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Expanding the archival boundary through a “community archives” project in Zimbabwe

Samuel Chabikwa

University of Zimbabwe

Department of History Heritage and Knowledge Systems: University of Zimbabwe

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1589-3863>

schabikwa@arts.uz.ac.zw

Patrick Ngulube

Department of Interdisciplinary Research and Postgraduate Studies: University of South Africa

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7676-3931>

ngulup@unisa.ac.za

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Abstract

The holdings of the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) are inherently colonial and document the memories of the White minority communities and colonial administration in the then Southern Rhodesia up until April 1980. The study describes and problematises (examines and questions) the current efforts towards redistributing archival power in Zimbabwe through the so-called “community archives” project, which has established several so-called community-based archival repositories in the country supported by NAZ. The study was qualitative, and a single case of the so-called community archives project, the project coordinator and four other members were purposively sampled. Data were collected through interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis, and this was analysed thematically. The findings revealed that the current efforts do not exemplify or represent conventional community archives because of the involvement of mainstream archives and government. The findings also point to the existence of an expansion of the archival boundary by the NAZ, and this perpetuates the marginalisation of minorities and the underrepresented, who are normally documented by community archives. The study concludes that the majority of repositories set up by the NAZ are in fact an expansion of the archival boundary from Harare to other provinces in the country. These collections are, in fact, government and public records, and there is nothing community driven in provenance and character, as exemplified by the conventional meaning of community archives. The study contributes to the growing literature on the discourse on community archives in the ESARBICA region.

Keywords: National Archives of Zimbabwe, silences, colonial, community archives, plurality

Introduction

Researchers' interest in community archives is expanding as a result of the archives' inherent ties to the community and their ability to preserve its evidence. While the paradigm of

transformative purpose is frequently the centre of discussion, the definitions of community archives nevertheless range widely, depending on the author's perspective, the industry they work in, and other real or perceived types and practices (Welland & Cossham, 2019). Differences in perspective between theory and practice lead to variations in definition, and many practitioner-based definitions are inextricably linked to the communities they represent. This may lead to the community defining community archives as "alternative" based on mainstream practice, "political" based on theoretical purview, or "meeting the needs of the community"(Welland & Cossham, 2019).

Flinn et al. (2009:73) define community archives as "collections of material gathered primarily by members of a given community and over whose use community members exercise some level of control". The active involvement of a community in recording and making accessible the history of their particular group and/or locality on their terms is described as the defining trait of community archives by Flinn et al. (2009:73). Community archiving primarily emerged as a response to the 'other' being excluded from mainstream archives, and this tendency is spreading throughout Southern Africa (Bhebhe & Ngoepe, 2021). Community archiving is, in contrast to national mainstream archiving, "a transformative praxis that liberates rather than oppresses" (Caswell, et al. 2021).

The National Archives of Zimbabwe (formerly Southern Rhodesia) has similarities with other archives in the former British colonies in Africa and is a legacy of colonialism, particularly British colonialism. In their article, Alexander and Pessek (1988:120) describe the growth of archives in the English-speaking parts of Africa and the Caribbean. They note that because of the cultural and political variations between various countries and regions, the "Anglophone experience often presents a complicated picture of its own." Alexander and Pessek (1988) attribute this to several factors, including hostile natural elements that made it difficult to implement adequate storage and preservation programmes, a degree of indifference or inertia among colonial civil servants, a lack of constitutional continuity, and the dispersion or loss of records. Alexander and Pessek (1988) point out that initiatives to develop records management systems were prompted by the need to preserve historical records of their operations in the colonies and to ensure administrative efficiency. Tough (2003:2-3) notes that "These countries have tended to develop similar administrative procedures," confirming the evolutionary curve that the former British colonies took in terms of archival systems. An administrative pattern common to all of them was the 'top-down' insistence on meticulous record keeping. A major issue was accountability for the use of resources like money and equipment. Tough (2003:3) asserts that

Developments in Zimbabwe varied dramatically from the general pattern. Due to its internal autonomy as Southern Rhodesia, the nation did not adhere to directives issued from London and did not make use of the standard cadre of expatriate colonial civil service officers. The settlement government decided on national archives in the 1930s.

