

# Migrated archives: time for closure to turn the wheels of reconciliation and healing for Africa

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## Abstract

In a paper on migrated archives, Nathan Mnjama<sup>1</sup> puts forward several reasons as to why these archives are in the custody of our former colonisers. Infrastructural challenges, the lack of the development of archival services and security issues are some of the reasons highlighted. Consequently, these archives were not collected and preserved within colonies and were thus repatriated to the metropolitan countries for safe storage. The removal of these archives have created gaps in archival holdings and these archives need to be located, retrieved and brought home, so he argues. The author of this response proposes that we need to start afresh and forget about this genre of archives in view of the protracted issues involved and considering the archival service challenges that most archival institutions are facing. We are now talking about de-colonisation/refiguring or Africanisation of our archives because there is over-documentation of the colonial record in our repositories and these records are often biased or incorrect.

**Keywords:** Migrated archives, closure, repatriation, re-figuring, decolonisation

## 1. Background

The School of Social Sciences (SSS) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2019 initiated a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the University of Botswana (UB), Humanities and Social Sciences. At the inaugural event, three UB colleagues (senior staff and professors from library and information studies, sociology and gender) visited the SSS from 11 to 13 November 2019, and delivered seminars as part of 'SSS Talk Series'. Mnjama presented a paper titled *Migrated archives: the African experience*, and the author of this paper was the respondent. Mnjama's paper traced the background to the issues pertaining to migrated archives with regard to their origins and meaning. The paper concluded by highlighting the efforts made by various African governments to locate and copy records held in Western capitals. As the respondent, issues covered included the terminology on the use of the term 'migrated archives', an insight into the research on migrated archives by Mnjama and the need for recognition in this regard, why we need transformation in our archives and some proposals on the way forward with regard to this genre of archives. At this juncture, some clarification of terms as used in this paper will suffice.

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<sup>1</sup> The full paper is accessible via this link:

<http://alternation.ukzn.ac.za/Files/articles/special-editions/36/15-mnjama.pdf>

## 2. Key terms defined

Williams (2014:9) notes that definitions are designed to explain or describe the meaning of a word or phrase to help understand the concepts and their application and use. Consequently, definitions are significant for recordkeeping practitioners for purposes of ensuring communication with others, consistency of practice, and decision making in the discipline of archival studies. When we talk of migrated archives, these are archives that have been removed from the context of their creation and where ownership is disputed (Lowry 2019). In archival scholarship, these are referred to as fugitive archival material, archival claims, disputed archives, restituted archives, repatriated archives, expatriate archives, missing documents, and removed or displaced archives (Mnjama 2002; Garaba 2010; Society of American Archivists Dictionary of Archives Terminology 2021a, b). The lack of consensus on terminology points to the fact that the interplay between actors and those records is unique to particular cases, as reflected in their histories. To understand this category of archives, one has to contextualise them in terms of how they were created in the first place – largely due to war, looting and dispersal, and illegal trading. Ashie-Nikoi (2019) highlights this context by making reference to two manuscript collections housed at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City which were created in Ghana by two African Americans. Using these collections, Ashie-Nikoi (2019:143) shows how the interconnections between continental and diasporic Africans that played out in the independence era complicated the notions of cultural patrimony and rights of ownership that often arise during debates on repatriating cultural records. The Society of American Archivists (2019) defines repatriation as the return of cultural materials (particularly archival records) to the country or people who created them. As one authority on this subject noted (Kukubo 1991), this alienation of cultural property constitutes the largest single group of archival estrays. An stray is defined as a document not in the possession of the authorised custodian, especially government records in private hands (Society of American Archivists Word of the Week 2021). Whatever term one uses, the bottom line or common factor is that these archives are not where they are supposed to be, in their rightful custody, hence the call for their restitution.

