

OVERVIEW OF THE ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME AT THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF ZIMBABWE: IMPLICATIONS FOR NATION BUILDING AND SOCIAL COHESION

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ABSTRACT

This article will aim to give an overview of the development of oral history programme at the National Archives of Zimbabwe since the colonial period to the present. It will look at the strengths and weaknesses of the programme, especially in issues of inclusivity and exclusivity. The article will try to answer questions such as whether the programme is national in its outlook or elitist in its approach, serving the interests of few dominant ethnic groups. How it is faring in giving a voice to those marginalised groups of the society will be another issue the article will consider. It will also look at the approaches and methodologies used to collect oral testimonies and how these bear in the long term on preserving and archiving these recorded testimonies. The article will mainly be based on the views made by interviewee's who, when interviewed during the oral history programme, made passing statements about the programme. The environment encountered by archivists and the welcome given to them in

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different communities they visited during oral history exercises will be discussed, especially its implications on the success of oral traditions programme at the National Archives of Zimbabwe. The literature on oral history relating to National Archives of Zimbabwe will be reviewed and a document analysis will be done.

Key words: National Archives of Zimbabwe, National Archives of Zimbabwe War Archive, National Archives of Zimbabwe' Minority Archive, oral history conceptions and methodologies

INTRODUCTION

The oral history programme at the National Archives of Zimbabwe can be traced back to 1968. Then, it was mainly targeting the prominent Europeans who had been in the public service or prominent citizens in society. The colonial regime did not view Africans as having had a history worthy of being recorded (Manungo 2012: 65). However, later in the 1970s, a few Africans were interviewed. These were prominent Africans, including chiefs, politicians and the acclaimed philanthropist such as Jairos Jiri. It can therefore be argued that the oral history programme by then was elitist as it excluded Africans from all ethnic groups who were deemed to be 'not prominent' or of poor 'uneducated' background. Such an approach to oral history meant that the National Archives of Zimbabwe was a voice for the prominent, the conquerors, the vanquishers, the elites, the educated; whereas the voices of the grass-roots' people, the defeated, the minorities, and the women were side-lined and forgotten.

Only recently has this elitist approach to oral history been abandoned for a more inclusive approach. The minority groups are now being targeted such as the Kalanga, the San, the Shangane, the Tonga, the Venda, the Xhosa, the Nambya, the Sotho and the Nyanja. However, it has not been an easy journey. Challenges such as the language of collecting these oral testimonies have come into play. In the National Archives of Zimbabwe, which has no speakers of these minority languages, this means that 'dominant languages' such as Shona and Ndebele are used to interview these minority groups of people.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME AT THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF ZIMBABWE

The Oral History Programme at the National Archives of Zimbabwe is meant to fill the gaps in the archival collection of the institution. Munjeri (1982: 2) argued that the "*raison d'être* of the programme therefore is the bringing about of a balance in the collections of the National Archives, *pari passu* ensuring that the silent majority does not perpetually remain in communicado". The Oral History Programme at the

National Archives of Zimbabwe has moved away from excluding some voices of the society to including almost every section of the nation.

Initially, as already mentioned, the Programme catered for the prominent white community, by then it was known as the English Oral History Programme. The Oral Historian interviewed said, at the time, the selection of interviewees was subjective as the whole process was left to the interviewer. But in most cases those who played significant roles in various areas of national or local life – farming, politics, the military, commerce and industry, aviation, and local government were targeted. Other interviewees were suggested by the members of staff or the public. The problem with this, as the oral historian narrated, was that lay people, in recommending potential interviewees, often thought that just because someone was in their 80s or 90s, their age would make them a valuable and essential interviewee. But in fact – once the pioneers and early settlers had all died out, this was no longer a valid criterion in itself.

