

AUGMENTING CONVENTIONAL SOURCES WITH ALTERNATIVE SOURCES IN RESEARCH: AN ANALYSIS OF HISTORICAL DISSERTATIONS AND THESES FROM UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

TLOU SETUMU

Robben Island Museum
Nelson Mandela Gateway Building
Cape Town, South Africa
TlouS@robben-island.org.za

MPHO NGOEPE

Department of Information Science
University of South Africa
Pretoria, South Africa
ngoepms@unisa.ac.za

ABSTRACT

In most historical research works, conventional sources are used. In most cases these are primary sources (eg, professionally obtained archaeological material, rock art, archival records and oral evidence) and original documents (eg, newspapers, reports and diaries), as well as secondary sources (eg, books, journal articles, theses, etc). There is consensus among historical scholars that alternative sources, such as old objects, and artefacts (eg, machinery, wagons, epitaphs, etc), are not always used adequately in research as compared to conventional sources. Researchers point out that rich sources, including alternative sources, enhance the quality of the research outcome. This study investigated the use of alternative sources by master's and doctoral scholars in historical research at public universities in South Africa in order to compare the use thereof with the use of conventional sources. The study used a non-reactive research method, that is, content analysis of 93 selected master's and doctoral historical research works from public universities in South Africa, to investigate the extent to which conventional sources are used at the expense of alternative sources. The study findings revealed that historical researchers preferred using conventional sources to alternative sources, which were used in only four theses. The study concluded that the use of alternative sources can enrich historical research works as well as augmenting conventional sources. A further study to

investigate why researchers do not use alternative sources is recommended. In addition to historical research, the study model can be extended to fields of study such as Sociology, Anthropology and Archaeology.

KEYWORDS

conventional sources, alternative sources, primary sources, secondary sources, historical research, records

1 INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the crucial role of primary sources in research, especially with regard to historical research, by authors such as Brundage (2013), Barber and Peniston-Bird (2013), Harvey (2013) and Kaye (1995) to name just a few. In most historical research works, conventional sources are used to give coherence to the events. In most cases, these are primary sources (eg, professionally obtained archaeological material, rock art, archival records and oral evidence) and original documents (eg, newspapers, reports and diaries), as well as secondary sources, such as books, journal articles and theses (Leedy & Ormrod 2010:108). Although written records tend to predominate as the source of material in historical research, Brundage (2013:19) recommends that, in research relating to ancient and medieval times, scholars should rely heavily on alternative sources. Alternative sources are materials of importance to historical research, such as artefacts, weapons, coins, machinery, tombstone epitaphs, vehicles, buildings, household utensils, cathedrals, statues and film cast (Brundage 2013:19). However, whereas history depends on the tangible remains of the past for source material, alternative sources tend to be neglected by historical researchers. Any remnant of the past can serve as a primary information source for a historical researcher. Even though there is no regulated and systematic way of keeping historical objects except in museums (Yilmaz 2014:3402), alternative sources are an important key to unlocking the everyday lives of people who lived in the past. The importance of using alternative sources was demonstrated in a study by Yilmaz (2014:3402) when investigating the history of the City of Kordon, which was mostly obliterated. In that study, the remnant of the city was used as a source of information. Sources are the raw material of history, but where the written word as the principal source is insufficient, historians need to recognise the value of sources beyond text (Barber & Peniston-Bird 2013:1). These sources, found in day-to-day life, can help historians to develop new interpretations of and knowledge about the past.

Historical sources are divided into two major categories, namely, primary and secondary sources. Kaye (1995:13) further proposes the following ways of classifying primary and secondary information sources by format, status and location:

- **Format**
 - oral versus documentary;
 - textual versus audio-visual;
 - paper-based versus electronic.
- **Status**
 - personal versus impersonal;
 - formal versus informal;
 - published (open) versus unpublished (confidential).
- **Location**
 - internal versus external.

Koeller (2005) mentions three ways to use a source, namely, as a collection of facts; as a source of background material; and as an interpretation. All these sources provide a rich source of information to researchers, yet, as Mix (2012:9) observes, alternative sources are often overlooked by historical researchers. Even authors such as Chen (2009:122) and Kaye (1995:13) admit that there is an increasing preference for traditional sources by historical scholars to the detriment of alternative sources. As Kaye (1995:14) puts it, the results of numerous research studies show quite clearly that most seekers of information prefer traditional sources over alternative sources. Traditional and library sources are preferred because it is easier to find and access them than alternative sources (Iuliano 2012:7; Korobili, Tilikidou & Delistavrou 2006:92).

