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# Digitising the oral history collection at Botswana National Archives and Records Services: problems and prospects

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## Abstract

*The advent of new technologies has ushered in changes in the way oral histories have been collected and managed. Oral history recordings are no longer done with only the analogue recording equipment, but are also nowadays done with digital recording equipment. Although digital audio recording equipment offer higher quality recording, their suitability for long-term preservation has not yet been established; they require some form of training; and are generally expensive. In its endeavor to achieve its mandate of preserving the nation's documentary heritage, the Botswana National Archives and Records Services (BNARS) has been collecting and managing oral histories over the years since 1982. This has been done using the analogue recording equipment and lately the BNARS has been experiencing challenges as the analogue recording equipment is becoming obsolete. This paper seeks to discuss the problems and prospects of digitized oral history collections at BNARS through literature review and personal observation.*

**Keywords:** Digitisation, Oral History, Botswana National Archives and Records Services, preservation, digital audio recording equipment

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## 1 Introduction

This article the challenges and future prospects faced by BNARS as an Archival institution in a developing country (Botswana), looking into the transition from analogue to digital oral history recordings. Not only have new technologies changed the way oral history is being collected by bringing digital equipment, it also means that oral history should be preserved and made accessible in a digital environment. All these bring challenges, especially for developing countries with their limited resources and shortage of expertise to manage digital archives. It can be argued that BNARS is at the cross-roads in deciding whether to go digital with respect to its oral history programme.

Oral history can be defined as the systematic way of collecting oral testimonies from people passed from one generation to another by word of mouth through interviews. Ritchie (2000) argues that the dynamic and creative nature of oral history makes it difficult to define it with a single definition. The terms oral history and oral traditions have been used interchangeably in some literature. Other scholars differentiate them while others take them as having the same meaning but the difference between them is insignificant as they both take an oral form. The information collected for this paper was mainly through literature review and personal observation by the author. For purposes of this paper, the term oral history will be used.

## 2 Background to Botswana National Archives and Records Services (BNARS)

BNARS was established in 1967 while the archives legislation was passed by an Act of Parliament in 1978. The National Archives Act of 1978 gave BNARS the mandate to manage

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the preservation, custody and control of public archives of Botswana. The mandate of the Department was expanded in 1992 by Circular No 4 of 1992, issued by the Permanent Secretary to the President to cover the management of records for the entire life cycle and the consequent amendment of the National Archives and Records Services Act in 2007. BNARS is a government Department in Botswana and falls under the Ministry of Youth Sport and Culture. The majority of the collections at BNARS are in paper format. As part of its mandate to collect and preserve the nation's documentary heritage, BNARS has been collecting and managing oral histories over the years since 1982. The oral history collection currently at BNARS covers the history of different ethnic groups in Botswana, certain individuals, their villages as well as the histories told by World War II veterans.

### **3 Importance of oral history to the archival institution and the role of the archivist**

Before discussing digitisation of oral history at an archival institution, it is important to discuss why the archivist has to conduct oral history interviews in the first place. The contention of this paper is that archivists should actively be engaged in conducting oral history interviews, especially in an African country like Botswana where histories were not documented before the arrival of the colonialists. Traditionally, histories were passed from generation to generation through word of mouth among Batswana. Ritchie (2003:13) acknowledges the importance of oral history in this kind of situation when he points out that the "inadequacy of written documents from previous regimes and colonial powers has accelerated the new-and even demand- for oral history". Therefore, archivists should not depend on other professions such as historians or sociologists to collect oral histories as the goal of collecting oral histories by each of them differ according their interests. This has been rightly captured by Kgabi (1986:436) when she stated that "it's only at the archives where most people expect to find information of a national character".

There is a general believe by some scholars that archivists should not concern themselves with conducting oral history interviews as they already have too much work load. According to Moss (1988) archivists face the danger of acting against archival principles of being neutral. He postulates that in conducting oral histories, archivists put themselves in unfamiliar and undesirable positions which may jeopardize their preferred status of neutrality in record content. Tuchman (1996) quoted by Ritchie (2003) is adamant that archivists should not concern themselves with conducting oral history. She states that "oral history produces a "trivia of appalling proportions with all sorts of people being invited merely to open their mouths and ramble effortlessly and endlessly into a tape recorder".

However, there are scholars who are convinced that conducting oral history is the job of an archivist and they should be actively involved in conducting oral history interviews. According to Kgabi (1986), archivists are not any way creating information when conducting oral history interviews, but they are simply assembling information or a sequence of events that have already existed as they are. Moss (1988) also argues that the collection of oral history is inescapable and goes on to state that the archivist who seeks to avoid it will sooner or later have to deal with it.

### **4 Oral history in Botswana**

Oral history in Botswana has been collected on a national scale by BNARS, the Botswana National Museum and Radio Botswana. According to Kgabi (1986), before colonialism Batswana could not read and write and the accounts of their social activities were in the memory of people and this justifies the collection of oral history so that what was not

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documented could be captured. The need to capture Botswana's histories was underscored by the first president of Botswana, Sir Seretse Khama (1970) in his speech delivered at the Graduation Ceremony at Swaziland, who believed that the advent of colonial rule weakened Botswana's social systems and cultural activities through the introduction of civilization influences. He said;

It should be our intension to try to retrieve what we can of our past. We should write our own history books to prove that we did have a past, and that it was just as worth writing and learning about as any other. We must do this for the simple reason that a nation without a past is a lost nation, and person without a past is a people without a soul.