One of the few oral historians interviewed said that one of the memorable experiences experienced during this period

was the freedom to interview both young and old, the non-political as well as the politically motivated. It was a particularly interesting exercise in objectivity trying to capture opposing perspectives: for example the liberals and right-wingers; people whose work had strengthened the white regime, and people who had tried to undermine it. One advantage in this respect was that the English-Language Programme was by definition not racial: so I was able to speak to anyone who was willing to be interviewed in English, including black and Coloured Zimbabweans.

Later in 1970s prominent black people were incorporated into the programme and by then it was mainly Shona orientated. Matabeleland, which is home to almost all minority languages in Zimbabwe, was not part of the programme until the 1980s.

During the early years of the English Oral History Programme in 1968 to 1970s, a structured questionnaire was used to collect oral testimonies. For example, those oral interviews catalogued as ORAL/216 are questionnaires completed by pioneers and early settlers in 1969, and ORAL/217 are questionnaires completed by Early Settlers in 1972. Those respondents who were seen to have more interesting information were then orally interviewed. In the 1980s, this method was no longer used.

Munjeri (1982: 2), quoting Lohead, stated that there are three ways of approaching oral history: the journalistic, the academic and the archival. The journalistic approach tends to edit its oral collections sometimes to fit the contemporary political correctness and to entertain the readers. Munjeri argued that ‘it is difficult to know at what point this editing process crosses the line of historical credibility into journalistic licence’. Despite these weaknesses, the societal influences of journalists cannot be underestimated. These are people who sometimes interview people and collect notable oral testimonies. Therefore this observation has seen the National

Archives of Zimbabwe working with journalists and the national news broadcaster, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation. Munjeri (1982: 3) noted that:

The National Archives of Zimbabwe has cooperated with willing journalists, and has secured a number of tapes and transcripts which, subject to the donors' conditions, are kept for permanent preservation in the institution. A case in point is the taped interviews of Benjamin Burombo, Masotsha Ndhlovu and soon to be made available, those of Josiah Tongogara.

Academics also collect oral testimonies but mainly for self-interest. They usually consider their oral testimonies to be their own private intellectual property to which all others are to be denied access. However, the National Archives has managed to work with some academics, particularly those from overseas in order to secure some of the interviews carried out on local topics. Munjeri (1982: 3) said that:

London, York and Leiden Universities for example have been particularly helpful in this respect. The tapes are deposited with National Archives of Zimbabwe and remain "embargoed" until the donor has published his work or until such time as he feels they are no longer useful for his purposes. Alternatively copies of the tape recordings are made and preserved.

The oral history approach at National Archives of Zimbabwe is different from the academic and journalistic approaches as it is obviously archival in nature. Lohead (1976: 9) argued that it is the 'responsibility of the archivist to ensure that the historical record is as complete as possible for other persons to research'. Lohead (1976: 10) further argued that 'for the best possible assessment of gaps to be filled in the historical record must surely come from those who are most familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of existing archival holdings'. However, it should be noted that not all are in agreement with the notion that archivists should be the ones who conduct oral history. Grele (1998: 39) stated that 'the librarians and archivists have embraced oral history and this has reinforced the suspicions of most historians who, with the best intentions in the world, cannot conceive of librarians and archivists as significant initiators of serious scholarship'. Despite some of these negatives, the National Archives of Zimbabwe has used and continues to use oral history as a tool to fill in the perceived gaps, which are a part of the historical narrative of the nation of Zimbabwe.

Following the attainment of independence in 1980, the Oral History programme tried to become national. It moved from its elitist approach to accommodate those from the grass-roots levels. As already noted, the Programme was established in 1968 and Murambiwa *et al.* (2012: 8) described it in the following words:

Its main objective was to recollect the British colonial occupation and remembrance for those who served the then Rhodesia in various ways. In essence, the African stories were largely neglected unless it had incidental or circumstantial relevance to the colonial occupation of the country.