Even though traditional sources are preferred, there are areas and subjects with minimal and scant records with which to conduct adequate historical research and reconstruct the past. In such cases, conventional sources alone are inadequate in the reconstruction of the past. For example, the past of most black communities in South Africa (and Africa in general) is an area in which records, especially written ones, are scant, therefore making it difficult to cover and capture the past stories and experiences of such communities comprehensively. Most of the pre-colonial societies, such as those in Africa, did not keep written records before the arrival of the Europeans. For example, in South Africa, the oldest paper-based record in the holdings of the archives repository is a resolution created on board Jan van Riebeeck's ship, the *Dromedaris*, dated 30 December 1651; thus, it was written a few months before its arrival at the Cape on 6 April 1652 (Verster 2007:19). Therefore, the past of many communities cannot be reconstructed comprehensively with the use of only conventional sources, which are mostly written. For example, in his historical exposition of African Independent Churches in South Africa, Lukhaimane (1982, 1991) laments the lack of primary sources to support his studies. In these areas with minimal records, alternative sources (eg, old objects) and artefacts (eg, implements, machinery, vehicles, wagons, buildings, utensils and clothing) can play a pivotal role in enriching research works. Furthermore, tombstone epitaphs

can be useful as alternative sources of information, especially in tracing the origins of people both temporally and spatially.

Utilising content analysis of historical master's and doctoral theses from selected public universities in South Africa, this study sought to investigate the use of alternative sources to supplement conventional sources in order to enrich research, especially in areas and subjects where few records are available to yield information. The study recommends ways of standardising the use of alternative sources in research works. It is hoped that the study will stimulate further research in the area of alternative sources and encourage the utilisation of those sources.

2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Alternative sources constitute an extremely rich pool of materials, yet they remain largely underutilised. Harvey (2013:16) argues that a mass of data that would be considered primary sources for histories is either overlooked or sidelined as most historians do not consider it to be proper raw material. Even in areas where alternative sources could have been used in historical research, these sources are not consulted. Harvey (2013:16) notes the importance of recognising these historical objects, whether lodged in museums, galleries and archaeological archives or just left in the open field. Such objects are dynamic for historical researchers as generations leave their traces through objects. In South Africa, very few attempts have been made so far to study extensively the state of the use of alternative sources by scholars and their impact or influence on academic research. Therefore, it is relevant to find out the extent to which researchers are making use of alternative sources in South Africa. Fullerton (2011:438) advises historical scholars to become more familiar with alternative sources in order to make an impact on their research outputs. As a result, secondary sources should be used, but always more sparingly than primary ones.

3 PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to investigate the importance of using alternative sources to supplement conventional sources in order to enrich research, especially in areas and subjects where few records are available to yield information. The specific objectives were to:

- identify the types of sources used in historical research at public universities in South Africa;
- explore the extent to which alternative sources are used in historical research at public universities in South Africa;

- suggest ways and means for the effective use of alternative sources, including their standardisation.

4 SCOPE AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used content analysis, which is a non-reactive research method because as the creator of the content, it does not know whether anyone will analyse it (Babbie & Mouton 2001:383). Content analysis is a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a particular body of material for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes or bias (Leedy & Ormrod 2010:144). The method is unobtrusive, as its focus is on the products of human activity and not on the humans themselves. This means that there is no need for the experimenter or interactional investigator to control other similar effects arising from the influences of researchers and human subjects on each other (Beck & Manuel 2008:167). Furthermore, content analysis data sources pre-exist in the study and they are usually readily accessible as was the case with the current study. This is data that has been generated for purposes other than those for which the researcher is using them (Singleton & Straits 2010:11). Available data research often avoids reactive measurement error because the data is used without the knowledge or participation of those who produced it (Neuman 2006:44). Furthermore, there is no influence from the researcher who analyses the content. Prominent among such data sources would be written reports, books, articles, web pages, photographs, newsletters, and so on.

