MANAGING CHURCH RECORDS RELATING TO INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES AT THE ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF NATAL

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ABSTRACT

The Anglican Diocese of Natal in South Africa (hereafter the Diocese) is part of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. It covers the western part of the KwaZulu-Natal province, west and south of the Tugela and Buffalo rivers. The Episcopal leader of the Diocese is the Bishop of Natal. This study aimed to examine the current records management framework at the Archives of the Anglican Diocese of Natal (hereafter the Archives), especially with regard to

records relating to indigenous laity within the Diocese. The study identified the strengths and weaknesses of this framework and recommends an effective and efficient records management protocol for the future. The study was based on a literature review and the personal experiences and observations of one of the researchers who worked at the Diocese at the time of the study. The study concludes that the Diocese does not have a clear records management programme to deliberately guide the management of indigenous related records. It recommends the need to embrace information and communication technologies (ICTs) and other innovative changes in in order to create an enabling environment to facilitate records location, accessibility, retrieval and the timely utilisation of information.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The importance of church records cannot be underestimated as these are some of a nation's earliest records of identity as well as a source of local history. These records also hold evidence of land ownership and use, building developments, demographic composition and socio-political changes over time (Eberhard 2013). Accordingly, the guiding principle in records management is to ensure that this kind of information is available when and where it is needed, in an organised and efficient manner, and in a suitably maintained environment (Garaba 2015).

In South Africa, the use of church records relating to the indigenous population can be especially rewarding and insightful due to the country's difficult history. This article will mainly focus on the management and use of the so-called 'sacrament records' relating to indigenous South Africans, currently being kept at the Archives of the Anglican Diocese of Natal (hereafter the Archives). Sacrament records comprise baptism registers, confirmation registers, marriage registers and burial registers (Genealogical Society of South Africa 2011). Anglican sacrament records are amongst the most complete in the world and they tend to follow a universal pattern. Knowing the pattern can help a researcher to overcome the difficulties faced with problematic handwriting and/or inaccurate or damaged records which may sometimes be encountered. The pattern is usually as follows (Chisa and Hoskins 2013):

- place and date of the event (i.e. baptism, confirmation, marriage or burial);
- name(s) of the subject;
- declared date of birth;

- both first and last names of the parents in case of a baptism or confirmation;
- professions of both parents;
- residential address; and
- both first and last names of the godparents/witnesses, and sometimes their relation to the subject.

As noted above, Anglican sacrament records generally go further than merely giving names and dates. They also give the professional and residential details of the people mentioned in the records. On the strength of such information, a researcher may have a good sense of the socio-economic context of the people involved at the time of the event (Chisa and Hoskins 2014). Special mention should also be made of the importance of the writings, including journals and correspondence, of early Anglican missionaries, especially missionary priests. This is because they often provide some information about indigenous South Africans with whom the missionaries interacted, such as naming specific individuals and giving details of ceremonies, conversions or events of similar nature (Chisa and Hoskins 2014).

Therefore, the significance of church records lies in the fact that they are often the earliest written records of individual indigenous people. This is because missionaries frequently visited people in remote communities that did not have any contact with civil authorities. Therefore, in the absence of any civil registrations of birth, marriage and death – a reality which was pervasive especially amongst the indigenous population in apartheid South Africa – sacrament records can serve as alternative sources for genealogical, legal, historical and theological information (Chisa and Hoskins 2014). It follows, therefore, that the entire mission of a religious institution such as the Anglican Diocese of Natal (hereafter the Diocese) can benefit by ensuring proper management and control over these records. The benefits include an informed vision of past events and transparency of information (Garaba 2015).

Records management has been defined as the systematic and administrative control of records throughout their life cycle to ensure efficiency and economy in their creation, use, handling, control, maintenance and disposition (Garaba 2015). Consequently, records management is an administrative tool which is vital to the efficient management of an organisation, and it affects every aspect of corporate affairs. Garaba (2015) adds that many organisations adopt records-management practices to eliminate problems caused by the inefficient and unsystematic management of their records.

Thus, the activities, policies and procedures within an organisation with which it implements records management are the constituent parts of a records-management programme. In this regard, a religious institution's records-management programme should strive to achieve economy and efficiency in the creation, use, maintenance and disposal of its records. Its basic purpose is to help answer the familiar questions

in archival science: What do I keep, for how long do I keep it and when can I remove it from my office? (Garaba 2015).