However, this was to change soon after independence when the oral history was eventually expanded to the whole society and to the diverse ethnic communities of Zimbabwe. With the celebratory mood of independence cutting across almost all spectrums of society, the National Archives of Zimbabwe also joined in by recording testimonies of the revolutionary liberation struggle. However, most of the recorded testimonies were those of the victors, the cadres of Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and its military wing, Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army, while those who were vanquished, for example the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) and its military wing, Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) were side-lined. This was worsened by the civil strife in Matabeleland between the years of 1983 to 1987, which came to be known as Gukurahundi, which mainly affected those people who supported ZAPU. Writing about this period, Kaarsholm (1992: 166) argued that it 'was therefore difficult to carry out research in Matabeleland – to gain access to archives and documentation, to get around and interview people, and for them to be brave enough to speak out'.

Murambiwa (2009: 25) described the Zimbabwe Archive as a memory of racial and ethnic conflicts, which tended to be violent. In addition to this, Murambiwa stated:

It is archive of divergent versions shaped by colluding interests of archivists and historians. As part of the creation of the "Zimbabwean archive" certain social sections actively seek to protect their desired memories through collecting documents, objects and stories that buttress their viewpoints. In a parallel process, the same social sections seek to erase unwanted memories of losers, atrocities and repression. This they do through destruction of evidence, access control and distortion of history

Murambiwa's statement can be summarised by Pickover's (nd: 2) observation:

In this globalised world, knowledge and information, and archives, are seen as strategic resources and tools. The manner in which information is used and who controls it is therefore pivotal. And as a result the Soul of the Archive, because it mirrors historical constructs of the past, (albeit only fragments) is often a sought-after commodity. As such, archives are also about propaganda, rights, desires, lies, ownership, trust, nationalism, freedoms, concealments, acquisitiveness and surveillance.

It is from this theoretical background that one can understand the battle over collective social memory between ZANU and ZAPU. It is a battle that ZAPU may seem to be losing because of their exclusion in institutions of social memory, of which some are National Heroes Acre and National Archives. The ZAPU archives, important historical materials and other papers of ZIPRA were seized by the government and have not since come to light (Kaarsholm 1992: 166). SAHA (2012: 5) has this to say about the exclusion of ZAPU's historical narrative from the national memory:

The Zimbabwean government has since 1980, been dominated by ZANU, a political party formed as a break-away from ZAPU in 1963. Within this context, the story of ZAPU's role in

the liberation struggle has been eclipsed, deliberately underestimated by official Zimbabwean sources, and largely not understood by many sympathisers.

It is from this status quo that the National Archives of Zimbabwe, National Museums and Monuments (NMMZ) and the History department of the University of Zimbabwe joined hands in trying to collect 'true' and 'endangered' oral records of the Zimbabwe liberation struggle. The programme was known as the 'Capturing of the Fading National Memory'. The project targeted rank and file soldiers. Much was collected nationwide even though problems were encountered in Matabeleland. The interviewees in this part of the country were not forthcoming in providing their oral testimonies as they viewed the Government and its workers, that is oral historians, with suspicion. Murambiwa (2009: 31) described the experiences of Oral History programme in Tsholotsho, which is in Matabeleland, in the following words:

The Tsholotsho interviews provide another interesting dimension. From the perspective of the establishment the villagers were deliberately forgetting second chimurenga events in order to drive home the Gukurahundi memories. But could it be that the establishment had been caught off-guard trying to help the villages forget Gukurahundi events? In their accounts, the Tsholotsho villagers, predominantly Ndebele people and victims in the Gukurahundi disturbances, essentially refused to remember second chimurenga at the expense of Gukurahundi when interviewed by agents of the same predominantly Shona establishment that had perpetrated the Gukurahundi atrocities.