In the present study, data was extracted from 12 public universities in South Africa which had an online thesis and dissertation database, namely: Durban University of Technology (DUT); Rhodes University (RU); University of Cape Town (UCT); University of the Free State (UFS); University of Johannesburg (UJ); University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN); University of South Africa (Unisa); University of North-West (UNW); University of Pretoria (UP); University of Stellenbosch (SU); University of the Western Cape (UWC); and University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). Public universities which did not have an online thesis and dissertation database were excluded from the study. Equally beyond the scope of the current study were private universities in South Africa, as well as theses written in languages other than English. Theses and dissertations were also selected from the Humanities study fields in which the focus of the study on alternative sources was relevant. Theses and dissertations published between 2000 and 2012 were selected purposively from different faculties, departments and schools of the institutions, such as: History; Historical Studies; Historical and Heritage Studies; Anthropology and Archaeology; Social Sciences and Humanities; Archaeology and Environmental Studies; Political Studies; Heritage Studies; Extension Education and Rural Sociology; Conservation Economics; Dogmatics; Law; Basic Sciences; Music; Musicology; Philosophy, Arts Studies and Anthropology; Missiology; Anthropology; Sociology; Environmental Studies; Social and Economic Research Institute; Statistics;

Theology and Religious Studies; and Human Ecology, resulting in 93 relevant master’s and doctoral theses/dissertations. Only theses and dissertations which, according to the authors, could use alternative sources, were chosen. Therefore, the overview given in the study has obvious limitations, one being that the researchers might have missed some of the theses and dissertations that could have used alternative sources during sampling and another being that some objects, such as spades, flags and others, might have been missed as the broad terms ‘artefacts’, ‘utensils’, and so on were used to search alternative sources. Therefore, these issues need to be taken into account when interpreting the results.

5 DATA ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section analyses and presents the results of the data.

5.1 DATA ANALYSIS

As reflected in Figure 1, the number of theses and dissertations from public universities in South Africa were as follows: DUT (4); RU (7); UCT (2); UFS (2); UJ (4); UKZN (4); Unisa (21); UNW (9); UP (14); SU (0); UWC (4); and Wits (23). Of all 12 universities with online theses/dissertations, only SU did not have a relevant thesis/dissertation for the study, while Wits yielded the highest number of 23, followed by Unisa with 21.

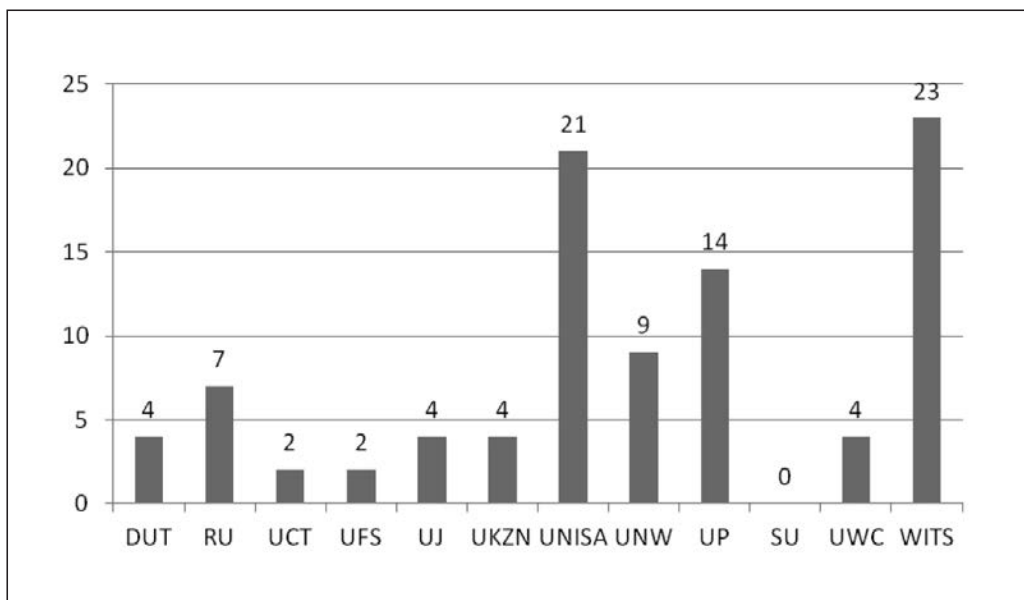


Figure 1: Number of theses/dissertations per university (N = 93)