Therefore oral history needs to be collected in Botswana to augment information that has been already documented by the colonial government and fill the existing gaps in the nation's history. BNARS has been engaged in the collection of oral histories since 1982. According to Kgabi (1986), this was started after a decision to collect oral histories to supplement written sources at the National Archives was taken by the Archives Advisory Council. Apart from oral histories conducted by archivists, BNARS has in its custody oral histories collection that have been conducted by other institutions like Radio Botswana and legal deposits made by researchers.

#### *4.1 Digital oral history*

Nowadays oral history recordings are increasingly done with digital recording equipment as opposed to analogue recording equipment. Examples of digital recording equipment include digital audio recording equipment which brings a variety of challenges to the archivist involved with conducting oral history for long-term preservation in archives repositories. Analogue recording equipment for oral history are increasingly becoming obsolete as companies which manufacture them are moving to digital recording equipment. Ritchie (2003) has predicted that the development of digital electronic equipment will eventually replace magnetic tapes as tape recorders become old fashioned.

Although digital audio recording equipment is known to offer higher quality recordings, their suitability for long-term preservation has not been yet established. Apart from that, they require some form of training to operate and are generally expensive. These are some of the problems; BNARS will face in collecting digital oral histories. Despite these problems BNARS has the moral and legal obligation to ensure that the nation's memory is captured and preserved for future generations and research purposes.

New technologies have signaled changes in the way archives and libraries collect preserve and make accessible their oral history collections. According to Ritchie (2003), archivists at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks were the first to experiment with the storage of oral history interviews on compact discs. The National Library of Australia is one of the institutions which have been engaged in archiving digital oral history collections. According to Webb (1997), the Library adopted the digital oral history equipment after recognition of the diminishing commercial support for analogue tapes and related equipment. In Botswana, institutions which have been collecting oral histories in the country like the Botswana National Museum and Radio Botswana have already moved from collecting oral history with analogue recording equipment to digital recording equipment. According to Webb (1997), a detailed investigation of technical options for digitising the oral history collection took the National Library of Australia about 2 years and this involved consultation with other institutions, suppliers, users and even evaluation of in-house options.

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#### *4.1.1 Challenges offered by digitisation of oral history*

Although digital audio recording equipment offer higher quality recording, the new technology doesn't come without problems. As BNARS's aim of conducting oral history is to preserve it for longer periods, the problem here is the unsuitability of digital audio recording equipment for long-term preservation. The other problem is that archivists needs some form of training and skills to operate digital audio recording equipment. Apart from that it has been realized that digital audio recording equipment is generally expensive, which becomes a challenge for an archival institution like BNARS in a developing country. This dilemma has been recognized by Ritchie (2003:166) as he says:

The development of digital electronic recordings confronted oral historians with a difficult choice: digital recorders provided superior sound quality, permitted copying without loss of clarity, and facilitated digital editing and placing interviews on the World Wide Web. But archivists had serious concerns about long term preservation of digital audio tape and compact disks.

For the purpose of this paper, digital preservation; resource constraints; inadequate skilled personnel; technological obsolescence and ethical issues are discussed as some of the problems BNARS will face in using digital audio recording equipment to conduct oral history.

##### *4.1.1.1 Digital preservation*

According to Kalusopa (2008), the increasing creation of electronic records in Botswana government Departments has raised challenges of preservation of digital heritage materials for archivists and librarians. The importance of conducting oral history interviews at the BNARS cannot be overemphasised, though the suitability of digital audio recording equipment for long-term preservation of oral history recordings is still yet to be established. Ritchie (2003) advises that the new technology should be approached with vigilance with respect to oral history archives until its usefulness for long-term preservation has been assessed. Therefore, as an archival institution with the mandate of preserving information for longer periods, adopting digital technologies may not be an easy option for BNARS. Digital preservation is also an expensive undertaking as McIlwaine, Comment, Wolf *et al* (2002) argue that preservation of digital information is unquestionably expensive and requires highly skilled staff and equipment.

##### *4.1.1.2 Technological obsolescence*

Since digital recording equipment are based on the computer for access, digitising the oral history collections faces problems of technological obsolescence as new versions of hardware and software are regularly adopted. Anderson (nd) sees it as ironic that while we should be celebrating the benefits brought about by digital technology, we are instead faced with threats of innovation, longevity and accessibility. BNARS will have to put measures in place to ensure that digital information is accessible despite changes in technology over the years. McIlwaine *et al* (2002) also note that the character of the IT industry is that it doesn't support long term access as the dynamic market forces work against standardization.

