Inclusion of rural communities in national archival and records system: a case study of Blouberg-Makgabeng-Senwabarwana area

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Abstract

Previously colonised, marginalised communities rarely participate in the mainstream archival and records systems throughout the world. Archiving as it is known today is preserving records on paper, electronic, audio-visual and microfilm formats. These media were not present in the pre-colonial era hence the stories, histories and heritage of most communities, such as those in Africa, are not represented in the mainstream archives. The African tradition had always been oral in which stories and heritage are transmitted and preserved by word of mouth. The purpose of this paper is to identify the factors such as the non-keeping of written records which had been preventing previously colonised communities from participating in archiving their histories. The paper seeks to find ways in which such communities could be galvanised into participating in the mainstream archival and records systems. The paper will use the communities in the Blouberg-Makgabeng-Senwabarwana (BMS) area, in Limpopo Province, South Africa, as a case study. Research works and projects in different professional fields, as well as oral history conducted in the BMS area will be used as references in this study. The communities in this area are mainly rural and poor, and they represent the previously disadvantaged groups which had not been able to participate in archiving their histories. While this paper uses the BMS communities as a case study, it is actually a viewpoint article in which the lack of community participation in national archival and records systems is interrogated and critiqued, and is found to have been mainly attributed to historical factors related to colonialism and apartheid. Other key findings in this paper include the fact that communities in peripheral areas such as BMS are generally poor, less educated and underdeveloped. As a result, they are constantly involved in day-to-day struggles for survival, hindering them from participating in archiving activities.

Key words: community participation, national archival and records system, Blouberg-Makgabeng-Senwabarwana (BMS) area, indigenous communities

Introduction

The current archival records preserved in South Africa’s mainstream archives largely consist of documents and materials which were generated after the arrival of Europeans in this part of the world. These records, which are stored in archives in paper, electronic, audio-visual and microfilm formats, reflect very little about the indigenous communities. That is because of the historical phenomena and factors which will be investigated and unpacked in this paper.

Communities in rural, peripheral areas in the countryside rarely participate in the mainstream archiving and record-keeping systems throughout the world. This is probably because the communities in the countryside are generally either poor, less educated or underdeveloped, and are mostly involved in day-to-day struggles to survive, as compared to their affluent counterparts in middle and upper class strata of society who are in a better position to influence political and socio-economic issues and developments in a given country. Although each country has its own peculiar historical background, in the African context, decades of slavery, colonialism and apartheid (in South Africa), compounded the problems and added limitations in archiving activities.
and participation of the indigenous communities who were defeated, subjugated and ruled by foreign forces. In the process, the stories of the indigenous communities were systematically uprooted and replaced by the foreign forces’ narratives, while at the same time the memories, histories and heritage of the local communities were greatly engineered and manipulated.

Archiving systems became a prerogative and domain of the victorious European occupying forces, while the local African communities were passive subjects. However, the indigenous communities’ past stories, histories and heritage proved to be so resilient as they were sustained through among other things, oral tradition. They were transmitted by word of mouth from one generation to the next. As a result, in the general mainstream of archival and record systems, there is a gap of indigenous communities’ participation hence the archival documents and materials are mostly Eurocentric and colonial in character. This paper focuses on the Blouberg-Makgabeng-Senwabarwana (BMS) area, in Limpopo Province, South Africa, in order to investigate the gap in the mainstream archival and records system that resulted from the non-participation of indigenous local communities due to the historical phenomena hinted above.

The paper studies and uses examples in which archival materials were produced in the area and how local communities participated (or did not participate) in those processes. The paper adopts a historical approach outline in which the archival and records systems in South Africa in general, using the BMS case study, are investigated and interrogated from the pre-colonial era; colonial/apartheid period; up to the post-colonial/apartheid times. As a viewpoint article, the paper interrogates and critiques the issues of participation/non-participation/lack of participation of indigenous communities such as those in the BMS area in archiving their stories, histories and heritage. After outlining its findings, the paper then concludes by making recommendations on how communities in the BMS area (and in other areas) could be drawn into systematically participating into formal, coordinated ways in order to contribute to the entire, mainstream archival and records system from local, regional and national levels in South Africa.

**Contextual setting**

This paper uses the BMS area as a case study to investigate community participation in national archival and records systems. The BMS area is a geo-cultural heritage landscape found towards the north-western corner of the province of Limpopo, almost next to the South Africa’s borders with Botswana and Zimbabwe. This landscape has been thoroughly researched and documented by various institutions and professionals including historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, zoologists, botanists, geologists, rock art students, etc. Above all, the BMS landscape was designated as one of the iconic heritage places with rich natural features (fauna and floral), as well as culturally significant sites. The BMS landscape is a home of one provincial heritage site declared as such in 2007 by the Limpopo Heritage Resources Authority, namely, the Malebogo-Boer War Battlefield.