In contrast, there are no such programmes in the territories governed by the Colonial Office. The Central African Archives, according to Tough (2003:3), "developed into an outstanding centre of expertise in records management." In the 1940s and 1950s, sophisticated record management systems were established. The short-lived Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland

was founded in 1953, which significantly accelerated the development of systems and ensured that they were transferred to contemporary Malawi and Zambia north of the Zambezi (National Archives of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, 1963). Contrary to the majority of African nations, Southern Rhodesia, or Rhodesia, as it was known, was to continue to be governed by a local white government until achieving independence on 18 April 1980. As a result, the impact of the socioeconomic and political factors at play was mirrored in the country's archival system. The record of the white people and their activities in the nation was maintained and perpetuated by responsible government. Africans were disempowered by this archival system, which led to the "absences" of the majority. Njovana (1993:37) made the point that these records contained "a massive number of materials from the white community, little could be found from the black population, even in the form of Oral Tradition." He portrayed this case very well. In agreement with Njovana (1993), Murambiwa et al. (2012) state that "documentation projects to document the underrepresented are non-existent" 10 years later. It is crucial to remember that Zimbabwe's colonial archive makes up the majority of the documents kept in the nation's repositories, especially the manuscripts and personal papers that are currently kept, in addition to the official public archives. The background provided thus far is crucial for placing the archives in Zimbabwe in context; this would not be feasible without knowing how the nation's archives developed. The Zimbabwean archives system, according to Murambiwa et al. (2012:12), "was part of the apparatus of social rule and regulation (as) it facilitated the governance of the territory and population through accumulated information." The NAZ eventually rose to become the centralising institution or agency for official records from the colonial period through the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland to post-independent Zimbabwe. They were mandated to make it easier to manage public records properly so that the information contained in them could be accessed. It is significant to note that the focus was on "public" records, which were mentioned before and would be necessary for both administrative needs and historical reconstruction – a situation common throughout all of Anglophone Africa.

Ngulube (2012:33) claims in the conclusion of his paper on total archives that the development of archives in Zimbabwe between 1935 and 1980 does not accurately reflect Zimbabwe's past because it has no bearing on Zimbabweans' history and is, at best, biased and fragmented. The Zimbabwean archive, according to him, is "a massive repository of correspondence and communications between colonial bureaucrats, and not a repository representative of the entirety of Zimbabwean history and heritage." In agreement with the aforementioned, Manungo (2012:65) claims that "the focus and interest of the National Archives was the preservation of the early records and documents of the British South Africa Company (BSAC) and other personal records, manuscripts, and photographs of the pioneers." Ngulube (2012) points out that attempts to "safeguard against collective amnesia" were made in the 1980s, but he poses the fundamental query: Is it conceivable to retain all records of all individuals? He admits that there are not enough materials and room to carry out that duty. He offers an archival system as a remedy, one in which the National Archives would coordinate a national archival management system that shared preservation of archives with record-makers for both their personal and society's advantages. This must be decided after analysing the locals' demands, and it must follow the post-custodial idea of maintaining archives. Ngulube (2012:33), who acknowledges that history and memory are neither objective nor exhaustive, quotes Maclean (1959), who asserts that "there are two histories of every land and people, the written that tells what is considered politic to tell and the unwritten history that tells everything." It is

acknowledged by Ngulube (2012:33) that "any history on archival development in Zimbabwe is not likely to be exhaustive as it is one version of several possible stories that may be told on the same subject." Ngulube (2012) urges archivists to concentrate on the "unwritten" history that Maclean refers to as the most significant because "...it is the honourable choice. It allows archivists the opportunity to set up an archive that is reflective of all national voices. It is against this background that the National Archives decided to engage communities in the 10 provinces of Zimbabwe to set up "community archives" to address some of the imbalances that both colonial and post-colonial archival endeavours created.