##### *4.1.1.3 Resource constraints*

Moss (1988) postulates that active collection of oral histories puts a great strain on archival resources and warns that inadequate resources produce poor results. Like most archival

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institutions in Africa, BNARS is faced with a problem of inadequate funds to enable it to effectively run its programmes and hence will face challenges in any digitization projects to be taken as McIlwaine *et al* (2002) have noted that many libraries and archives in developing countries tend to be behind the digital technology curve because of resource constraints. To effectively collect and manage digital oral histories, BNARS should have enough funds to buy the necessary equipment, employ more staff and train them. According to Campbell (1998:39), “No matter how great the promise for the new information environment, it must be bought at some price to present research and service”. Adopting digital technology to conduct and manage oral histories, BNARS would have to explore other ways of attracting funding of its oral history programme.

#### *4.1.1.4 Inadequate skilled personnel*

Conducting oral history is a technical undertaking especially in the digital environment and therefore needs archivists to have special skills and expertise to effectively undertake it. According to McIlwaine *et al* (2002), preservation of digital information undoubtedly requires highly skilled technical staff. BNARS has been experiencing high staff turnover and professionally trained staff leave for greener pastures soon after receiving training. According to Moathodi and Ramokate (2009), BNARS is still faced with lack of skilled personnel. They point out that since 2000, the Department has had 2-4 trained professionals at any given time and this number proved not capable of dealing with all archives and records management functions of the Department.

#### *4.1.1.5 Ethical issues*

Ethical issues in the oral history field arise as digital oral histories may be placed on the internet. Ethical issues include protection from hackers; intellectual property rights; and archival custody. Archivists should ensure that oral history interview placed on the internet is protected from those who may manipulate it to suit their own needs. This places a responsibility on the archivists to put appropriate measures to guarantee that information remains reliable and authentic as it was at the time it was collected. As information will be accessed online, BNARS may lose custody of the oral history collection. Issues of copyright are also a concern as online information may be reproduced without due regard for copyright issues. To deal with the issue of copyright, the University of Alaska at Fairbanks was hesitant to post oral history interviews online before consulting interviewees directly according to Ritchie (2003).

#### *4.1.2 Prospects of digital oral history*

Despite all the problems identified which may be experienced when digitising the oral history, digital technology also has the good side. The benefits brought by the new technologies are many and varied and as such, BNARS should seize the opportunity and take advantage of the new technology. BNARS could experience increased access to its oral history collection once the digital information is made accessible online, gain new partnerships and staff would have to acquire new skills to effectively manage oral histories under the digital environment.

##### *4.1.2.1 Increased access*

Oral history interviews conducted with digital equipment will also have to be made accessible in the digital environment. This means more users will remotely have access to

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oral histories in BNARS custody. As Anderson (nd) puts it, the internet has inspired archives, universities and libraries to position themselves as distributors rather than simply preservers of information. As the ultimate aim of preserving archives is to make them accessible for as long as it is possible, by collecting oral histories under the digital environment, BNARS will realize an increased access to the nation's history. According to Ritchie (2003), the new digital technology has increased access to collections, especially of Archives which do not have systematically transcribed interviews. BNARS therefore should act quickly to reap the benefits brought by this digital technology. According to McIlwaine *et al* (2002), the crucial management decision is therefore less about the "when" or the "whether" to begin, rather it is a question of whether an institution can afford to ignore the opportunity to reach a wider audience afforded by the technology to improve access and the preservation of cultural and scholarly resources.

#### *4.1.2.2 Skill acquisition and development*

The adoption of digital equipment for the oral history programme at BNARS requires archivists to acquire special knowledge and skills to operate such equipment. According to Campbell (1998), harnessing technology, understanding the users, learning new systems of management and developing new organizational models requires not only best efforts, but some new skills as well. As such, BNARS archivists stand to benefit from skill acquisition in working with digital equipment in the collection and management of oral histories.

#### *4.1.2.3 Increased partners*

It will be crucial for BNARS to collaborate and partner with other institutions with the same goals of making digital collections available for access. Such partnerships have been seen as working in other countries like the State of Colorado in the United States of America. According to Garrison (2001), the Colorado's Archives, historical societies, libraries and museums worked together in what is called the Colorado Digitization Project which began in 1998 with the aim of increasing user access to the special collections, including oral histories held by these institutions. As it has been stated above, to collect, preserve and make accessible digital information may put a strain on BNARS resources, and to overhaul that, BNARS would have to identify and establish partnerships with strategic partners in order to realise its objectives and mandate.

## **5 Conclusion**

The collection of oral histories with digital recording equipment brings both the good and the bad. The new digital recordings bring benefits to archival institutions like BNARS in increasing access to the nation's documentary heritage and staff skill development but at the same breath, the new technologies bring problems such as lack of adequate resources to manage digital recordings. Despite all these, BNARS should go with the rest of the world and adopt the new technologies used to collect and preserve oral histories. As Ritchie (2003) puts it, oral history archivists cannot afford to allow technological problems to tie their hands and make them quit the enterprise any more than they can go about blindly ignoring the problems. Therefore, BNARS faces the danger of losing out on gaining the benefits brought by the new technological advances in the collection of oral history and it is high time the Department adopts the new technologies.

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