This study investigated records-management practices at the Archives, focusing especially on records relating to indigenous South Africans currently being held there. The study critically analysed those practices and suggests a basic operational framework for the future. Significantly, the first author drew on his own professional and personal experiences of working as an archivist at the Archives to illustrate some of these issues. A literature review was also conducted to explore parallel experiences.

2. CONTEXT AND SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF COLLECTIONS RELATING TO INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

It is difficult to develop a single, specific definition for indigenous communities in South Africa. In the wider African continent, for example, individual indigenous communities reflect tremendous diversity in their cultures, histories and current circumstances (Chisa and Hoskins 2014). Therefore, the current study sought to understand indigenous communities in terms of their characteristics.

According to the Asia Development Bank (2008), one of the most significant characteristics of indigenous communities is their descent from population groups present in a given area, most often before modern states or territories were created and before modern borders were defined. Another important characteristic is maintenance of cultural and social identities, and social, economic, cultural, and political institutions separate from mainstream or dominant societies and cultures.

Indigenous communities are also described with reference to their ways of life. In many cases, indigenous people live in separated communities or cultural or ethnic groupings. Such communities and groupings often are located in areas geographically distant from urban centres and often function at the periphery of the political, social, cultural, and economic systems of the dominant or mainstream society (Chisa and Hoskins 2014). At the same time, however, it is not unusual to find indigenous communities on the fringes of urban areas, comprising indigenous peoples who have migrated but remain distinct from the mainstream. This means that indigenous communities in a given country can reflect varying degrees of acculturation and integration into the dominant or mainstream society (Kawooya 2006).

In apartheid South Africa, records pertaining to indigenous communities were created by a whole range of agencies, including government departments, church missionaries, and even academic researchers. The records were created for a variety of reasons but in the main these records provided a means of monitoring and control (Chisa and Hoskins 2014). It was from this imposed relationship that a paper trail documenting a cruel history of bigotry and oppression mostly emanated. At best, this was a tenuous relationship as the records were both evidence of the apartheid/

colonial governments and the legislation they were responsible for enacting, as well as being personal records documenting people's lives (Lalu 2007).

The first author spent the past six years working with this collection of records at the Archives. As a matter of policy, some of the records are closed to public access due to the sensitive and personal nature of the information they contain (Diocese of Natal Archives 1985). In the years he worked with this collection, he was continuously confronted by some of these insensitive records and the trauma they caused to people who accessed them. Personally and professionally the researcher had to build an inner resilience to empathise with some of the indigenous archives users who accessed these records while also insulating himself from becoming emotionally involved in the course of fulfilling his duties of providing archival reference. However, having navigated back and forth between these records and the personal stories of some of these people, it became evident that their experiences and oral memories differed from the 'facts' documented in some of the records.

Both authors, therefore, support the view that some church records relating to indigenous South Africans held in church repositories are 'imperfect' evidence because of the complex and contested nature of the history, experiences and decisions that they capture (Lalu 2007). During the period that the first author worked with the indigenous related collection, it became clear that some of the records continue to cause harm to people accessing them, and access to these records often raised more questions than they answered. It caused great distress when indigenous users were informed that although the information contained within the record could be inaccurate, nothing could be done about it. Their worry was that future generations will read these erroneous records and they will not be there to explain the events from their own perspective (Chisa and Hoskins 2014).

3.   HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE DIOCESE OF NATAL

The Diocese was founded with the consecration of John William Colenso on 30 November 1853 at the Lambeth Parish Church in England. Colenso was the first Anglican Bishop of Natal coinciding with the British imperialistic age of expansion (Chisa and Ngcobo 2013). A man before his time, Colenso was a militant champion of the Zulu people and showed deep respect for their traditions and rulers. However, theologically he was a man of controversy because of his nonconformist views (Chisa and Ngcobo 2013). He was severely critical of British political intentions in Natal and his preaching and writings brought about clashes between him and other church leaders, as well as with the political leadership of the Colony. In 1865, Colenso was tried and deposed as Bishop after being found guilty of heresy. This cataclysmic event resulted in an acrimonious schism within the Diocese, lasting well over 100 years (Chisa and Ngcobo 2013).