Review of related literature

The review of related literature had a thematic slant and concentrated on the idea of community archives. It followed the emergence of an "archival multiverse," which has altered how societal memories are compiled. A wide range of intellectual, cultural, technological, social, and political currents are reflected in the expansion of the archive multiverse (Poppo, Mutibwa & Prescott, 2020). The expansion of community archives and the active involvement of regular individuals in their creation are the most important aspects of these advances. According to Poppo et al. (2020), the professional archive community has begun to drastically reassess many of its presumptions about how archives are established, preserved, and made accessible as community archives have grown in popularity and influence. Gibbons (2020), on the other hand, contends that a grassroots social movement that sprang from social, political, and cultural upheaval in the UK during the 1960s and 1970s is defined as the contemporary community archives movement. When discussing so-called community archives projects in New Zealand, according to Newman (2011), the recorded memory of their communities is represented in archives. They contribute significantly to our cultural heritage and well-being, but because of the wide variation in accessibility and the care they receive, some people are worried about how long they will live. Newman (2011) further notes that many of the maintenance-related factors are interconnected and interdependent. On the other hand, organisational factors have the greatest influence on the preservation of archival records and the value of their evidence. Different organisational and governance traits and the impact they have on other variables suggest that the sustainability of community archives might be considerably improved by addressing these organisational and governance traits.

Bhebhe (2019:226) discovered that in Zimbabwe, where community archives/museums have been established by the BaTonga (BaTonga Museum), the Nambya (Nambya Museum); the Kalanga (Kalanga Language and Cultural Development Association), and the San (Tso-ro-tso San), ethnicity plays a significant role in inspiring and stimulating oral history programmes or community archiving. The majority of these ethnic groups in Zimbabwe feel marginalised, their languages are underrepresented in the educational system, and they are separated from the country's official language (Bhebhe, 2019:226). Bhebhe's (2023) major goal was to highlight the relationship between what borderlands theory espouses and the explosion of

community archives in these regions as a means of counter-archiving and capturing the "other." He noted that community archives that border on archival activism have grown as a result of this pervasive borderland phenomenon. This study also provides an outline of the relationship between community archives and Zimbabwe's borderlands. One of the conclusions is that these

community archives, which can take the shape of archives, museums, trusts, oral history groups, and language organisations, appear to be an attempt by the marginalised to communicate their tales that are ignored by those in authority. The fact that the histories of persons who live in borderlands are hardly ever recorded in Zimbabwe's established heritage organisations has practically become commonplace.

The use of information and communications technology for development (ICTD) by community archives in borderlands to achieve their goals is another recurring theme in the study (Bhebhe, 2023). Prescott (2020) also focused on the utilisation of information and communications technologies (ICTs) and social media by community archives and activists, when he stated that the technological, financial, and logistical difficulties of sustaining digital resources are frequently found to be significant by community groups. This tempts people to use commercial platforms, which pose concerns about privacy and manipulation and whose long-term viability is uncertain. The quality of the digital environment has an impact on daily living almost as much as the physical environment because everyone is increasingly working in it. Prescott (2020) adds further perspective by observing that the ability of community archives to realise their goals of developing common spaces of self-representation, collaboration, and remembrance depends on the health of the digital environment on which we all rely. There appear to be new revelations of social media manipulation, security flaws, domestic violence, and online misinformation every day. These concerns may give the impression that the idea of a digital environment that encourages community self-representation and collaboration is in jeopardy.

On the other hand, Hurley (2016) contends that various community archives around the world are typically seen as being the least suited to carry out digital preservation efforts since they are small, local, independent, and frequently unique. The scholar argues that community archives are made possible by cloud-computing solutions to start acquiring and preserving born-digital records by taking up the concept of archives as a "place of preservation" and putting it in conversation with the various areas of scholarship on community archives and cloud computing. Achieving this requires redefining the areas within which preservation occurs. Hurley (2016) further outlines the concepts that define community archives in the Anglo-American context, discusses these ideas about preservation and place, and connects them with a review of potential cloud-computing implementations and case examples for small archives. Community archives, which are embedded alongside records creators representing a wide range of organisations, people, and interests, are perfectly positioned to gather the digital records of individuals, enterprises, and organisations that may elude major, institutionally based collections (Hurley, 2016).

