and preserved thereafter for reference, in their own custody, by the persons responsible for the affairs in question or their successors.

With advances in information technology archiving was perceived as saving data or information on a diskette or creating some form of back-up storage for a short or long period, whereas archiving in the framework of archival science has an element of long-term and short-term retention of information (Ngulube 2009:8). For a long time archivists in Europe and the United States did not agree on the definition of an archive. The contestation of the definition of the term might have led to Derrida (1996:90) to posit that "nothing is less reliable, nothing is less clear today than the word 'archive'". The debate about the term is still raging. Over the years, archives have been defined differently in terms of the materials, that is, records; facilities where they are kept or the archive repository; and institutions concerned with their acquisition, preservation and communication. For the purpose of our discussion, we will define archives as institutions with records that document human experience and that are managed by people.

Before we assign the archivist their role in preserving IK we need to address the question of whether IK that is transmitted orally is a record that should be preserved just like other records created in the conduct of business (see Jenkinson's [2003:237] definition). At face-value, indigenous knowledge does not seem to have those characteristics. IK is not always created in the conduct of business. Now our perspectives which are rooted in Western epistemologies of rationality are getting the better of our thinking. It is a thinking

characterised by “subject vs. object, appearance vs. reality, nature vs. reason, oral vs. written, authentic vs. inauthentic” to use the words of Heather MacNeil (2001:43). This line of thought tends to create a divide between two positions. In the context of our discussion, the divide manifests itself in orality versus written records.

Does the recordness of a record derive from it being inscribed on a stone tablet, a papyrus scroll, parchment or paper, or from it being stored in an electronic format? We posit that if a record in the Western sense constitutes an important part of the knowledge chain, the oral records that are transmitted from generation to generation and the material culture of the indigenous peoples are vital components of that chain. In that regard, the records of the indigenous people constitute an important part of the archive in their own right. They do not have to supplement the official record as is presently the case at the National Archives of Zimbabwe. An archive that is constructed in line with this perspective is likely to be inclusive and representative of the whole society. It will give all knowledge systems “a place in the sun”. Such an archive would fit Ham’s (1993:1–2) characterisation of archives as hallmarks of a civilised society that

> …document human experience and serve as civilisation’s collective memory. Preserved [historical] records transmit our cultural heritage from generation to generation… [and] provide a sense of time and place and educate the citizenry about the role of the local community in a larger state and national context.

In that regard, a society that excludes other voices from the archive may not be deemed to be civilised. The archivists must play an active role in fostering a “civilised society” by collecting, arranging, describing, communicating and preserving IK in the archive along other knowledges. As highlighted earlier on, IK is at the risk of becoming extinct. Archival institutions have a calling to preserve societal culture, norms, practices and beliefs. Archivists and archival institutions as preservers of societal heritage should realise that societal knowledge is incomplete without IK even though it has not been documented for so long. The next section addresses the role that archivists in Zimbabwe may play in archiving IK.

Role of archivists in integrating IK into the archive

The notion of restoration and redress dominates democratic discourses. It is acknowledged that there is a need to redress the injustices suffered by indigenous people. The injustices suffered by indigenous people took various forms, but here we are concerned with the marginalisation of their knowledge in the national archive in all its forms. There is need for archivists in Zimbabwe to come up with strategies to reinvent themselves in order to accommodate indigenous know-how, its values and perspectives. The need to reinvent the archivists is apparent given the foregoing arguments. Archivists should take advantage of the opportunity to enrich their collections to reflect the grain of society by integrating IK into the archive.

Archivists have spent almost all of their efforts to preserve “official records” – those records that are created and maintained as evidence of activities of organisations. Projects by archivists to preserve indigenous knowledge have been scant. As Ranasinghe (2008:7) noted, the main reason for the dearth of documented IK is the absence of a clear vision on the importance of recording national IK. In addition, archivists have traditionally neglected the possibility of evidence in oral history as records of past events and the prejudice that IK is traditional, old fashioned, backwards, static or unchanging (Langill 1999:3).

If indigenous knowledge is understood to be influencing planning as well as decision-making in local areas (Msuya 2007:3), which is exactly what governments use official records for, then archivists will need to make great strides towards ensuring that IK is given due attention before we lose more than what we have already lost. Furthermore, unless archivists allow and accept IK systems and experiences as records that may reshape the foundations on which their work is based, they cannot offer appropriate ways of archiving IK.