The analysis of theses took place at three levels. Firstly, the theses included in the study were identified purposively. Secondly, the data was analysed using TextSTAT and WordSmith software to mine the key words and identify the alternative sources by searching for key words, such as ‘implements’, ‘machinery’, ‘utensils’, ‘tombstones’, and others. In this regard, the theses/dissertations were downloaded and the PDF formats were converted into MS Word to be searchable by the software. WordSmith was also used to provide synonyms for keywords through its thesaurus functionality. TextSTAT and WordSmith are concordance programmes in which text can be combined to form corpora. The programme analyses these text corpora and displays word frequency lists and concordances of search terms. In this regard, the software displayed usage of words in a given text and identified theses/dissertations that utilised alternative sources. Lastly, the theses that could have used alternative sources were identified.

5.2 RESEARCH FINDINGS

In the current study, the results are presented through written descriptions and numerical summarisations. The results are presented according to the research objectives raised in Section 3.

5.2.1 Types of sources used in historical research

The methodological approach involved searching for and extracting analysis references to the keywords in the theses and dissertations. As reflected in Table 1, it was noted that books were the most used source in 84 theses/dissertations out of 93; followed by journal articles in 43 theses/dissertations; Internet sources/websites in 41 theses and dissertations; whereas theses and dissertations (36) with the Bible, lecture notes and alternative sources, such as artefacts, wagons, fabric, stones and photographs, were the least used.

Table 1: Usage of sources (N = 24)

No.	Keyword	Frequency
1	Books	84
2	Journal articles	43
3	Internet sources	41
4	Theses and dissertations	36
5	Interviews	33
6	Reports	19
7	Magazine articles	10
8	Newspaper articles	10
9	Letters	9

No.	Keyword	Frequency
10	Speeches	6
11	Acts	4
12	Diaries	3
13	Minutes	3
14	Gazettes	2
15	Artefacts	1
16	Handbooks	1
17	Bible	1
18	Brochures	1
19	Lecture notes	1
20	Funeral programme	1
21	Wagons	1
22	Fabric	1
23	Gravestone	1
24	Photographs	1

The sources that were used were mostly conventional. As reflected in Table 1, there were only a few sources that could be labelled as unconventional and therefore could be regarded as alternative. Such sources included artefacts, fabric, gravestones and wagons, and the use of a funeral programme which was most interesting. This is a conventional source that is rarely used in the mainstream, and in this case it enriched the author's research work as its detailed information shed more light on the circumstances surrounding the death, the profile of the deceased, and those who took part in the funeral.

5.2.2 The extent to which alternative sources were used

To determine the extent to which alternative sources were used, citations of theses/dissertations were checked. In A. Wanless' PhD thesis, 'The silence of colonial melancholy: the Fourie Collection of Khoisan ethnologica', submitted in 2007 to the Social Sciences and Humanities Department of Wits, alternative sources, such as photographs, wagons and artefacts, were used. Furthermore, P. Warnich's PhD thesis, 'The value and roles of cemeteries: designing a possible methodology for teaching heritage to learners', submitted to UNW's History Department in 2010, quotes 'gravestones' as a source in addition to books and journal articles.

In S.C. Dymond's MSc thesis, 'Social and physical factors influencing the use and consumption of European fabric by nineteenth century indigenous societies in the old Transvaal', submitted to the Social Sciences and Humanities Department of Wits in 2011, the author traces the use of European fabric as uncovered in the excavation in the historic cave which was used as refuge by the Matebele of Kekana in their 1854 clashes with the Boers. The 'unique cache of European fabric excavated' was used as a source, and it is indeed a valuable alternative source. Mention is also made of 'Boer wagons'.

It is only in these instances that what can be regarded as alternative sources were used in all 93 sampled theses/dissertations from different faculties, departments and schools of the 12 institutions.