## 3. The work of Mnjama on migrated archives

In his writings on migrated archives, Mnjama correctly notes that archival displacement, to which these migrated archives are a witness, is an unresolved injustice of colonialism (Mnjama & Lowry 2017; Mnjama 2020). The East and Southern Africa Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (ESARBICA), which is an affiliate of the International Council on Archives (ICA), has also passed resolutions on the need for these archives to be brought home<sup>2</sup>. This attests to the fact that the subject of migrated archives continues to receive much attention within the ESARBICA region. Mnjama deserves credit for highlighting this as he has written extensively on this and has presented papers about these archives, locally and internationally. He is an activist archivist (social justice campaigner for the archival profession) for the need for these archives to find a resting place. His passion on this topic dates back to the 1980s when he was actively involved in the retrieval of Kenya's migrated archives that were overseas (Mnjama 2006). This social justice crusade has its fair share of critics from an archival professional ethics point of view. Boles (2019), for instance, puts forward a number

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<sup>2</sup> There are quite a number of resolutions on migrated archives promulgated by ESARBICA starting from 1969, 1974, 1982, 2003, 2005, 2011, which further shows how problematic this issue has been (See Mnjama 2015).

of propositions in this regard, two of which will be highlighted here. Firstly, Boles (2019) argues that archivists cannot create a societal mirror; they cannot even define what that mirror might look like. Archivists are not major players in the arena of social justice, even if archival records sometimes play an important role in social justice causes (Boles 2019). Secondly, social justice is not a core archival value. Many organisations work for justice. People who see their mission as promoting justice should become deeply involved in an organisation that answers their calling rather than trying to make the archives the agent of their personal passion (Boles 2019).

Nonetheless, migrated archives have been and continue to be his life as he has more than 40 years' working on these records. This commitment explains his fight for justice in terms of their ownership, which is core to this category of records. From this perspective, he is also a human rights campaigner and this goes great lengths in demonstrating his endeavour to build a complete and inclusive archive. His works on migrated archives have made a telling contribution to the archival landscape in east and southern Africa and beyond Africa's borders. His latest chapter on migrated archives, co-written with James Lowry, titled *A proposal for action on African archives in Europe* in the book *Displaced Archives* not only speaks volumes of this advocacy campaign, but also signifies another addition to scholarship on this genre of archives. This work is being translated into French and a second volume of *Displaced Archives* is currently underway. Mnjama's contribution on this genre of archives needs to be acknowledged when one considers that the Global North is dominating the writings on this subject of archival displacement (Lowry 2019). If one looks at the composition of contributors in the displaced archives book, there are very few from the Global South; hence, Mnjama deserves special recognition in this regard (Lowry 2019). From this perspective, Africa's voice from a victim and an archival point of view needs to be heard to free ourselves from the dominant Eurocentric archival epistemology believed to produce 'legitimate' knowledge.

Mnjama's paper highlights the following seven categories or types of migrated archives (Mnjama 2019):

- i. Archives created by colonial powers in their home countries.
- ii. Archives of colonial administration created in colonies but transferred to metropolitan countries at the dawn of independence (this category is the focus of both Mnjama and the respondent).
- iii. Inter-territorial archives (records of the High Commissioner for Basutoland, Bechuanaland and Swaziland held in Cape Town but later transferred to Salisbury (Harare) in 1948).
- iv. Archives of regional colonial bodies which either collapsed during the colonial period or soon after independence, leaving those records in that particular country.
- v. Private papers of individuals and various organisations (missionary bodies, explorers, anthropologists, etc.).
- vi. Liberation movements.
- vii. Research scholars conducting research in Africa who do not deposit copies of their work with the national archives.

This author used Mnjama's work which covers these broad categories extensively in his doctorate, and salutes his work. Some brief insight will suffice here. The focus was on another category of migrated archives from a private domain perspective, namely, liberation struggle archives, and the respondent noted then (Garaba 2010) that the restitution of these archives was

an ongoing process, albeit a difficult one. It is ongoing in the sense that there is no time frame as to when this process would be complete. Recently, in 2018, it was in the news that South Africa returned Rhodesian Cabinet files and others state papers dating back to 1927 which Ian Douglas Smith took to South Africa following the collapse of his regime. He removed these migrated archives unlawfully from public offices and exported to South Africa towards independence in 1980 (Zimbabwe gets Rhodesian state papers back from South Africa 2018). Mnjama correctly notes that no government passes its records to a successor government. Here in South Africa, one of the leading South African archivists and former Nelson Mandela archivist, Verne Harris, blew the whistle on the destruction of apartheid records by the outgoing government in 1994, noting that they should have destroyed more (Harris 1999).