In North America and the United Kingdom, the community archives movement has established a major, and often critical, presence both inside and outside of mainstream archival traditions and practices. They can take many different shapes and frequently challenge how public and private archives in these areas have historically been conceived of, organised, and run (Gilliland & Štefanac, 2018). On the other hand, *Bénédicte Stoufflet* (2023) observe that community archives serve as both memory joggers and exemplary representations of a world that has vanished. *Stoufflet* (2023) seeks to examine archives from an anthropological perspective, concentrating on how people utilise them to jog their memories and feel part of

the community. According to Caswell, Gabiola, Zavala, Brilmyer, Gracen, and Cifor (2018), although formal archival spaces have been the subject of extensive writing, community archives' physical locations have received very little attention from academics. Caswell et al. (2018) analyse how individuals of marginalised communities conceptualise the physical space inhabited by community archives representing their communities. In their findings, Caswell et al. (2018) found that users described community archives spaces as symbolic and emotionally stirring places across all sites. Users frequently referred to their community archives site as a "home-away-from-home," characterised by cross-generational conversation and a strong sense of belonging. Other users referred to community archives websites as "politically generative spaces" that encourage conversation and debate about activism, representation, and identity while empowering the community to foresee its future. Caswell et al. (2018) argue that even though community archives are political by their very existence, many participants in their study thought that these platforms have not yet reached their full political potential. In conclusion, their research shows the need for a change in archival metaphors of space and demonstrates how community archives are personally and politically transformative spaces for the communities they represent and serve by listening to the voices of those communities.

In conclusion, the literature reviewed confirmed that community archives can take a variety of forms and commonly question how public and private archives in these areas have traditionally been imagined, established, and managed. They empower and politically liberate previously disadvantaged and underrepresented voices in communities across the world.

Statement of the problem

Societal archives are selective repositories of memory, and as claimed by Samuels (1986); Kaplan (2000); Ridener (2007), Rodrigues, Van de Walt and Ngulube (2014); and Chabikwa (2019), the socioeconomic and political elites' voices predominate in the archive at the expense of other voices. Public sector records and archives form the majority of Zimbabwe's archiving activity. The registry system/model and the Oral History Programme, in particular, have marginalised the voices of minorities and underrepresented people in post-colonial Zimbabwe. In part because of this dissatisfaction with traditional archival practices, the NAZ argues that "community archives" should be established and preserved for "posterity." However, the establishment of these so-called "community archives" by the NAZ goes against the very tenets of "community archives", because of the involvement of the national archival institution and the government of Zimbabwe. Some of these so-called "community archives" are in fact government archives, such as the case of Girls High School, Gwanda Municipality and Kariba Municipality Archives, which are supposed to be managed by the NAZ. The fact that these so-called "community archives" are an extension of the mainstream archives implies that minorities and the underrepresented continue to be further excluded from the archive, and it takes away the community initiative to document themselves through the NAZ and the government of Zimbabwe's involvement. The material from the public sector, represented by Girls High School Archives and others, perpetuates the dominance of public records over other silent voices in the archive. As such, the study sought to describe the so-called "community archives" project by the NAZ and problematise (examine and question) how it entrenches the dominance of mainstream archives in the Zimbabwean archival landscape.

Objective of the study

The major objective of this article was to describe and problematise (examine and question) the “community archives” project run by the NAZ in the 10 provinces of Zimbabwe.

