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POLITICIZATION OF MEMORY AND THE CREATION OF DARK HISTORIES IN ZIMBABWE

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"But who can remember pain, once it's over? All that remains of it is a shadow, not in the mind even, in the flesh. Pain marks you, but too deep to see. Out of sight, out of mind."
Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale.*

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Abstract

Politics have greatly influenced the documentation process of Zimbabwean history. This article takes the concept of 'dark history' not only to mean painful life experiences on a group of people ranging from political parties to communities but also to imply absence of light due to poor documentation and inaccessibility of necessary information. Darkness will therefore be seen in the context of deliberate efforts of subjective documentation and poor access to information, understating facts and subjecting them to various contestable interpretations. Documentation of history and national memory is very vulnerable to political manipulation. The article shall focus on the various means and ways that lead to poor documentation, poor access and conflicting memories on past events. Usefulness of various symbols of memory that are usable to retract that past shall be analysed. It is the writer`s perception that a multi-disciplinary approach must be adopted and that new ways of records management must be adopted so that availability of information must be relatively fair on many issues of our past. This article shall use the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) as its core case study to evaluate documentation and accessibility of records.

Keywords

Documentation, dark history, oral history, politics, memorialisation, National Archives of Zimbabwe

Introduction

The *Oxford dictionary* defines darkness as "with little or no light, something characterised with unhappiness and something remote and inaccessible" This article will focus at trends that have gone on in Zimbabwe from 1980, this will involve a look at general governance practices and information dissemination ways. In dealing with this issue at stake, it is critical to note that the role of the government is critical and its arms are inescapable. It should be clear that the government has power to regulate social relationships, empower people by educating them, give them the educational curriculum, and govern its citizens through its legal structures among other things. The government has therefore the greatest role in shaping societal memory and making its documentation a success. The National Archives of Zimbabwe as a government department has enjoyed a relative monopoly over other information centres in the management of public records. I say 'relative' because not every public record ends up in Archives.

It is the duty of archival institutions and many other information centres to make sure that some memories about past events are kept in one form or the other for posterity. Politics however define the nature of such information and the memorization process. Proper documentation is therefore expected to give a wide range of concise and informative records that are of different origins and easily accessible by the public. Some phases of the Zimbabwean past have been made "dark" by virtue of poor documentation, limited access to some of the records and absence of

freedom in discussing some human experiences. It is also worth to note that some of the 'dark histories' have been determined by people who are looking at an event after they have failed to find documents that cover their issues. The 2002 Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (Chapter 10:27) (AIPPA) is one the Zimbabwean legislation that has been viewed as having helped promote secrecy and remote access of some information.

It would sound unjustified to say that there are incidents that are not well covered, in most cases the issues under discussion would have strong underground movements where documentation is done by anonymous scholars and access to such writings is remote. Also coupled with the rise of anonymous scholars is an absence of easily accessible official documents. It is in light of these mentioned challenges that a multi-disciplinary approach has to be taken to offer various bits and pieces of memory that can be used generations later to reconstruct a balanced account of past events. This article shall focus on post-independent Zimbabwe in retrospect of its colonial past.

Background study

Much of the people`s readings of the pre-colonial Zimbabwe is through the works of anthropologists, Native Commissioners, travellers, traders, personal diaries and some public records. One of the casualties of the transition from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe in 1980 was the journal NADA, which came to an end with the breakup of the government that sponsored it. The NADA had been used by many historians as a reliable source of history. It had 57 issues between 1923 and 1980. Beach (1986) accuses NADA of have been a product of the alliance between Native Affairs Department and missionaries. According to Beach (1986), NADA was for the African people of this country but only 6% were African contributors. In all, 34% related to archaeology and history, 31% was anthropology and sociology, 15% administration and politics, 7.3%to language, 7% fiction and poetry, 3.7% to anecdote and reminiscence and 2.5% to law cases. Inasmuch as NADA could have been sponsored by the government, many more scholarships of that nature and studies have taken centre stage in post-colonial Zimbabwe. The scenario brings controversy to the issue of objectivity when historians write their piece of work to meet certain set agendas/objectives through receiving funds. This creates anomalies in the documentation of our past.

Expecting historians to write everything will be fallacious. The challenge has been to do with the selection of what may be termed a relevant or significant past. How trivial may what historians decide to call trivial? According to Henige (1982) whatever we may end up having as history or evidence of past events is just a result of selected past events, it is also a result of a product of the nature of questions constructed by the historian. According to Henige (1982) the definition of history itself is contestable, he says:

> Should history encompass all that has ever happened anywhere and at any time? In that case historians have set themselves an impossible task. Or does history include only those activities of which traces still survive? Or is history no more than the result of whatever questions historians decide to ask of whatever surviving data they use? When this happens then historians create history as well as recreate it.