This Tsholotsho debacle is interesting because it raises a question of the implications of imposing to the interviewees what they should remember and what they should forget. Why should they remember the war of liberation struggle (Second Chimurenga) and forget the civil strife that took place soon after independence? Who decides what documents in the Archives need to be complemented? Who decides on who should be interviewed? Who decides on the gaps that should be filled? Is this process of top to bottom decision making done by archivists the only effective way of collecting oral histories? And, if the targeted community is to be involved in the initial stages of oral history planning, to what extent and in which *modus operandi* should be used? All these questions should be seriously interrogated before the National Archives of Zimbabwe embarks on future oral history interviews.

The war oral archive of Zimbabwe housed at National Archives of Zimbabwe cannot be said to be objective as it tends to follow the political climate of the time. The independence euphoria that engulfed the nation soon after independence included the historians, artists, be they musicians or writers, in this praise singing of independence. The war veterans and all those who were involved in the war were sometimes portrayed as invincible, infallible, superhuman, victors and fearless cadres. These kinds of biased war of liberation narratives also find their way into the war oral archive of Zimbabwe. Murambiwa (2009: 31), citing Manungo, the former oral historian of National Archives of Zimbabwe, noted that the interviews

conducted among surviving peasants and guerrillas in Chiweshe communal area soon after the war were coated with euphoria, graphic memories and exaggeration. However, repeat interviews a decade later revealed a different story that was now toned down, analytical and factual.

The glaring gap of the war oral archive at National Archives of Zimbabwe is the exclusion of the 'other'. Besides the popular oral archive of the triumphalism of ZAPU and ZANU cadres, there is also what Mazarire (2009: 99) termed the silent oral archive, which also occurs spontaneously with this archive of triumphalism. This is the archive of those Africans who worked for the Rhodesian Army. Also, the war oral archive of women who participated in the war of liberation is skewed and not visible. This is even more pronounced when one observes that out of more than one hundred declared national heroes laid at National Heroes Acre, only six are women, giving a 'biased' impression that women were not all that involved in the liberation struggle.

The omission of women in institutions of memory is not peculiar to Zimbabwe. Schwartz and Cook (2002: 7) stated that 'Gerda Lerder has convincingly traced, from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, the systemic exclusion of women from society's memory tools and institutions, including archives'. French feminist Julia Kristeva, as quoted by Malpas (2005: 100), described the importance of transforming modern approaches to history so as to take account of the politics of gender. She says histories must aim to produce narratives capable of recognising the presence of women in the past. This could lead to the multiplicity of histories that explore the ways in which the differences within and between sexes have been controlled, denied or suppressed by patriarchal societies. It is therefore important that oral history as it is used by National Archives of Zimbabwe helps address this distortion of national memory by omission of women in the memory institutions.

In one of the interviews, the interviewee (Dulo, interview, 10 July 2014) being one of the few combatant women who were interviewed, seems to downplay the role of women in the liberation struggle. She unequivocally declared that if you hear anyone stating that she was involved in a battlefield, she will be lying as no women was ever deployed into the battlefield. She, however, mentioned that they underwent rigorous and vigorous military training. When asked her specific duties in the war of liberation, the answer given is not clear because she said women were always, in most cases, in the camp protecting it and defending it. To understand Dulo's reasoning, we can quote SAHA (2012: 28), which proclaims that the 'decision to form a separate unit for women soldiers was evidently motivated by Joshua Nkomo. From evidence in the interviews he was uncomfortable having men and women together and also uncomfortable with the women becoming a fighting force'. To augment this idea, SAHA (2012: 28) further quoted an oral interview conducted with Sibongile Khumalo elaborating that:

You know he had a good policy. His thinking was that “Why waste a seed? These women are the ones who will replace those soldiers who would have died in the front, so why waste a seed. All we have to do is to prepare these girls for administrative work, yes”.

Therefore this Oral History Programme has made some strides in trying to document the ‘other’, in this case the ‘other’ being the silent voices of women who participated in the war of the liberation struggle.