Research methodology

The qualitative research methodology employed in this study was based on a comprehensive analysis of the literature on “community archives”. A thematic integrated evaluation of the literature was conducted using databases from ResearchGate, Sage Publications, Taylor & Francis, and African Journals Online (AJOL). These databases were conveniently sampled because, at the time of conducting the study, they were the only ones available to the study through institutional access; other databases were not available because the institution in Zimbabwe had not subscribed to them. NAZ documentation on “community archives” in Zimbabwe was also analysed during the same period: February 2023 to May 2023. The study purposively sampled the NAZ's project coordinator for the so-called “community archives” and four other project personnel, because they had expert knowledge of the “so-called community archives project”, having been in charge of the project and the establishment of seven local repositories in Zimbabwe. Questionnaires were administered to the four project personnel between 5 and 20 June 2023. On 27 June 2023, an interview with the NAZ's project coordinator for “community archives” took place in Bulawayo. The data collected were analysed and presented in a narrative and thematic way (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Findings and discussion

The findings of the study are presented according to the main objective, which was to describe and problematise (examine and question) the community archives project run by the NAZ.

Justification for creating “community archives”

The National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) started a project to set up “community archives” to maintain memory spaces in communities around the country, according to Antonio (2021). Ivan Murambiwa, the late Director of the National Archives, was quoted as saying that the NAZ knew that legacy was being lost, which is why the mission to select communities to support the establishment of their archives was established. “NAZ is the proud keeper of the nation's historical records and will keep supporting communities and organisations that wish to establish their archives at the local level,” said Murambiwa. In keeping with the concept empowering archives, the NAZ has started building “community archives”, with Arcturus community archive in 2019 serving as a trial project. Zion Christian Church in Mungo, Masvingo and the Girls High School in Harare both have “community archives”. The Shabani Mine Community Archive is now being established in Zvishavane. He stated that establishing a community archive in each province is the major goal of this endeavour.

In an interview with one of the then coordinators, the above (concept of empowering archives) was also given as the rationale by the NAZ to set up “community archives” in the 10 provinces of Zimbabwe. The respondent indicated that the idea was to empower communities and to feed

into the devolution mantra championed by central government, and the decentralisation of archives in the country. At the same time, the NAZ envisaged that it would transfer archiving skills and technical expertise to the said communities so that they would be able to manage and grow the collections without direct supervision from the national archival institution. The same would also ensure that local heritage is salvaged and saved from neglect, decay, and loss over time. The NAZ realised that a lot of local heritage was being lost without crossing the archival threshold, hence the active involvement of the NAZ in ensuring that community memories are documented and preserved. The initiative came from the NAZ, and the central government supported the project both politically and financially and turned it into a national priority under National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1). In contrast to the initiatives worldwide that identify and address ethnic aspirations for empowerment and liberation from mainstream archives, the “community archives” project run by the NAZ is an appendage of mainstream archiving and has both the political and financial support of the central government. Communities avail material collections, and the arrangement and description are done by the NAZ, in collaboration with locals, as part of skills transfer and empowerment. Through the central government, the NAZ provides the shelving and filing boxes, which are normally donated to the “community archives”.

Staff Writer (2021) and Ndlovu (2022) reported on the Zvishavane Community Archive and the Gwanda Community Archive, respectively, at their official opening and in all instances quoting the Minister of Home Affairs and Cultural Heritage, Kazembe Kazembe and his deputy, Ruth Maboyi, both reiterate the above role that government plays in setting up “community archives”. While speaking at the official launch of Zvishavane Community Archive, Home Affairs Minister Kazembe Kazembe stated that the development of community archive centres was one of several 100-day cycle initiatives his ministry implemented in 2021. The respondent who was coordinating this project at the NAZ summarised the objectives of setting up the “community archives” as follows:

- a) Decentralisation: Making records management knowledge and experience accessible to all communities.
- b) Increasing capacity: Making sure that there is knowledge transfer on the preservation of information resources, particularly archives, by members of the community is one of the project's core activities. In this instance, the department's goal is to increase the processes, capacities, and skills that communities need to prosper in topics relating to the preservation of their recorded heritage. The correct records management, which includes the collection, maintenance, and facilitation of access to historical records, is identified and taught to community members.
- c) Community participation: Communities taking an active role in managing their cultural assets in keeping with the government's push for decentralisation and grassroots empowerment in the direction of Vision 2030.
- d) Preserving community memories: Making sure that local communities' cultural heritage and archive collections are preserved for future generations.