The first letter in the triangular reference of “BMS” stands for “Blouberg”. This is an area with deep and extensive histories, which include those of the legendary Bahananwa people. The histories of the early European travellers, explorers, traders, missionaries, and later the Boer and British colonial settlers also have traces in Blouberg. The 1894 war between the Bahananwa of Kgoşi Seketa Rašhatšha Lebogo, and the Boers of Paul Kruger, is one of the significant historical developments in the
Blouberg area. That was why the battlefield was declared a provincial heritage site.

The second component of the “BMS”, “Makgabeng”, is in reference of a beautiful scenic plateau in the area which is known for its world-class rock art paintings of the San, Khoikhoi and the Basotho. The Makgabeng rock art paintings qualify it to be declared a world heritage site. The last letter of “BMS”, the “S”, is standing for “Senwabarwana”, which literally means, “where the San people drank water”. This is also an iconic area linked with its natural and cultural significance to the general BMS landscape.

This paper will use this BMS landscape rich in stories, histories and heritage to investigate and interrogate the participation/non-participation/lack of participation of communities in the national archival and records systems.

The approach in this paper is mainly to formulate a viewpoint around the issue in question in accordance with the sources available. The study is mainly an opinion piece of work, and with it, the following observations were made:

- There is a gap in the national archival and records systems in which the indigenous communities’ records are lacking due to historical factors discussed thus far.
- There is abundance in the national archives of the records on the periods of the European early travellers, missionaries, as well as colonial and apartheid eras.
- The post-1994 governments took initiatives of mainstreaming the records of the previously excluded indigenous communities into the national archival and records system by even ensuring community participation.

BMS pre-colonial stories within the archival and record systems

The pre-colonial historical gap

The pre-colonial indigenous communities like those of the BMS areas did not “read and write” as reading and writing are understood today. They used their own ways of “reading and writing” embodied in what is today generally referred to as indigenous knowledge systems. For example, they could read astrological phenomena, seasons, weather, etc. They could count their livestock; they could accurately plan their buildings’ construction; they could write and inscribe on rocks; and so on. However, the “reading and writing” systems and methods of those pre-colonial communities had always been regarded as if they were non-existent. This has been done deliberately as a colonial project in which indigenous knowledge systems were undermined by either being claimed by colonial settlers, diluted, demonised or even attacked. The indigenous communities’ histories, heritage and cultures were transmitted from one generation to the other by word of mouth. Oral history became a lifeline of the past of the indigenous communities such as those in the BMS.

With this deliberate intent to suppress the indigenous communities’ histories, heritage and cultures – which was part of a bigger scheme of political colonial project of subjugating indigenous communities – the local content was never regarded as mainstream. Pre-colonial history was almost regarded as non-existent. In fact, some views which appeared in colonial literature plainly and openly declared that regions such as Africa had no history prior to the arrival of colonial forces. For example, the German Friedrich Hegel once notoriously declared, “Africa did not have history and did not contribute to anything mankind enjoyed”. (www.azquotes.com). Much of the literature generated through such stereotypical approaches reflects this
historical gap, in which subjects such as South African history, are pegged at the arrival of the Europeans in this part of the world. This historical gap is reflected in the national archival and records systems of South Africa which are heavily Eurocentric in content and in outlook.

Archaeology, rock art and oral evidence

The pre-colonial communities such as those in the BMS area did not have archival and records systems as we know them in the modern days, kept in the form of paper, electronic, audio-visual and microfilm. Their stories, histories and heritage which predate the arrival of foreign forces, are today known because of oral accounts as well as other professional reconstructions such as archaeological surveys and rock art studies. These sources shed light on the past of the pre-colonial communities and data that is collected through them is sometimes deposited into the national archives systems. The process of collecting data about the pre-colonial communities such as those in the BMS area, and the eventual depositing of such data into the mainstream archival and records systems, is mainly done by professionals such as historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, zoologists, botanists, geologists, rock art specialists, etc. In such elitist academic exercises, local communities, who are descendants of the pre-colonial communities, rarely participate in such archiving processes.