The Diocese has moved on to become one of the most functional and economically viable dioceses within the Anglican Church of Southern Africa (ACSA). It is also one of the most multicultural with its burgeoning indigenous population mostly living in the outlying parts of the Diocese (Chisa and Ngcobo 2013). The Diocese is divided into three Episcopal Areas facilitating the administrative and pastoral leadership overseen by the tenth Bishop of Natal (Chisa and Ngcobo 2013).

The Archives forms part of the administrative arm of the Diocese and was established by an Act of the Diocese in 1985. The initial purpose of the Archives was modest: the safe keeping of the parish registers for baptisms, confirmations, marriages and funerals. In doing so, it would be possible to provide information for those seeking details about births, deaths and marriages (Gardner 2009).

Records show that, in its formative years, the Archives entirely depended on volunteers rather than trained staff. These volunteers were all pensioners who saw their work as part of their spiritual commitment to the church (Gardner 2009). The first remunerated worker at the Archives was only employed in 1997 on a part-time basis. Over the years, more untrained part-time workers and volunteers followed. As the Archives became more widely known, those who wished to do other research came looking for information. With time, the Archives acquired more and more materials, such as legal records, financial records, letters, reports and manuscripts. This plethora of documents attracted even more enquirers.

In response to this increased interest, the mandate of the Archives was also broadened. Guided by Act 26 of the Diocese, the Archives' functions would now be to collect, arrange, describe and preserve the records of the Diocese, its related councils, committees, and officers and other material pertaining to the history and activities of the Diocese (Diocese of Natal 2007).

The Archives also keeps lists of church members, which can prove residence, and in the case of indigenous people, can provide key pointers regarding clan membership. In recent times, both Christian and indigenous names have been recorded. Moreover, many early schools were established and run by churches in rural areas, so records of these schools can also be found in the Archives (Chisa and Hoskins 2013). School records might include a child's name, his or her birth date and parents' names (Genealogical Society of South Africa 2011).

At the time of the study, there were two full-time professional staff members: the Diocesan Archivist, who joined the Archives in 2010 and his Assistant, who was employed in 2012. It is also worth noting the following personal observations by the researcher in relation to the historical context of the Archives:

● None of the untrained members of staff or volunteers who worked at the Archives from its inception in 1985 to as recently as 2010 came from an indigenous background. This is significant given that recordkeeping theory is a subjective science (Rosenberg 2001).

- Probably as a consequence of the above, there is a disproportionate number of records from what were known as 'indigenous parishes' of the Diocese during apartheid. It is common knowledge in archival science that record keeping is a social construct where specific narratives can be privileged while others are deliberately marginalised and maligned (Rosenberg 2001). This means that the compilation of records at the Archives since its inception in 1985 speaks directly to the politics of collecting and privileging of certain type of 'knowledge' at the expense of others (Chisa and Hoskins 2014).

- At the time of the study, mainstream users of the Archives were predominantly middle class urbanites with steady incomes. On the other hand, the few indigenous users lived far away from the Archives, mostly in townships and other peripheral areas. Typically they were semi-literate and unemployed.

- There were no diaries, letters, deeds or other documents that were created in the first person by indigenous peoples in the nineteenth or earlier centuries.

- Many records on indigenous communities were error ridden, mainly because they were authored by non-indigenous subjects and the content, in some cases, was derogatory and insensitive.

Yet, despite all these contesting variables, the Archives had no specific policy, at the time of the study, to manage and regulate this problematic collection.

4.   RESEARCH PROBLEM

The management of church records and collections belonging to indigenous communities in South Africa presents challenges to conventional archival methods and practice because of the negative legacy of colonialism and apartheid. Therefore, concerns relating to the management of these records at the Archives are important questions that need be discussed and considered broadly by the Diocese and similar institutions in South Africa.

As noted earlier, at the time of the study, the Archives had no policy, guiding the effective management of records belonging to indigenous communities. This is in spite of the country's fractured history of violence, bigotry and segregation, which renders some of these records as contested evidence. Therefore, the study argues that a review of policy and methods needs to take place at the Diocese in order to acknowledge the conflicting relationships that exist between indigenous communities and records. The new policy framework should take into account the rights of indigenous communities to participate in the process of decision making regarding indigenous records management and practices.