Although Bhebhe (2019; 2023) and other researchers examined defined "community archives" by ethnicity, this definition is not exclusive, as evidenced by this study in Zimbabwe. The same conclusion was also reached by the University College of London (2018) (UCL) in acknowledging the diversity of the meaning of “community”. The findings in the case of this

study also affirm the definition provided by UCL (2018) that “community archives” are “collections of materials created, held and managed primarily within communities and outside the formal heritage sector”. As much as this is true, the study found that the NAZ and the National Museum and Monuments of Zimbabwe, have played a critical role in establishing both the so-called “community archives” and museums, by providing the technical expertise lacking in these initiatives and, at times, resources in the case of the seven so-called “community archives” established at the time of conducting this study. It is also important to note that although partly motivated, driven and owned by so-called local communities, these archives exhibit traces and imprints by the government through the active involvement of the NAZ. This deviates from the conventional approach of “community archives” being ethnic-based or community initiatives as an alternative memory space from mainstream archives. This creates a problem in the case of the NAZ initiative because it negates the very essence of “community archives”, given that they are an extension of the national archival institution in a way, or they can be perceived as an abrogation of the NAZ’s role to in managing public archives and records to communities like Girls High School, Gwanda and Kariba Municipalities.

Process of establishing a community archive

Data from the interview with the former project coordinator and four archivists involved in the project showed that the NAZ established “community archives” in Zimbabwe using the following setup procedure.

1. An initial survey: Finding institutions that are willing and capable to assist with the establishment of their archives are a key component of this step. The initiative is appealing to a huge number of institutions. The NAZ ensures that it carefully weighs all the institutions before choosing one. For practical considerations, proximity to the institution takes precedence.
2. Visit to the potential host: A team from the NAZ physically visits the institution for further evaluation when it has been identified. This evaluation seeks to determine whether it has a working library that, if possible, might be combined with the archives, and to evaluate whether the institution has records or information sources that need to be archived and the availability of space for setting up an archive.
3. Establishing archives: The NAZ team arrives on the scene and processes the records (archival processing, organisation, and description), conducts interviews, and creates an archive after gathering the data at the institution.
4. Progress assessment: The NAZ Directorate conducts a progress assessment to determine the degree of readiness for the launch of the archive. Following the directorate's satisfaction, launch preparations will start.
5. The official launch: The community archive is introduced at the right time. A senior official from the parent ministry will perform the official opening.

One can clearly discern the NAZ's careful planning and implementation in all five the aforementioned phases, as well as the restricted involvement of the affected community and the origin of the archival documents.

Obstacles and possibilities

According to the four archivists running the project, the major obstacle of the project stems from the limited funding by the central government, which is saddled by other competing frameworks in national development, in an economy that has been dysfunctional for decades and is characterised by hyperinflation and is increasingly dollarising. The impact of this is that it negates the quality of the systems and archives set up in the provinces. At times, equipment and infrastructure are not adequate to meet archival standards. Related to the issue of limited funding is the issue of the buildings utilised in housing the collections. These are not purpose-built to house archives and pose a risk to the long-term preservation of the community collections. Each project's limited time for implementation is related to the 100-day cycles specified by the central government, and the NAZ, communities, and local governments labour to reach the reporting targets rather than methodically creating an archive by archival best practices or standards.

Another barrier to the project's success is the non-use of ICTs; it has been noted that this is partly due to a lack of funding and the fact that the majority of the collections to date have been in physical form and paper format. However, it was also said that there were no urgent plans to digitise these local collections. Contrary to what has been observed (Hurley, 2016; Bhebhe, 2019; 2023; Kord, 2022; Popple et al., 2020; Prescott, 2020), ICTs are expected to play a larger role in the future and sustainability of “community archives” as well as in facilitating continued access to the archives by the community and society at large.