Expecting the historiography of the Second Chimurenga to have been objective is nothing short of a miracle. What we have is a tussle of power politics in the informatics. What would one expect from someone who has been writing about the war (now considered sources of history) in exile during the peak of the Second Chimurenga? National Archives has in its collection in the form of a book authored by Johnstone (1987). The materials compiled in this book were published in exile and rendered inaccessible to most Zimbabweans by the colonial government through the various censorship mechanisms. NAZ has been trying to publicise these

publications into the mainstream information centres. What would one expect in terms of objectivity from a public record that has been created from an office responsible for buttressing African political consciousness? That best explains why the late Vice President Muzenda was once arrested for reciting a poem in Mutsvairo (1956) which was later realised to be political after publication. Therefore, publications of materials that are not supportive to a political ideology may face hindrance and opinion-diversity may not be welcome.

Post 1980 period witnessed ideological, social, political, ethnic, racial and tribal conflicts. Some of these events happened in a way that they can be seen as dark histories. Such have been caused either by the fact that the writers are full of uncertainty in the event that they openly discuss such matters. This has resulted in many Zimbabwean writers publishing in foreign journals and websites for both financial gains and fear of uncertainty of the content of their publications. Trying to project the Zimbabwean past through such writings has also required users to be scrutinizers.

Jeater (2012) argues that whenever people are engulfed with uncertainty they are bound to be circumspect (in her paper she discusses attempts by colonial white government`s challenges in handling witchcraft and how Africans refused to cooperate). Under the same scenario it is always the case that people are circumspect about discussing their livelihoods with either government authorities or historians. Consequently, the result is either what we end up having an archival collection which is silent about certain or at times misleading.

The 1980s were characterised by civil unrest, industrial strikes, ethnic and tribal clashes, strikes by university students and a lot other national problems but historians of Beach`s calibre decided to focus on those perceived neutral topics in the distant past. In his 1995 paper on the death of Nehanda, Beach cited a total of 72 sources and 44 of them were archival sources, six of them were his own publications leaving the remaining few to some other sources. Inasmuch as Beach (1995) was so much into writing pre-colonial Zimbabwean history but I also strongly believe that his choice was influenced by the availability of archival sources that could substantiate his arguments for research as shown above. Historians are fascinated in digging a past where there are plenty of archival sources to substantiate their arguments. A lot of the publications about the challenges perceived as 'dark histories' after 1980 in Zimbabwe were done by anonymous publishers, social scientists, or by people outside the country. Such kind of information is bound to be either emotional or subjective but supplements the historical facts available.

Iconography and philosophy of memory

Iconography is the use of images or symbols in visual arts as representation of a collective memory of an individual, group of people or a movement. Such philosophy has been so popular in the history of Zimbabwe pre-colonial times to independence. Oral traditions of pre-colonial times are characterized by use of rock-art and monuments to help keep this memory intact. This is why archaeological studies have been so thriving in Zimbabwe.

The colonial era was also marked by such symbols held with high esteem to try and keep some memories intact and enduring. The raising of the Union Jack, the statues of C. J Rhodes, A. Beit, the Physical Energy (all which now happen to be at NAZ), this idea was extended to the naming of buildings and some other infrastructure. The whole idea behind this was to try and immortalize memory through either art or naming system. Mention of the name Rhodes will echo a lot of memory about this country to many Zimbabweans.

There are many more statues scattered across Zimbabwe that have been constructed to serve as memory for particular events. The idea of naming was not unique and specifically for the colonial government alone but it has been also popular among the local people. Places, mountains and rivers would be named after certain incidents. In Buhera there is a place called *Mutiusinazita* (in the Shona language, literally meaning a tree without a name). The residents of the place have so much memory regarding the 'unknown tree' – simply because of its cultural viability. The name of the district itself Buhera that has been derived from *Vahera* (people of the eland or *mhofu* totem) also provides a consistent source of memory about its history.