5.2.3 Ways of applying the usage of alternative sources

In the sampled works, there was room for alternative sources and the researchers could have enriched their respective works had they considered such sources. This is not to suggest any deficiency in any of the works, but only to point out that alternative sources have a place in research and can augment conventional ones. As a result, a few theses/dissertations that, according to the researchers, could have used alternative sources were identified. For instance, in F.E. Ramudzuli's MA thesis, 'The uprooting of the Ravele community in Luvuvhu River valley and its consequences, 1920–1930's', submitted to UJ's Historical Studies Department in 2007, only conventional sources, books, journal articles, theses and interviews, were used. As stated in the abstract, the aim of this thesis is 'to reconstruct the manner and the effects of the forced removal of the Ravele community, from their historical homes in old Mauluma 1 along the Luvuvhu River Valley'. In addition to the conventional sources mentioned, the thesis could have been much enriched by the excavation of alternative sources, such as old objects and artefacts, including implements, machinery, vehicles, wagons, buildings, utensils and tombstone epitaphs (gravestones) on ruins of the town from which the Ravele community had been forcefully removed. Such alternative sources could have uncovered more information about the past stories of the Ravele community, augmenting the information yielded by the quoted conventional sources. However, this is not to suggest that such alternative sources existed for the study as there is no catalogue of alternative sources. There is no indication in the thesis that the researcher attempted to find the availability of such sources.

In K.K. Scotch's MA thesis submitted in 2008 to UP's Historical and Heritage Studies Department, 'The settlement nexus of Southern Tswana on hilltops

and valleys in present day South East Botswana in the 19th century', only conventional sources, that is, books, articles, illustrative maps, websites and informants, were used. This work looks at the settlement of the Batswana groups of the Bakwena, Bangwaketse, Bakgatla, Bahurutshe, Batlokwa and Balelete. Here again, there was an opportunity to dig into the alternative sources which were available among these Batswana communities. Given the fact that this work focuses on the nineteenth century, the researchers are of the view that there should be abundant old objects, building ruins and gravestones that could have been gleaned to shed more light on those communities. Again, this is not to suggest that such alternative sources existed for the study as there is no catalogue of alternative sources.

In the MA thesis of W.F. Tabata, 'AWG Champion, Zulu nationalism and "Separate Development" in South Africa, 1965–1975', submitted to the History Department at Unisa in 2006, the following conventional sources were used: archival sources, manuscripts, theses and dissertations, conference papers, government publications, newspapers and magazines collections, books, journal articles and interviews. This thesis documents the life of Champion who was the leader of both the Industrial and Commercial Union and the African National Congress. Again, alternative sources, such as Champion's old memorabilia, artefacts, and gravestone information, if available, might have enriched this work, especially at a personal level.

K. Lumbwe's 2009 PhD thesis submitted to UCT's South African College of Music entitled, 'Ubingwa, a subset of Bemba Indigenous Knowledge Systems: A comparative study of pre-colonial and post-colonial independence wedding ceremonies in Lusaka and Kitwe, Zambia', lists only four conventional sources, namely: books, journal articles, interviews and websites. The work is about pre- and post-colonial wedding ceremonies in Zambia, and surely alternative sources, especially those associated with traditional pre-colonial weddings, should have been used to add more flesh to this work. Artefacts and materials, such as traditional clothing, ceramics and utensils, if available, could have been used, especially for the pre-colonial part of the work.

The abovementioned works are just a few examples out of all the theses and dissertations sampled which mainly relied on conventional sources to produce information.

6 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear from the study that historical researchers prefer using conventional sources to alternative sources. This is demonstrated by the fact that alternative sources were used in only three theses and dissertations out of the 93 sampled. The study thus demonstrates the need for using alternative sources in historical research and provides examples of how these sources can be utilised. Indeed, just like conventional sources, alternative sources can serve the same purposes of fact collection, material background, and interpretation, and will help to enrich the research. The standardisation and uniform categorisation of alternative sources is also recommended for research in order for them to be effectively and optimally utilised. Heritage organisations and community libraries are urged to also identify areas with scant records and to catalogue those alternative sources that are available. Furthermore, history students need to be taught early in their studies about the importance of using alternative sources as the challenges posed by these sources require new skills of interpretation and require historians to consider alternative theoretical and practical approaches.

It is clear that the alternative sources do have value in augmenting the conventional sources to further enrich the researched works as most of the past, especially in the African community, has not been recorded. Therefore, all attempts to trace the histories of these communities can be curtailed if alternative sources are not used. A further study to investigate why alternative sources are not better utilised by researchers is recommended.

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