This destruction re-affirms the fact that outgoing governments are reluctant to pass on their records to successive governments and the Ian Smith regime in the then Southern Rhodesia transferred its records to apartheid South Africa when it lost power in 1980. These records were only returned to Zimbabwe in 2018. This repatriation of these records followed negotiations (bilateral agreements) between the two countries (Zimbabwe and South Africa), which also highlights how problematic this can be. This issue of disputed archival claims is thus a problem involving political interest and national pride (Garaba 2010:231), and their existence, notwithstanding their long history, continues to trouble archivists, historians and government officials (Lowry 2017:3). In addition, academics, scholars and researchers have also invested their minds, energy and time trying to find a solution for this migrated archives conundrum.

That said, in the case of the Rhodesian state papers, the Cabinet files were taken to South Africa by Smith when the Rhodesian Front had collapsed following Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, and were deposited as his personal documents at Rhodes University. The return of the documents is of interest to Zimbabwe as they form a section of Zimbabwe's history and will be of use to researchers and history scholars (Zimbabwe gets Rhodesian state papers back from South Africa 2018). The problematic aspect also pertains to negotiations between the new owners and old custodians of these records. In archival vernacular, we talk of de-accessioning of collections, which is defined as the process of removing material from the archives (Shapley 2008). This can be due to several reasons and, in the case of these cabinet files and other documents, they were in the wrong hands and had to be returned to the people about whom they speak. In most instances, these records are of a sensitive nature, which further accentuates the debate about migrated archives as they document supposed colonial crimes, conspiracies and cover-ups, especially for the victims. These records are all about cataloguing injustices and maltreatment, both of people and artefacts (Fitzgerald 2018). In short, migrated archives document human rights abuses. In Kenya, such records were used in court by the defence, and helped to bring a settlement through which the British government agreed to pay compensation to more than 5 000 Kenyans who had been abused and tortured in the 1950s (Anderson 2015).

Mnjama acknowledges the efforts made by some African countries such as Botswana, Kenya, Ghana and Zimbabwe to locate some of their records held outside their boundaries, but others are yet to initiate such programmes. Mnjama is talking about public records that document the relationship between the governed and governing. With regard to private records, South Africa, for example, as far as liberation struggle records are concerned, has successfully managed to repatriate these. Ngoepe and Netshakhuma (2018) suggest that the fact that the African National Congress (ANC) ran a proto-government in exile facilitated the repatriation, except for the fonds in Italy. The ANC archives at the University of Fort Hare (UFH), which is the official custodian of liberation struggle archives, have since been digitised by Africa Media

Online. The major challenge with the archives is metadata capturing, especially for the thousands of photographic material created in exile (Kirby 2019).

Mnjama's paper not only highlights the plight of these archives, but also the state of archival infrastructure within east and southern Africa. The joke goes that African countries forgot their archives in the euphoria of independence, which presently explains its poor state of archives, and the author subscribes to this view. For example, the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa (NARSSA) is severely under-resourced and faced with a number of challenges that are compromising its ability to sustain an archival service, and this extends to most archival institutions within ESARBICA (Thurston 2020; Chabikwa 2019; Pather 2016; Wamukoya 2015; Archival Platform 2014; Nengomasha 2013; Bhebhe, Masuku & Ngulube 2013; Hamilton 2011; Ngoepe 2011; Ngulube & Tafor 2006; Mnjama 2005). This archival underdevelopment has been used as justification for the safekeeping and retention of these African archives in Europe.

Archival material is rarely bought, but with these African archives in consideration, Mnjama notes that some archival institutions had to purchase their own country's heritage to fill the missing gaps in their country's history. One example is the files of Percy Yutar (state prosecutor at the Rivonia trial) in apartheid South Africa which were brought to South Africa through the intervention of the Oppenheimer family in 2009 (Ngoepe 2019:155). The argument is as follows: Is it worth going to all these lengths? Considering the archival service challenges that most archival institutions are facing, why do we want to have this missing record in our archival repository? It would appear that these migrated archives are so sacrosanct to our former colonisers because they document their imperial conquests which they take pride in. The author would suggest that it is time to take pride in our own history as told by Africans through orality – the Bambatha rebellion (1906), Chimurenga uprising (1896-97) and the Mau (1952-1960) uprising are pointed examples of our struggle against colonial subjugation. UNESCO declared 2019 the year of indigenous languages and, history capturing using our own languages should be a step towards addressing this. A decolonised university in Africa should put African languages at the centre of its teaching and learning project (Mbembe 2015). The voice of the previously marginalised or disadvantaged needs to be heard, and Bhebhe and Ngoepe (2020:155) correctly note that having community-driven archives led by people in communities and not ruling party government bureaucrats spearheading oral history collections is one solution to circumventing this elitism which reflects the views of those governing.