Preservation of IK: a modern archivist’s perspective

IK faces extinction due to the accelerated effects of rapid urbanisation and continuous attrition in the older population (Anwar 2010; Ngulube

2002). According to Anwar (2010), preservation of IK dates back to as early as the 1970s and the activities of the WHO and FAO, notably in areas of agriculture and health. However, despite efforts by the WHO and FAO to preserve IK, the scenario in Africa calls for accelerated efforts to preserve IK. Msuya (2007:4) agrees with Anwar (2010) and notes that “Africa has not been able to document IK so as to protect and prevent it from extinction and pirates”.

Scholars have put forward a number of suggestions regarding the possible ways in which IK can be preserved. Among these suggestions are appropriate policies that encourage and provide guidelines to promote and support IK innovation, conservation and preservation, the establishment of IK resource centres and IK databases, as well as the involvement of government and non-governmental organisations in IK development (Msuya 2007:7).

Zimbabwe has remained passive in this regard despite the country being rich in IK. The country has an oral history recording programme, but the programme is largely meant to complement “official records”. While the programme may touch on aspects of indigenous knowledge, IK preservation is not the chief aim of the programme. On that note, one can say that it is worth encouraging both private and local archives to design and implement IK preservation programmes that are tailor-made for IK.

Meanwhile, Botswana has acknowledged the importance of IK. The country realised that there was no inventory of traditional knowledge and this prompted the government of Botswana to formulate policies that regulate the IK stakeholders (Mosarwe 2011). The Ministry of Infrastructure, Science and Technology engaged the University of Botswana Centre for Scientific Research, Indigenous Knowledge and Innovations to assist it in formulating an IKS policy for Botswana. The project was launched in February 2011 and is expected to be complete by 2012 (Mosarwe 2011). While this is a good move by the government of Botswana, what remains unclear to an archivist is how exactly the inventory will preserve IK. It would not be sufficient just to make people aware of its existence and its repositories.

Oral curation or archiving: fostering identity

IK is passed from one generation to the next through “oral curation” (Ridington and Ridington 2011). Oral curation involves the oral transmission and preservation of IK. The indigenous knowledge centres that are discussed in the next section are modelled around this notion. Some archivists would aspire to convert this knowledge into text or some other stable medium for reference and use. Archivists may bring IK into the ambit of the archive through video and tape recordings. However, “the issue of sound documentation lies at the heart of the problem of preserving and maintaining the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous peoples and local communities...” (Ma Rhea 2004:5).

While it is true that in order to preserve IK for future generations, such IK is first to be recorded as put forward by Ranasinghe (2008:7) it should be noted that such documentation requires that community members, who happen to be the suppliers of such knowledge, be well informed about the intent of archival institutions to document and preserve IK. This will avoid a top-down approach in which archival institutions propose, plan and implement IK preservation programmes that sideline local people. Such a top-down approach is bound to yield meaningless results. Modern archivists should shift away from the inappropriate top-down approach to the management of IK.

The archivist’s role in archiving should ensure that the oral testimony is not frozen in the archive and alienated from the indigenous people. This could be avoided through the active participation of indigenous people in the archiving processes. It can be said that effective IK preservation strategies are the ones that involve the society itself as the first port of call. One is bound to fail in preserving IK if one does not involve the indigenous people of the very societies in which IK lies.

The audiovisual and visual representation of IK in the archive should always remain connected to the indigenous people. This is archivists' moral duty. Indigenous knowledge centres are set to play a major role in preserving the link between IK and indigenous people. The archivists should be able to provide indigenous people with copies of tapes they have recorded so the people may play and listen to them.

That would strengthen the connection between the present and the past, and foster a sense of identity.

Furthermore, people listening to the old song or story, or watching an old dance may be able to integrate contemporary developments into the tape or into a new recording. The addition of new layers to the aural record lies at the heart of oral curation and the dynamism of IK. It was its ability to adapt and integrate new ideas that was the driving force behind the development and survival of IK. The notion of a static archive is a myth. Archivists add layers to the original record when they arrange and describe it, and so do the users when they read and annotate some of the records. Indigenous people add knew layers when the dance or story is re-created.

The society is at the centre of the preservation and vibrancy of IK. Thus, IK cannot be tapped effectively for the purposes of its long-term preservation without seeking the voluntary involvement of the societies in which such knowledge is embedded. It is futile to argue that archival institutions should take a lead in the preservation of IK without mentioning any serious engagement of the societies who are the developers and owners of IK that exists in their communities. Archivists and archival institutions need to be encouraging and sensitive to the needs of the communities in their efforts to preserve IK. It is also essential that archival institutions first conduct educational programmes in communities to disseminate knowledge about the existence and importance of IK in a community and its preservation for future generations.