The study considered these issues by examining challenges that are presented in the literature regarding the management of similar collections in South Africa and beyond; this is followed by a discussion about the challenges and opportunities

that exist in the digital environment which can facilitate an exchange of multiple perspectives on collections from diverse backgrounds.

5.   OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The broad objective of the study was to determine how church records belonging to indigenous South Africans are managed at the Diocese. The specific objectives of the study were to:

- Examine the types of church records held at the Archives.
- Analyse various activities associated with the existing records management protocol, identify any challenges and propose recommendations for the future.

6.   RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study sought to answer the following research questions:

- How are records pertaining to indigenous South Africans held at the Archives managed and what are the challenges?
- What strategies are required to manage these records more effectively?

7.   LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review highlights critical issues pertaining to management of indigenous related records at the Diocese. The broad themes are as follows:

7.1. The concept of record keeping

According to Hanlon (1999), record keeping theory was imposed on indigenous cultures by colonising powers, as an introduced concept, which altered or displaced existing cultural practices. Hanlon explains that written record keeping is a phenomenon that was introduced by Western travellers, traders, missionaries, and bureaucrats. Like other systems that colonialism introduced (i.e. religious, administrative and economic), record keeping has been embraced by local cultures and has become integral to many aspects of indigenous life (Hanlon 1999).

Written record keeping is essential for modern governance, economic systems and cultural needs on the continent of Africa. This is because archives play a vital role in documenting rights and entitlements and enabling interpretation of the events of the past. Yet, the management of records and collections relating to indigenous

communities presents unique challenges to conventional archival methods and practice which cannot be wished away.

From a South African perspective and the broader African continent, these challenges include the tension between oral and literate traditions, the legacy of colonial/apartheid disempowerment and the increasing reassertion of indigenous rights and identities (Chisa and Hoskins 2014). In analysing the record keeping practices at the Diocese, therefore, the study paid close attention to these broader issues. The first author drew on his own professional and personal experiences of working as an archivist at the Archives to illustrate some of the challenges encountered in the process of managing indigenous related collections.

7.2. Challenges of managing church records belonging to indigenous peoples

The first author worked at the Archives as an archivist from 2010 to 2016. During his tenure, there was no specific policy designed to guide systematic and administrative control of indigenous related collections to ensure efficiency and economy in their creation, use, handling, control, maintenance and disposition. The overarching records management framework was amorphous and rigid. For example, at the time of the study, access to sacrament records belonging to indigenous people was through a system of mediated access. This was deemed imperative in order to guard the privacy of individuals and families documented in the records. This means that the Protection of Personal Information Act (No. 4 of 2013) (Republic of South Africa 2013) applied to all sacrament records held in the Archives. In line with the provisions of the Act, Archives users could only be allowed access to their own personal records.

Ordinarily, researchers at the Archives are not granted access to a sacrament record unless it is:

- a baptism record which is more than 100 years old;
- a marriage record which is 75 years or older; or
- a burial record which is more than 20 years old (Diocese of Natal Archives 1985).

If a user wants to access a record on behalf of someone else, policy requires that the owner of the record has to send written permission to the archivist in order for the record to be released to the third party. If friends or family request access to the record of a deceased relative, policy requires that proof of death plus the bona fides of the applicant be provided beforehand (Diocese of Natal Archives 1985).

However, this traditional approach, while noble, simply insulates the records from critical scrutiny. This is because it limits the exposure of the records to empirical research. Importantly, the researchers believe that keeping records belonging to

indigenous communities locked up in this manner continues to give them leverage as instruments of control and oppression (Katon 2002). It also allows the records to be viewed as an ultimate source of truth, disconnected from the contesting personal narratives and oral memories that might exist outside the Archives.

Therefore, these indigenous collections should be connected across the country through networked archival platforms to enable people to provide a right of reply to some of the inaccurate information contained in the records (Rosenberg 2001). This is particularly important where the records document cruel systems of control or injustice to a people, as is the case with some of the records kept at the Archives. Although some effort has been made to contextualise these collections through indexing, there has been no focus on finding culturally appropriate policy to broaden access and allow an empirical interrogation of the records.