#### **4. The transformation/refiguring of archives**

We need to work closely with the local people so that they can exercise greater control over records and decide whose voice is in the archives. Community archives could be the solution to promoting access in our archives. Community archives, as the term suggests, exist outside mainstream archives and are defined as documentation of a group of people that share common interests, and social, cultural and historical heritage, usually created by members of the group being documented and maintained outside of traditional archives (Society of American Archivists Dictionary of Archives Terminology 2021c). This paradigm shift from an archival acquisition perspective or collective drive will be in consonant with the re-purposing/decolonisation/refiguring or Africanisation of our archives drive. Agenda 2063 talks about cultural renaissance and charts the way forward for Africa. It was adopted to mark 50 years of the African Union's (AU) existence and develop the continent into a global powerhouse in the coming five decades. At the 2019 UKZN Co-Hosts Pan African Conference on Restoring

African Dignity through African Ideas, former Ghanaian President, John Mahama had this to say:

Our history did not begin with colonisation. It did not even begin with the history of the infamous slave trade which lasted for over 400 years. Africa's history has a glorious stance as the cradle of mankind (Mahama 2019).

The author agrees with this view and would argue that from an Afro-centric/post-nationalistic point of view, we need to start afresh, but his response to the correct solution is not prescriptive as this is also contested. Regardless of one's stance in this burning issue, the bottom line is that there is too much white privilege in our archival institutions. In *The wretched of the earth*, Fanon (2004) urges Africa to be innovative and be pioneers in our efforts to take humanity forward. In other words, we need to be masters of our own destiny. From this perspective, decolonisation means making a new start and developing a new way of thinking (Fanon 2004). Decolonisation is about re-humanising the world by completely dismantling colonial legacies (Maldonado-Torres 2016) and therefore we need to dismantle white supremacy in our archives. From an archival point of view, this means interrogating the archive as to whose voice is in there and the language used to capture the record, as this needs to reflect what is obtaining presently – this is about re-contextualising the records and institutions created by our colonisers. There is over-documentation of the colonial records in our repositories and these records are often biased or incorrect, and regularly cast indigenous peoples “as passive bystanders” of history rather than human beings with agency (Fraser & Todd 2016:37 as cited in Jones & McRory 2017).

Jordanova (2000:187) aptly notes that refiguring compels practitioners to explain the means by which materials were originally produced and have come into the archives. Refiguring refers to the process of questioning the privileged place of archives in historical practice, opening them up to “critical inspection” and articulating their contexts (Booth 2006:91). In consequence, cultivating a post-colonial archival tradition means transforming or repurposing the archive so that the broad spectrum of society is captured for the benefit of posterity (Garaba 2016). In so doing, the following questions should guide the interrogation or inquiry (Baker 2015):

- Who were the creators of the records?
- What were their intentions, both tacit and explicit?
- What did they see?
- What did they not see?
- Did they place everything relevant into the record?

Bradford (2017:9) explains that decolonising archives consists of two processes. Firstly, there should be more emphasis on the indigenisation of the archives, which involves incorporating the voices of indigenous people. Thereafter, the focus should be on (re)describing the records and making the archival space more accessible to indigenous researchers. We need to ask ourselves whether the knowledge and information in the archives are empowering or disempowering us as individuals and communities. Access to the archives remain a concern. The author argues that the language in which that history was captured drives users away. For a long time, the image of archives has been that it is serving an elite class, the privileged is still pervasive, and this is what needs to be transformed. Commenting on access to archives, Ngoepe (2017) quoted Conradie (2012) who points out that users of archives in South Africa are an old boys club consisting mainly of male Afrikaanser genealogical researchers. Ngoepe (2017) in his inaugural lecture at UNISA highlighted the need for a policy on inter-repository repatriation