Establishing indigenous knowledge centres as a strategy to preserve indigenous knowledge

Some countries such as Australia have established IK centres to work with the national archival and documentation system to preserve IK as part of the national heritage. The indigenous knowledge centres are repositories of community knowledge, places where knowledge can grow, and places where two-way cultural learning can occur.

As a repository of captured, documented and preserved indigenous knowledge, an IK centres is a place where indigenous culture and knowledge are showcased to the wider community and preserved to

pass on to future generations. Russell (2005) recommends that archivists create archival systems in which indigenous people and indigenous knowledge can be added interactively. He adds that such community-based archival systems and services will help indigenous people realise and experience the true benefits of their indigenous knowledge (Russell 2005). To achieve this, it is recommended that indigenous knowledge centres be established to engage and empower indigenous people to overcome the challenges they face in accessing and contributing to the development of their indigenous knowledge. The question to which we do not have an answer is the following: Should archivists in Zimbabwe be part of such an archival system or should they refigure their system and reinvent themselves to be able to constitute an inclusive archive?

Possible models for an IKC

A principal aspect of any IKC model is that it should recognise the community and allow it to determine the way knowledge is created, retrieved, disseminated, utilised and owned. Ngulube (2002) concurs with this and tasks archivists with expanding the accessibility of IK by preparing inventories and registers of traditional knowledge systems using standardised tools for indexing and cataloguing, making IK accessible to the community marketing strategies and developing collection development policies for IK bearing in mind the implications of the storage media for its preservation and compiling bibliographies for IK resources. Legislation can give IK centres a mandate to preserve the documented heritage of the nation.

In general, an IKC could be a central physical site where tangible indigenous knowledge is stored and managed in partnership with indigenous communities from across the nation. Alternatively an IKC could be a computerised database of indigenous knowledge sources. Communities from across the nation could access this database, using it as a portal to gain knowledge about and access to materials held in other physical locations. The IKC can also exist as a combination of a central physical site holding and managing indigenous knowledge and a database networked nationally that enables communities to gain knowledge about and access to materials held both at the IKC and in other locations.

In order to expand participation and access to IK within large provincial areas, a network of small physical sites can be situated near the local communities directly associated with contributing IK to the IKC. The IKC can extend the role of an existing institution or institutions simultaneously. The National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) and the National Documentations and Library Services (NLDS) can collaborate in this endeavour.

The overall result will be that indigenous knowledge exists in multiple indigenous and non-indigenous IK centres across the nation to serve their immediate local communities and the nation as a whole. IK will exist in the form of artworks, artefacts, photographs and film archives, personal histories, literature, recorded ecological knowledge, bush medicine and indigenous philosophy (NIKC 2010).

Intellectual property rights and copyright

The oral testimonies that archivists collect form the indigenous people represent indigenous intellectual property, and their preservation raises ethical and ownership issues. The archivist should be clear from the beginning that their role is to ensure the continuous availability of IK through effective preservation and to ensure that any benefits that might accrue from the use of such knowledge by governments, private organisations and individual researchers and scholars are equally shared with IK owners. They should also emphasise that their aim is not to own the knowledge, but to preserve it for posterity.

The above-mentioned implies that archivists need effective policies and frameworks to guarantee that the IK that local people provide for specialised preservation by archival institutions is not for sale, and will not be provided to third parties without the consent of the local people. Societies should be encouraged to form their own mini-archives, and ownership of such archives should be left in the hands of the society itself. Archivists have a duty to assist societies in establishing such archives.

This will allay the fear of loss of IK that is associated with no benefits by the local people, the generators and owners of such knowledge.

There have been cases of cultural imperialism and biopiracy (Langhill 1999:15):

> (R)esources and knowledge are being stolen and used without [the knowledge or consent of indigenous people] and without recognition or a share in economic benefits that may result from the development of related commercial products. Indigenous communities are coming to realise themselves that their bio-diversity and knowledge are a potential source of wealth, and they want control placed on corporations and researchers, as well as a share in any economic benefits arising from their knowledge.