Archaeological and rock art evidence indicate that before the arrival of the first early European explorers, hunters, traders and travellers, and later the missionaries as well as the Boer and British colonial settlers around BMS, the area was home to the indigenous San, Khoikhoi and the Bantu-speaking communities (Eastwood & Van Schalkwyk; 2002). The San, notably the earliest of all the groups, traversed the BMS area, nomadically moving in small units, hunting and gathering wild food. Their finely painted rock art is still indelible in the BMS area, particularly in the Makgabeng Mountain. The Khoikhoi rock art paintings in the BMS area depict mostly coarser geometric figures (the San mostly depicted animals in fine print), and such evidence verifies that they were once inhabitants of that area (Eastwood; 2002). The presence of the pre-colonial Bantu-speaking communities such as the Batau, Bakone, Babirwa, Batshadibe and the Bahananwa in the BMS area is also evidenced by rock art and archaeological evidence (Eastwood & Van Schalkwyk; 2002).

In addition to rock art and archaeological evidence, oral history has been a significant source of information on the pre-colonial communities such as those in the BMS area. Oral transmission of stories, histories and heritage ensured their preservation and conservation over centuries, from one generation to the other. Older members of the communities would orally transmit poetry, folktales, proverbs, idioms, legends, riddles, and all forms of educative content to the younger generations, who would in turn relay it to the generations coming after them.

Early Europeans and missionaries records

With the factors explained in the previous paragraphs about the colonial project of subjugating indigenous communities, the colonial powers’ systems became dominant official mainstream in all walks of life: political, social, economic, religious, educational, etc. That is why today the national archives are full of paper, electronic, audio-visual and microfilm records starting with the arrival of Europeans this part of the world, while the period prior to that does not have records.
The indigenous communities were therefore never part of such systems as participants.

Available records indicate that the Europeans touched the southern African shores as early as the 15th century (Maylam; 1986). The advent of ships, combined with the “push and pull” factors, led to adventurous journeys across the seas resulting in Europeans touching the shores of other continents. The records of the earliest Europeans such as Vasco da Gama, Bartholomeo Diaz, Jan van Riebeeck, etc., are currently in abundance in the national archival record systems of South Africa.

In the BMS area, the earliest Europeans to touch base were mainly hunters, travellers, traders and other similar smaller groups which were on the move. They would move from one place to the other as they engaged in their various missions. Coenraad de Buys, a white rebel who broke away from the European traditions, in his nomadic fashion, is one of the earliest Europeans recorded to have touched the area referred to as BMS today (Maylam; 1986). Because the earliest Europeans could not settle for longer periods on one area, as they were on their various missions such as hunting and trading, their records which are in the archives are not as abundant as the ones generated by the later groups, viz., the missionaries and the colonial settlers.

The first missionaries to set foot in what is the BMS area were from the Berlin Missionary Society of Germany (Beyer; 1870). By the time those German missionaries arrived in the BMS area, they had already established themselves in different areas such as GaSekhukhune, GaMokopane and GaMatlala. After protracted negotiations with the ruler, Kgosi Matsiokwane of the Bahananwa, eventually Missionary Beyer established the first missionary in the BMS area on 9 March 1868 in Sehlong village (Beyer; 1870). Beyer named the station Leipzig, in remembrance of his hometown back in Germany. In 1870 another mission station was established in Makgabeng among the people of Mnyebody. This was an extension of the station in Sehlong and different missionaries presided over these stations in the BMS during different periods. The amount of archival records generated by the missionaries during their stay in the BMS area is massive.

The missionaries were deployed from Europe with clearly defined mandates and were funded by their respective denominations. The basic objective of the missionary societies was to dispatch their foot soldiers, the missionaries, to places like Africa, to teach their kind of religion, in order to convert the other nations which they believed were “barbaric”, “savage” “heathens” who needed salvation (Sack; 1890). In executing their duties, the missionaries were expected to constantly compile reports about what they were exactly doing. So, the missionaries’ reports, diaries and other documents, became significant documents which are currently available in abundance in the national archives of South Africa. Although most of those missionaries’ archival records are in the German language, they are still valuable archival material which shed important light about that period of the history of the BMS. Even though those records were written from narrow missionaries’ perspectives and are overloaded with stereotypes and prejudices against the indigenous people and their cultures, they are still significant primary sources available. With regard to community participation, certainly the communities did not take part in generating the missionary archival records. The missionaries would engage the local communities, organise and try to convert them into their European belief systems, and then go on to write reports about what they think they understood about the
indigenous communities such as those in the BMS area.