The issue of access to the collections is related to the NAZ's decision not to use ICTs in the project to digitise the Zimbabwean Archives. Given that the collections are physical and in paper format and are located in one of the 10 provinces of Zimbabwe, this does not improve access to the archive and instead hinders decentralisation efforts because they are still restricted to the urban and peri-urban areas of the country. Although the efforts are admirable, there is potential for Zimbabwe's memory ecosystem to take advantage of plurality, diversity, and uniqueness derived from the country's predominantly black population, which has been largely absent from the archive since 1932. Several opportunities exist through harnessing both manual and digital technologies to redress the imbalances and innovate strategies for preserving integrated societal memory. This obstacle gives credence to the fact that the NAZ's focus is on decentralisation, which is to expand the boundary of the archive, from the capital Harare and Bulawayo to provinces and outlying areas.

The following list of additional difficulties was provided: limited resources: projector, cameras, laptops, power generator, a lack of qualified personnel for ongoing work at the community level, and limited community willingness to move the project forward due to their limited expertise in the area. In addition to the above, the project also lacked dust collectors, shelving material, and acid-free boxes.

When asked about ownership, the responder acknowledged that both the NAZ and the government regarded these collections as belonging to the community. This is not consistent with academic research that distinguished community archives as ethnic narratives; however, it is not exclusive as previously perceived by the NAZ. Although it is the position of the NAZ that ownership resides with the communities, some of the records are legally government records and should be owned and managed by the NAZ, in the case of government schools and

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municipalities involved in the project. A few instances in the case of Shabanie Mine Community Archives can legally be considered to be private archives belonging to a mining company and community.

The current status of the “community archives” project

According to the government's National Development Strategy 1 (2021-2025), which aspires to realise the nation's 2030 vision of a wealthy and empowered upper-middle-income society, the project is currently 70% complete for the initial phase. In each of the 10 provinces of the nation, one “community archive centre” is to be established. Seven “community archives” have been successfully established by the NAZ in the seven provinces of Zimbabwe, as indicated in the table below. The programme will also be cascaded down to the district level.

Table 1: “Community archives” established by province in Zimbabwe

COMMUNITY ARCHIVE	HOST INSTITUTION	PROVINCE	YEAR EST.
Arcturus	Arcturus High School	Mash East	2019
Harare Girls High	Harare Girls High	Harare	2020
Mbungo	Zion Christian Church	Masvingo	2020
Zvishavane	Shabani Mine	Midlands	2021
Kariba	Kariba Council	Mash West	2021
Gwanda	Gwanda Municipality	Mat South	2022
Chipinge	Mt Selinda High School	Manicaland	2022
REMAINING PROVINCES			
Mashonaland Central		Mashonaland Central	2023
Matabeleland North		Matabeleland North	2023
Bulawayo		Bulawayo	2024

Source: Fieldwork 2023

The number of community initiatives that the NAZ successfully launched in Zimbabwe's 10 provinces is shown in Table 1 above. It is important to remember that this criticism refutes the myth or belief that “community archives” are driven and motivated by ethnic factors. For instance, there are no specific ethnic traits present in the Zvishavane archives that would support the claim that they represent an ethnic community. Kazembe asserts that the choice of Zvishavane was made with great strategy. The archive was established largely because of the town's extensive mining history, which is documented in numerous manuscripts, meeting minutes, policy files, personal files, maps, plans, drawings, machinery manuals from equipment suppliers, technical manuals, books, and a photographic collection. The same is true of the Girls High School Archive, which was primarily an exclusive white girls’ school before independence. Its collection primarily documents the memories of white schoolgirls who passed through its portals, but after Zimbabwe gained its independence in 1980, the school

became multi-racial and multi-ethnic, making it impossible to associate it with any particular ethnic grouping in Zimbabwe, whether it was marginalised or not, given Harare's cosmopolitan nature as the country's capital.

