

Chapter 16

Whose Truth Is True? The Use of Archival Principles to Authenticate Oral History

Mpho Ngoepe

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6241-161X>

University of South Africa, South Africa

ABSTRACT

African societies use memory to store valuable historical information. This memory is passed from generation to generation through oral history. This method uses oral testimony, oral tradition, and, to some extent, archival sources for evidence. This memory is in danger of being obliterated as the historical truth is not directly accessible, or, in some instances, the truth can be distorted to suit the griot. While traditional archival principles such as archival diplomatics are used to authenticate records, oral history is often characterised by deliberate distortion of facts. This chapter explores the use of archival principles to authenticate oral history. It was established that some elements of archival principles can be used to authenticate oral history. Written records and oral history can complement each other to provide the 'whole truth'. It is concluded that oral history fits the description of a record. The griot is no different from any medium of a record and is as reliable as any other medium.

INTRODUCTION

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1: 1-4)

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A number of scholars and commentators in eastern and southern Africa, as observed by Tough (2011) have articulated severe criticisms of the resultant colonial archives, and many of the critics have advocated oral history programmes to fill the perceived gaps. Indeed, most commentators in South Africa in particular remain angered or at least disoriented by an exclusionary past and even more so by the seemingly bleak future for the inclusive archives that can cater for all of the rainbow nation as the country is known. This is so because the archival system in South Africa is based on the premises set by Western civilization which at times can limit the ability to deal with certain realities. Criticism of the Western way of archiving relates to the fact that such a system caters only for the elite and those who are in power. This has been the case in South Africa with the archival holdings reflecting colonial and apartheid realities. Despite the dawn of democracy, the archival scene in South Africa is still mainly the Western-dominated global mainstream. This is true to the assertion of the towering archival theorist, Ketelaar (1992) that “the cruel paradox in many revolutions is that what is left after the revolution resembles the past” (p. 5). Perhaps, put differently by Nadine Gordimer in her award-winning novel ‘July’s People, that ‘in the interregnum, old habits perpetuate and entrench themselves in the so called new order’. Even when assigned the mandate to position archives to play an important role in redress, transformation and knowledge production through oral history that is relevant to the ordinary people, the archival situation still resembles apartheid in South Africa. Documentation of history of marginalized communities is almost non-existent and in cases where it does exist, it has many inaccuracies as it is recorded in a problematic way (Ngoepe, 2019). In a dialogue with Sello Hatang, and Verne Harris argues that even when presented with a powerful opportunity to ‘transform, refigure and re-imagine archives’, the practice in South Africa is still shaped and sharpened by the Western foundation (Harris & Hatang, 2000).

One way of transforming archival holdings is through conducting oral history, which is an important part of recreation and rethinking of the past, especially to those who had never had an opportunity in the past (Hatang, 2000). Oral history is one of the ways to integrate indigenous culture into the Western dominant archival discourse in Africa. However, in public archives, especially in South Africa, oral history is often seen as of secondary importance to records and may even be seen as a factor working against the practices of good record-keeping (Archival Platform, 2015). Many people consider truth only to be in recorded form while forgetting that the other way of indirectly accessing the past is through oral history. In both cases of oral history and records, what is regarded as truth entirely depends on the trust of the source. Duranti (2017) suggests that whose truth we are dealing with requires the use of traditional archival principles, concepts and methods, collaborate with technology experts especially when dealing with digital records. While traditional archival principles such as archival diplomatics are used to authenticate records, oral history is often characterised by deliberate distortion of facts emanating from the narrator or even those who do not agree with the narratives of the griot. In oral history, there are many small stories that feed the big stories, and some stories that lead nowhere, vanishing into the sands. These stories are told and retold thereby becoming fluid. It is sometimes difficult to authenticate such oral histories. This chapter explores the authentication of oral history using archival principles or concepts.

The Western way of archiving does not address the relationship between oral culture and written records. This is despite Tough’s (2011) contention that Western archive is itself largely the product of a process of turning oral communications into written records. The point is also emphasized by Yeo (2019) when arguing that written records came into being as an attempt to overcome limitations of human memory. For example, in producing minutes of the meeting, oral deliberations are made until consensus is reached which results in recorded resolutions in the form of minutes. In other words, as Turner (2012) would attest, new information emerges orally before emerging in other formats, for

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