**Colonial and apartheid systems**

For obvious reasons some of which were hinted in the preceding paragraphs, the records of the colonial and apartheid periods are abundant in the South African archives just like those of the early European travellers’ and missionaries’ periods. After the Europeans’ adventurous explorations in which they “discovered” other parts of the world such as Africa, their contact with those areas increased and intensified with time as they interacted for various reasons. The invention of transport modes such as ships enabled and encouraged greater adventure. Trading, hunting and sometimes sheer curiosity, motivated such adventurous trips; and later more purposeful missions such as those of the missionaries took place. When the European colonial powers decided to formally lay claim on foreign lands as their own possessions in the form of colonies, groundwork was already laid down by the earlier groups. Actually, the early European travellers and the missionaries enabled and actively facilitated the colonial project.

In what is South Africa today, although there had been earliest traces of touching bases by Europeans as far back as the 15th century, the earliest signs of a more permanent colonial settlement can be attributed to the arrival of the Dutch East India Company (DEIC/VOC) group under Jan van Riebeeck in 1652. The expansion of the DEIC outpost that was initially meant to be a refreshment station for the ships travelling on trade missions to the East, later became a huge colonial project, especially when the British entered the scene towards the end of the 18th century. By the end of the 19th century in what is South Africa today, all the indigenous communities were defeated in ruthless colonial wars and were subjugated and subjected under colonial rule.

The victorious European colonial powers then imposed their authority over the defeated and dispossessed territories and communities politically, economically, socially and even culturally. Where the missionaries earlier on preached for conversion, the colonial powers enforced their authority. The colonial powers took away not only the indigenous communities’ right to rule themselves, but they also took away their land with all its resources and their livestock. The colonial project in what is South Africa today went through different phases as time went on: from the 1652 DEIC outpost to the British occupation in 1795; the 1830s Great Trek; the 1899-1902 “Anglo-Boer” War; the 1910 Union; and 1948 apartheid.

In all those colonial and apartheid periods, huge volumes of archival records were generated about the dominant ruling, colonial, political forces. No wonder today there are stacks and stacks of archival materials about the colonial and apartheid eras in South Africa. The indigenous communities, who were by then defeated, subjugated and occupied, did not participate in generating these records. They were only scantily referred to as subjects, as they were mainly regarded as troublemakers who were constantly hunted down and attacked as they resisted trying to defend their land, livestock and freedom, from the marauding and plundering colonial forces.

**Post-colonial/apartheid systems**

**New dispensation**

The year 1994 is regarded in South African history as a significant milestone of political change, although there are still disagreements about the extent and impact of that change on the people, especially about the material conditions of the previously oppressed communities. The new
democratically constituted government had to deal with huge challenges of backlog of centuries of destructive systems of slavery, colonialism and apartheid. Coupled with those challenges, there were great expectations from the new government by the black majority who had been left in the doldrums of poverty by the successive colonial and apartheid governments of the white minority.

In the new dispensation ushered in by the democratically elected government in 1994 work needed to be done to address issues on all fronts: political, economic, social, educational and cultural fronts. The new government was mainly concerned with reconciliation issues as well as bread and butter priorities, and in that obsession, cultural issues such as heritage preservation became secondary in terms of prioritisation. The departments which dealt with arts, culture and heritage issues were mostly allocated fewer budgetary resources than those which deal with, for instance health, housing, etc. However, despite limited resources allocated to matters of arts, culture and heritage, there were tangible efforts in trying to address the past legacy of excluding the stories, histories and heritage of the previously marginalised communities.

The new post-1994 governments embarked on new policy initiatives in the arts, culture and heritage sector in which draft papers, bills and then legislation, were formulated. Specific laws on heritage, museums, archives, arts and culture were passed and they were mainly aimed at transforming those sectors which were previously dominated by the white minority governments. The principle of inclusivity was adopted in which heritage of all South Africans was to be preserved as compared to the previous dispensation from which the indigenous majority communities were excluded. These are some of the policy and legislative framework the new democratically elected governments came up with in their efforts to address the imbalances of the past with regard to preserving heritage and archival records in an inclusive society: Arts and Culture White Paper (1996); National Archives and Records Service Act (1996); National Film and Video Foundation Act (1997); Cultural Institution Act (1998); National Library Act (1998); Local Government Transformation, Municipal Structures Act (1998); World Heritage Convention Act (1999); National Heritage Resources Act (1999); National Heritage Council Act (1999); National Heritage Resources Act (1999); Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act (2003); National House of Traditional Leaders Act (2009); and National Heritage Transformation Charter (2009).