of archives to the communities in which they were created. Without this policy, as Ngoepe (2017) notes, most repositories in South Africa will be white elephants without archival holdings. Ngoepe (2017) also states that there is a need for oral history to redress these gaps. This is so because archival holdings in South African archives repositories do not reflect the diversity of the nation, but mostly the interests of those who were previously in power. Marschall (2019) calls for a rethinking of South Africa's national heritage policy in the wake of the #RhodesMustFall campaign, which calls for this "white heritage" to be dismantled. As a result, the users of such archives are mostly the beneficiaries of apartheid and colonial governments.

## 5. The way forward

Mnjama advocates for more empirical research on these archives and he correctly highlights the following four areas in this regard. However, the author suggests that we now need closure on these displaced archives. As noted by Mnjama, for some countries, the restitution is yet to happen.

- i. The 1983 Vienna Convention on Succession of States in Respect of State Property, Archives and Debts was a legal instrument designed to settle this problematic issue, but the convention made it clear that newly independent states should not expect to obtain records of the colonising power. These records raise emotional issues as this evokes expressions of memory that is anthropomorphised (Fitzgerald 2018). The author agrees with Prof. Mnjama that more empirical research needs to be done on what impact the removal of archives to the West has had on research in the Southern African region.
- ii. These records raise ethical issues on collecting practices of archival institutions and our work generally as archivists. These archives were created in a complicated political landscape where history was controlled by those in power and not by the people. The question continues as Mnjama notes how the voices of the minority who are victims during the creation of the record can be heard. The second volume which Mnjama is planning to write might probably take care of this.
- iii. Infrastructural challenges. The author questions the logic of adding these fonds (migrated archives) to our archival holdings when we cannot take care of what we currently have. Is this acquisition for collection's sake considering that maintaining an archival service has proven to be a daunting task for most institutions within the ESARBICA region? There are teething preservation issues, as the infrastructure is either run down (Zimbabwe and South Africa) or experiences chronic funding challenges. What do we intend to get out of this restitution – repatriation compensation? If so, from whom?
- iv. Use and access – who is going to use these archives? Mnjama talks about microfilming and digitisation, but these types of access are for the elitist researchers and not for the ordinary people. What do usage metrics say on this from the survey that Mnjama undertook with the directors of archival institutions? Who are making these inquiries or is this political grandstanding? The demographics are crucial. This brings us to the issue of shared heritage through optimisation of digitisation and microfilm as technical opportunities to negotiate conflict between the metropole and its former subjects, as suggested by Mnjama and Lowry (2017). Sharing the heritage is a novel idea, but is problematic as archival researchers always want to have a feel of the original manuscript, and not surrogates. The onset of the covid-19 pandemic, with its emphasis on online access, presented a huge paradigm shift in terms of access. This might be the

route, but only time will tell. More importantly, the issue of **TRUST** needs to be factored in – how do we know that what our colonial powers are sharing with us is the correct record? This digitisation also raises intellectual property, sovereignty and governance issues (Chamelot, Hiribarren & Rodet 2020:101), but covid-19 now urgently calls for a reconsidering of physical access to archives.

- v. Archives follow the flag. This reflects the power of archives as these are footsteps of human civilisation – transparency, accountability and governance issues should provide the roadmap as to which Africa we want to build for future generations. Successive African governments should let archives speak for the people, regardless of how uncomfortable that truth might be to avoid these gaps.

## 6. Conclusion

The subject of migrated archives is an emotional issue. Ownership wrangles and the evidence captured in these records from a human rights point of view are some of the burning issues one encounters when dealing with these records. Efforts made by African archival institutions to reclaim this archival heritage are applauded, but the time is now for closure on these archives. We need transformation in the archives in line with Africa's agenda 2063 so that archives can reflect the history of Africans as told by Africans. Resources being channelled to bring these archives back home need to be re-prioritised so that our archives have the voices of our own people. Currently, our archives are overloaded with colonial records and we need to start empowering our users to make contributions to their own archival heritage, thereby promoting identity, value, preservation, access and use. Once this is in place, archives will be critical in supporting transparency, accountability and governance issues for the roadmap that Africa wants to build for the future.

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