The unfortunate thing about this process of memorization is politicization of it. With the coming in of a new political power in government some sources of memory are erased. Names have been changed after independence and the process affect the course of memorization. Colonial names for Harare streets were meant to serve as memory for the colonial government and these were changed in 1982. On the night of 18 September 1982, after the Independence celebrations the Mayor of Harare announced that the name of the capital was to be changed from Salisbury to Harare, in Gweru Minister K. Kangai announced that the town will now be called Gweru from Gwelo this was followed by many other towns and street names. Buildings and roads were changed of their names. In Harare Pioneer street was changed to Kaguvi, Victoria street to Mbuya Nehanda, Coghlan building named after the first colonial Prime Minister was changed to Chaminuka and Vincent building to Mapondera. The question is 'Does changing the name of the street from Jameson to Samora Machel, changing Cecil Square to Africa Unity Square; take away the impact made by the former or it is simply a way of gradually obliterating the memories of the unwanted?' This transitional process has also led to migration of archives in Zimbabwe just like many other governments elsewhere as authorities try to deny their successors access to some information thus creating a historical lacuna. Dissecting into such a past becomes a mammoth task in the absence of such valuable historical records and artefacts.

Beach (1995) in his paper describes the rise to fame of the figure of Nehanda after 1980 as a symbol of resistance to colonial rule. Beach (1995) says 'she has been commemorated since 1980 in statues, street names, a hospital, posters, songs, novels and poems'. According to Beach (1995) the rise of Nehanda's heroism has a practical effect in that it is strongly associated with the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU (PF) Party. Beach (1985) was convinced that Nehanda was neither a political nor feminist heroine but just that she was caught up in a major historical event. Bogumil (1986:198) is of the view that while memory does not escape power politics, it is not its product.

Remembering pain and forgetting resilience

"Get your facts first, then you can distort them as you please" Mark Twain.

The elite theory of power explains that generally there is a clique of powerful people who can impose their will upon the rest of the society. There seems to be deliberate ploy by these elites to try and control the memorialisation of people's past (Ngulube 2012). What is interesting is that in as much as there could be some unbearably painful past experiences which can be safely termed '*dark histories'* these are intrinsically related to the resilience of some members of the society. Had everything been '*dark'* there could be less to cherish about our past. Inasmuch as the Zimbabweans would want to document painful life experiences, they should know that these are the same conditions that nurtured our societal heroes.

There is a tendency to manipulate facts for political motives. True historical facts are manipulated to either justify or to ignore. There is normally application of selective memory. The unfortunate thing is the fact that for most ordinary citizens they rely on the media, oral history

and traditions for an understanding of our past. Not everyone can make use of archives for a verification of some historical facts. There has been a tendency to try and invoke the minds of the people by continuous broadcasting of war massacres such as the Nyadzonia and Chimoio, videos of African nationalists being beaten by dogs, in jails among other sad memories not for an honest retrospect of our past but to win the hearts of the people and pursue a political agenda. Bone (1975) expressed the fact that 'concerted efforts of propaganda, as again we know full well, in the end condition whole peoples to perceiving reality only in terms of the view in which they have been indoctrinated'. He gave example of the conditioning of the German people`s minds into devoted adherence to Nazism.

Archival collection

National Archives of Zimbabwe was established in 1935 for custodianship of public records. From 1935 to 1980 the collection grew gradually. However, the nature of collection before 1980 was more like a '*white memory'* where the history was more of the settlers than indigenous people. There were many instances where interpretations of some African cultures were misleading and falsified simply because the white administrators did not understand their culture or Africans did not give enough cooperation to the documentation process. Even in post-independent Zimbabwe, there are instances of certain sections of ethnic or tribal populations who feel enough is not done in documenting their past or that the truth is not said about their past. This brings in the issue of history being written or controlled by the victors and they define the vanquished. The question will be, "do the historians save a political purpose? Do they represent certain political agendas?"

It is generally agreed among many that information is controlled by those power and authority, but historical trends have proved it that even the weak, subjects and villains need fair documentation of their activities. Bogumil (1986:197) says "collective memory is in part a product of political institutions which justify and legitimate themselves through the discourses on the past". With such a backdrop he further notes that whilst memory does not escape power politics, it is not its product. To this end Bogumil (1986) calls for "as many more-or-less differentiated collective memories as collective identities in all narratives on life*"*. If this is genuinely to be the case for archives to meet '*archives for the people'* concept then a multidisciplinary approach has to be considered. Post 1980 events have faced different challenges on areas that were previously not well documented for political reasons, in some cases resulting in migration of archives.