Because in the new dispensation the people are at the centre of policy and implementation, communities are mostly engaged, like in the archival and record systems in the post- colonial/apartheid period. In the subsequent paragraphs it will be demonstrated how in the new dispensation the communities such as those in the BMS area were engaged in the archival and records processes and systems.

Efforts to close the pre-colonial gap through archaeology, rock art and oral history projects

Numerous projects have been undertaken in the BMS area in order to uncover the pre-colonial past that had been neglected in the colonial and apartheid literature that was regarded as the mainstream South African history. These projects, as well as groups’ and individuals' initiatives were conducted at various periods and spots on varying extents. Some of such efforts were scattered and their outputs were never really collated and consolidated into tangible results that could be referred to. However, despite this type of limitation, professional and academic institutions researched variously on the history, heritage and culture of the BMS
area. In some instances, communities were engaged in such initiatives. In citing the examples of such initiatives, this paper will point out which ones involved community participation.

The Pretoria-based National History and Culture Museum conducted significant archaeological surveys in the BMS area under Dr. Johnny van Schalkwyk towards the end of the 1990s and early 2000s (Van Schalkwyk; 1998). Van Schalkwyk would camp in the BMS area for weeks while conducting archaeological excavations. He would rope in young promising students from the area as his assistants. One such young student, Phophi Raletjena, became an important link to get the local communities to participate in such projects and initiatives (Van Schalkwyk; 1998). Although the extent to which such efforts covered communities cannot be measured, the fact that students like Phophi introduced Dr. Van Schalkwyk’s and his work to the Bahananwa traditional authority and the Blouberg local municipality, are evidence that there were community participation in uncovering, documenting and eventually archiving of their pre-colonial stories. Those communities were therefore beginning to participate in archival and record systems, starting locally, through to the provincial level, up to the national mainstream.

Another similar research initiative was that of the Wits University Institute of Rock Art, under Professor Benjamin Smith, which was concentrating on the hundreds of world-class rock arts sites in the BMS area, which are mostly concentrated in the Makgabeng plateau (Eastwood, Van Schalkwyk & Smith; 2002). Rock art specialist, Ed Eastwood, contributed the most in physically tracing and documenting hundreds of the Makgabeng San, Khoi and Sotho rock art paintings. Eastwood recruited local residents whom he taught about the significance of rock art in Makgabeng, most notably, Jonas Tlouamma, whom he groomed to become a rock art specialist and heritage practitioner in his own right. Eastwood, Tlouamma, joined by other locals such as Elias Raseruthe, expanded the rock art documentation and heritage awareness as well as community participation around the BMS area towards the end of the 1990s right into the 2000s.

In addition to those archaeological surveys and rock art documentations, there were also oral history initiatives in which local communities were interviewed about their past histories. In 2002, under the auspices of the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) managed by Ron Viney in Limpopo, the author of this paper led the Makgabeng Oral History project in which over fifty interviews were conducted. The project yielded valuable data which ensured that communities participated in the documentation, and ultimate archiving, of their histories and heritage. A PhD thesis was another form of documentation which resulted out of that project. The Limpopo Heritage Resources Authority (LIHRA) which was established in 2004, built on the earlier archaeological surveys, rock art documentation and oral history programmes.

LIHRA continued research in the BMS area which included community participation, and the result was the declaration of the Malebogo-Boer War Battlefields as a Provincial Heritage Site in 2007 in accordance with the National Heritage Resources Act of 1999. The world-class rock art paintings of Makgabeng have been on the radar of SAHRA for declaration at national level, in which the ultimate goal would be a possible declaration of the sites at international level by UNESCO. Another initiative worth mentioning in the BMS area is the Malebogo-Boer War documentary which was funded by the National Heritage...
Council and implemented by the author of this paper between 2007 and 2008. The activities around this particular project, especially the interviews, ensured that local communities participated in documenting their histories and heritage to a point where the end product is archived.

All these initiatives of archaeological surveys, rock art research and oral history in the BMS area – in which communities were mostly engaged – were intended to uncover, document, and ultimately archive the stories, histories and heritage of that area. The communities were therefore made to participate in the archival and records systems of this country.

**Conclusions and recommendations**

This paper concludes by noting that community participation in national and archival system is essential so that the records in the archives could reflect and represent the South African society in its entirety, as compared to the previous records characterised by historically-induced gaps. The paper recommends that the present and future governments should continue on a transformational trajectory and channel more efforts and resources in ensuring that the stories, histories and heritage of the previously excluded and oppressed indigenous communities are well researched, well documented, and well archived into the mainstream.

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