8.   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was based on a literature review and the personal experiences and observations of one of the researchers who was working as an archivist in the Diocese at the time of the study. Observation in a research study is critical because it enables the researcher to gain first-hand knowledge of the subjects. Both obtrusive and unobtrusive observation was employed in this study (Baily 1994).

9.   STUDY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has shown that no records-management system as a basis for appropriating indigenous related collections has been implemented at the Archives. In view of this finding, the study offers some recommendations, contextualised by the researcher's own personal experiences.

In 2013, the first author joined the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) as a postdoctoral researcher with an interest in the digitisation of cultural heritage material at Digital Innovation South Africa (DISA). DISA is a digital archival platform that holds huge collections of indigenous cultural resources relating to the liberation struggle. DISA makes use of modern information and communication technologies (ICTs) to ensure the efficient and economical delivery of this material to students, scholars, researchers and the wider global community.

It was a very transformational period for the researcher, to step outside of the conventional archival space and engage in critical conversations with academics, digital archivists and members of the indigenous community regarding the management of indigenous related collections in a networked environment.

Based on the first author's DISA experience, the study recommends the linking of disparate archival church collections belonging to indigenous communities in South Africa across ethnic, cultural and denominational divides. The study believes that

an archivist's role in contemporary South Africa should also include collaborating and networking various collections from diverse backgrounds for the benefit of this 'rainbow nation'. The digital environment now provides ample opportunities for archival practices to be reconceptualised in order to connect collections through culturally safe practices. This can allow institutions such as the Diocese to open up archival collections and enable a diversity of perspectives to be connected to the records (Goldman 2002).

The first author's DISA experience has also opened up his professional mind to think of new approaches to practice. In that regard, the study recommends the potential use of church records, such as those kept at the Archives, to build greater understanding and harmony across the racial divide, not only within the Diocese itself but also the larger South African society. This is necessary in light of the country's painful history of violence and prejudice. This vision could be achieved by designing new approaches, based on appropriate protocols and culturally acceptable measures, to cater for the linking and critiquing of these indigenous related collections by using various digital platforms (Chisa and Hoskins 2015).

The DISA initiative was proactive in its approach in that researchers and indigenous communities worked together to discuss the digitisation and management of the indigenous material at the conceptual stage of the initiative (DISA 2013, n.p.). Similarly, the study recommends that the Archives should begin with an acceptance of the complexities of working with indigenous related material within a framework of Western oriented protocols. This can encourage relationship building with indigenous communities, through conversation and mutual respect, to establish acceptable methods for managing its indigenous related collections. This initiative can also promote a collaborative ongoing connection to the collections so that multiple perspectives could be attached to these problematic records that were created during the difficult eras of colonialism and apartheid (Chisa and Hoskins 2015).

For this to happen, however, archival repositories need to let go of their rigidity by allowing new perspectives and opportunities for collections to be managed (Katon 2002). In this regard, the researchers would like to encourage the archival science profession in South Africa to engage in further research in order to build more conversation around diversity. Hopefully, this can lead to more innovative ways, in which people from diverse backgrounds in the country can manage, disseminate and care for knowledge and records safely.

Greater awareness should especially be built around the needs of indigenous communities in order to create practices that recognise that the protocols of one community may be different to another. This is especially true when the dominant Western paradigm currently promoted in conventional archival practice may encounter implementation challenges when dealing with indigenous related records (Chisa and Hoskins 2015).

10. CONCLUSION

The study has shown why a transformation of archival policy and methods needs to take place in church repositories in order to acknowledge the conflicting relationships that exist between indigenous communities and records in South Africa. Further, the study has argued that this review of policy should recognise the rights of indigenous communities to participate in the process of decision making about records management and practices especially with regard to indigenous related collections.

Indigenous communities in the country have been negatively impacted by the colonial and apartheid history. Under apartheid, from 1948 to 1994, a person's race influenced his or her occupation, place of residence, education, place of worship, choice of partner, freedom of movement, and use of facilities and amenities (Institute of African Development 2010). This legacy will take decades to erase.

It is important, therefore, that indigenous communities be given an opportunity to heal this past trauma. Church archivists and other information practitioners can assist this healing process by reinventing archival practices that create space for ongoing conversation between archival repositories and indigenous communities. This can be achieved by building collaborative practices that allow indigenous communities to be active participants in the management of their own records.

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