The 25-year closure period for most public records at NAZ makes archives accessible decades after their creation leaving researchers with no option but rely on other sources of data. Archives are understood to help in promoting human rights and democracy but this will be very difficult to justify when they are accessed either after 25years or more because of the different classifications they get. Access to public records is restricted for a period ranging from 25 years to 50 years. The basic reason has been to do with sensitivity of some records which should reach public domain after 25 years or more. This has led to some of the records to be deemed inaccessible for an infinite period (e.g. adoption cases). There is little justification in keeping some correspondence from the Department of Veterinary Services on tsetse fly control programmes in Hurungwe (Zimbabwe), or about some correspondence or minutes on drought relief programmes in Buhera, an administrative district in Zimbabwe for 25 years after their closure.

De-classification of records – this is a process of documents that formerly were classified as secret ceasing to be restricted often under the principle of freedom of information. Procedures

for their accessibility differ with countries. The common practise in Zimbabwe is automatic de-classification which stipulates that records will become unclassified and accessible say after 25years. In the United States of America in 1966 they signed the Freedom of Information Act which was amended in 2002, the act allows any person or group of people to apply and request de-classification of previously unreleased records as long as they justify their request. In Zimbabwe the 2002 Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) had similar clauses. Article 6 of the Act states that:

> An applicant who requires access to a record that is in the custody or control of a public body shall make a request, in writing, to the public body, giving adequate and precise details to enable the public body to locate the information so requested.

There should be a culture of users who frequently request the de-classification of records by custodians of public records for purposes of research. This will then help in the generation of factual and more informed publications which will help in policy formulation and protection of human rights, for instance.

It should be clear that saying records are closed or inaccessible does not mean absolute inaccessibility. There are mechanisms and procedures that are followed for one to make use of such records; however the channels may not be very inviting to ordinary researchers. In essence, closure of most of these records has led to creation of '*dark patches of history'*. This scenario has left historians fascinated about distant past which hardly has any meaningful bearing to unfolding events.

The fact that NAZ has two archives offices in Harare and Bulawayo says a lot in starving some people to critical information. This brings in the issue of decentralization of archives. NAZ has four provincial records centres that however do not have research facilities. Under similar circumstances as discussed above access to critical information is restrictive. A public record that concerns the Chivi people may not be in any of the offices in Masvingo but in Harare. Often people turn to archives to justify themselves. Over the recent years a number of people visited the Archives for the delineation reports, political detainees and immigration dockets. The reason has been that they would want to justify their claims to chieftainship, benefits for war credentials or their citizenship. These political and economic trends have by default increased NAZ visibility to the society.

Oral History Unit

The Oral history Unit was established to try and augment the services provided by archival services by carrying out interviews so as to fill gaps which would have been identified by Oral historian and the institution. Interviews conducted would cover areas undocumented or under documented. The ultimate goal will be to preserve and give access to a wide spectrum of documented works at NAZ as a whole. The challenges that arise are in the following questions:

1. Is oral history a valid source?
2. How authentic is the source?
3. Who validates this and how is it done?
4. How are interviews assessed?

There has been a generally shared feeling amongst citizens that the so called minorities are under-documented, which I believe is again for political mileage. There are several instances when the Oral History crew from NAZ when in the field trying to collect data would face resistance and questions such as, "where have you been since 1980? Why is it that you have no Kalanga/Tshangani representatives at your institution (as employees)? Who do you want to give that information?" A lot of such questions are asked out of scepticism about political intentions. This will definitely lead to a situation where gathered data is likely to be either subjective,

superficial or misleading leaving out crucial facts. There is no guarantee that generations to follow will consider these Oral history sources as reliable and insightful.

Recommendations

There are a lot of factors that affect the documentation process and their accessibility. It remains a fact that different types of information have its own shortfalls in terms of accessibility and usability. The following recommendations may be applied to try and demystify the concept of darkness in history:

1) Revising some disposal and retention schedules at NAZ
2) A user-initiated de-classification of records
3) Public programming for archival collection that is unique or recently processed or acquired archives/manuscripts e.g. Oral history projects. After collecting data how then does the public know of the existence of such information and its usability?
4) A multi-disciplinary approach to appreciate the past better, reliance on historians alone is not sufficient.
5) Heritage managers must have immunity from some sections of legislation and political interpretations of their collection so that their institutions will not be viewed as appendages of political institutions.

Conclusion

Duvenage (1999) poses the question that, "how can the dangers of forgetting, on the other hand and manipulation of memory or the truth on the other be avoided?" Duvenage (1999) was analysing the effectiveness of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in its endeavour to facilitate national reconciliation. This is the same challenge that faces many nations after going through phases of political instability. The greatest challenge is how to come up with a universally accepted truth or a collective memory. The role of politics and governance in general is inescapable in its influence over the nature of memory that societies hold onto and value. It is the author's wish that institutions that represent such memories be immune from such politicisation.

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