Archivist should help the indigenous people to benefit from their knowledge and have shared ownership (with the archivists) of that knowledge. We must bear in mind that the archives have running costs to contend with. The current practice in Zimbabwe is that archivists go to the field with copyright forms, which the indigenous people sign. In the process the indigenous people cede ownership of the documented material to the archive. This is not surprising because the archivists base their practices on the Western model of an archive which emphasise hat there is no curatorship and archiving without ownership. Anyone may tap into that knowledge and benefit from it once it is in the archive without acknowledging the original owners. The current approach disempowers indigenous people instead of building their capacity.

Private and national archival institutions mainly exist to preserve societal memory and the fabric of a nation, a community, a society or an organisation. It is of paramount importance that archivists and archival institutions inform communities that custody of IK does not mean its ownership. Indigenous people who share their knowledge with the archivists should be assured that they will continue to have ownership of their knowledge, and access to it while it is being preserved for posterity by people who are professionally qualified and relatively well resourced. That way their knowledge may not become extinct.

Unless archivists and fellow IK professionals take practical steps to establish IK centres, there is a real possibility that precious IK, which could be used in sustainable development projects in their immediate and broader communities, could be lost (Mathias 1994). These steps

should include identifying the material to be preserved and then capturing it in a digital format so that it can be documented, shared and re-used systematically by authorised groups or individuals.

Once the issue of ownership has been resolved, we need to pay attention to another ethical issue. We need to ask ourselves: What IK do we preserve? Do we preserve everything? Do we have the resources to do it? These questions are pertinent “because what constitute significant documentary heritage is an invidious, arguable and not necessarily conventional process” (Australian Memory of the World Committee 2005:4). Owing to the size and complexity of IK and the costs involved in its long-term preservation, there has been a lot of debate on identifying the importance or significance of possible materials to be included in preservation programmes. Almost everything is significant if you come to think of it, so what do we preserve and what do we allow to disappear? This is the dilemma that archivists in Zimbabwe face. Choices have to be made. Their choice should be based on a policy that seeks to constitute a representative archive. Finally, what criteria should archivists use to choose IK to be preserved in the event of getting foreign funding for preservation programmes? Do archivists have a choice or they are obliged to dance to the tunes of the foreign funders? Projects such as ALUKA, which aimed at documenting the liberation struggle in Southern Africa, come to mind. Funding was given on foreign funders' terms and many archivists complied with these terms only to regret it and withdraw when they realized that the project would only benefit researchers in the West. By that time, a lot of irreparable damage had been done.

Conclusion

Archivists will only meet the challenges of preserving indigenous knowledge in Zimbabwe once they change the way they think about archives and the models for managing them. There is a need to go beyond the oral versus written records binary. There is also a need to change archivists' mindset and to leave their comfort zones. In this sense, archiving professionals must review their understanding of the relation between records and the people that create them. The ultimate aim would be to represent the whole spectrum of society in the archives and to focus on marginalised knowledges.

The acquisition and accumulation of IK vary immensely from those of official records. IK, unlike legitimised knowledge, is not recorded; it has always been a verbal tradition (Ranasinghe 2008:3). Unlike recorded knowledge that exists in “official records”, IK is “implicit and thus difficult to systematise. It is embedded in community practices, institutions, relationships and rituals” (Msuya 2007:3). IK often exists as oral knowledge that is delivered in an oral form (Ngulube 2002; Russell 2005) Therefore archivists must reconceptualise the relationship between text and orality in order to preserve indigenous knowledge effectively.

Archivists and fellow IK professionals should not use a top-down approach to the capture and preservation of IK in their societies. Such principles and practices tend to ignore the dynamic and holistic nature of IK. Where IK centres are to be established it is vital to develop a fully participatory and consultative process to identify and prioritise the material to be captured. In addition, where technology is used to preserve valuable artefacts or record the oral information from an IK source, care must be taken to ensure that the intellectual and cultural rights of indigenous peoples as owners of their cultural heritage are acknowledged and respected.

IK preservation can be accelerated if societies themselves are made aware of the importance IK for future generations and if they are encouraged to take measures to preserve it (Ranasinghe 2008:8). Archivists and archival institutions therefore need to change their approach: they should stop viewing themselves as mere custodians and preservers of societal memory. Instead, they should stand up and cooperate with the society itself to document and preserve IK.

Are we therefore saying that the archivists in Zimbabwe should reinvent themselves in order to have a role in the preservation of IK? Will training them from the perspective of the indigenous ways of archiving help? Your guess is as good as ours.

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