Critical analysis reveals that this approach taken by the NAZ violates or upsets the very notion of community archives. From an academic point of view and going by conventional definition and several studies, Hurley (2016), Bhebhe (2019), Bhebhe (2023), Kord (2022), Popple et al. (2020), Prescott (2020) argue that community archives are community or ethnic initiatives, which, in essence, are empowering by rebelling against mainstream archival initiatives. The “so called community archives project” by the NAZ does, in reality, not empower communities in the conventional sense of community archives; instead, it expands the boundary of the NAZ to local levels as described in the rationale and setup process. Archival repositories are being set up to store and give access to local histories or historical manuscripts of mining corporations and their communities. The existence of government-owned archives or records created by local authorities and government schools merely buttresses the argument that the NAZ is decentralising or abrogating its responsibility to create agencies and provenance of these records, which by statute are supposed to be transferred to the custody of the NAZ.

Conclusions

According to the study's findings, the “community archives” initiative built several NAZ-supported community-based archival repositories nationwide. The mainly black population of Zimbabwe, mostly absent from the archive since 1932, presents both opportunities and challenges for the country's memory ecology in terms of capturing plurality, diversity, and distinction. These issues are not just racial. It is possible to address imbalances and develop new methods for conserving integrated societal memory by utilising both manual and digital technology. Although mainstream archives (NAZ) play a vital role in inspiring and driving the “community archive” project in Zimbabwe with central support, community-based initiatives are locations of participatory memory preservation and exemplify dignity by design in their own right. As observed by Caswell et al. (2018) and reinforced by the findings of this study, even while community archives are inherently political, many participants believed that these platforms have not yet realised their full political potential. Finally, their research indicates that community archives are personally and politically transforming venues for the communities they represent and serve by listening to those people's voices. This inherent characteristic of community archives is still in its infancy in Zimbabwe. The NAZ project does not exemplify community initiatives in the conventional sense but is an expansion of the archival boundary by NAZ to the 10 provinces of Zimbabwe, as such, it should not be confused with the conventional concept of community archives, which is liberatory in nature and character from an academic point of view.

Recommendations

Considering the aforementioned findings, the study makes the following recommendations to the NAZ:

- Building renovations are necessary to bring certain structures that serve as the “community's archives” on par with archival requirements. The condition of the structures housing the so-called community archives is crucial to preservation.

Expanding the archival boundary through a “community archives”

- Equipment provision: Money is required to buy equipment like shelf material, dust collectors, and acid-free boxes.
- Oral interviews are undertaken as part of the expansion of the archival boundary to ensure the complete preservation of local heritage. The objective is to record both the concrete and abstract cultural elements of that community for future preservation. As a result, financial aid is required to buy recording tools, including recorders, cameras, and computers for transcription and storage.
- Sustainability: The need for qualified community knowledge. A new idea called Subject Matter Refers (SME) claims that not all community memories are the domain of archivists. While working with communities, archivists simply bring professional handling (arrangement and description); nonetheless, it is necessary to collaborate with local staff to decide what is considered to be archival. This local workforce has to be fully equipped. The authenticity and cultural significance of historical knowledge are promoted by community involvement, preserving information ethics. The survival of these “community archives” depends on ongoing training for residents.
- Continuity: It is important for the so-called “community archives” programme to keep reaching out to underserved communities. It has been noticed that some locations contain susceptible archives. Despite having a long history, neither of these communities has a communal memory institution to protect their past. More “community archives” will need to be established in the designated marginalised areas, as local community initiatives, which will require funding.
- Money for recurrent appointments. These include going to every newly founded so-called “community archive” in every province to check on its status and development.
- ICT infrastructure and equipment must be adopted and deployed to improve access and collect and analyse digitally born collections from the expanded archival boundary being documented.
- The NAZ should reconceptualise the community archives project, in view of its deviation from the conventional meaning of community archives. It should manage these so-called “community archives” as an extension of the NAZ holdings, which in provenance they are.

Limitations and future research

The study's main limitations were that it did not include community archives that are not a part of the NAZ's “community archives” project and that it only examined one instance of the NAZ; as a result, its conclusions cannot be applied to the remaining community projects in Zimbabwe. Future studies should concentrate on user studies and the archival activists involved in the community archives in Zimbabwe. More research has to be done to include those community efforts beyond the NAZ's purview.

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