ORAL ARCHIVE OF THE MINORITY ETHNIC GROUPS

Zimbabwe is made up of the different ethnic groups who speak the different following languages: Shona, Ndebele, Kalanga, Nyanja/Chewa, Shangani, Tonga, Barwe, Sotho, Venda, Chikunda, Xhosa, Sena, Hwesa, Nambya and Tshwawo of the Khoisan community. In the former *Constitution of Zimbabwe*, which was replaced by the new Constitution in 2013, Shona, Ndebele and English were recognised as the national languages. Of these three, English was also recognised as the official language. However, the new Constitution under section 6 (1) reads: ‘The following languages, namely Chewa, Chibarwe, English, Kalanga, Koisan, Nambya, Ndau, Ndebele, Shangani, Shona, sign language, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Venda and Xhosa, are the officially recognised languages of Zimbabwe’.

Under the same section, 6 (4), the supreme law stipulates that the State must promote and advance the use of all languages used in Zimbabwe, while creating conditions for their development. However, already to show lack of research at national level in regard to minority groups, the Constitution talks of the Koisan language whilst in real fact no such language exists. The Zimbabwean San people speak Tshwao, not Koisan.

This is the language environment in which National Archives of Zimbabwe operates. After noting that the oral archive of Zimbabwe has a gnawing gap when it comes to the minority groups, the institution started collecting their oral traditions. All this is being done in the spirit of national cohesion so that at least everyone will feel being part of Zimbabwe where pluralism or diversity of Zimbabweans is celebrated.

This pluralistic approach to the language situation in Zimbabwe has seen the National Archives of Zimbabwe collecting the oral traditions of the Shangani, Kalanga, Venda, Sotho and Xhosa who are sometimes referred to as amaFengu, but the term is believed to be derogatory. However, it has not been the easy road as the following section will show.

RAW EXPERIENCES OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF ZIMBABWE'S ARCHIVISTS IN THE FIELD

When conducting oral interviews in Chiredzi, an area which is dominated by the Shangani people, the issue of a language to be used for interviews became an obstacle. There was not one archivist who could speak the Shangani language. The community was not happy about that. They demanded to know whether in the whole of Zimbabwe there were no Shangani people who could be recruited into an oral history programme so that these interviews could be conducted in Shangani. The whole issue then turned political as they viewed our approach as discriminatory and purposefully intended that way. Nevertheless, the Chief finally calmed the situation and the interviews were conducted, but hard lessons were learnt. For example, language is the vehicle of culture, some of the indigenous knowledge systems are preserved within the language, so to be collecting oral traditions of people but at the same time using a language foreign to them means some of the aspects will not be captured.

In another case, the interviewee of (Sivu, interview 12 January 1988) Venda origin, before answering the questions, gave a lecture by asking the interviewers the point of their inquiries – and why now? And he continued to argue that it is now 8 years after independence and the National Archives have existed all that time, so why only now? And should not the first object of historical research be concerned with the civil strife that took place between 1982 and 1987, when the wolf moved in the night. He even went on to lament that the Unity Accord of 1987, which brought to an end what is now commonly known as Gukurahundi atrocities, had serious shortfalls. These sentiments from the minority groups are but the tip of an iceberg of the simmering anger over what they view as neglect from the Central Government of Zimbabwe. This begs for an archival approach that softens their sentiments when collecting their oral traditions.

When the National Archives of Zimbabwe visited the Kalanga area in Plumtree in 2012, the same challenges were experienced. Plumtree is divided into two sections: one area is known as Mangwe and is occupied by the Ndebele, the other area is called Bulilima and it is mostly occupied by the Kalanga. One of the Oral History team members was of Kalanga origin and comes from the area by birth. It was easier for us to win their co-operation and deal with gatekeepers. Unfortunately this member was not able to speak Kalanga. One could see the disappointment from the faces of elders when they noted that one of theirs, because of assimilation, could not speak the mother language. These are people who, through their association with organisations such as Bu-kalanga-Muka-Kwayedza Culture Promotion Society, have even challenged the use of the word Matabeleland as they claim it is misleading in its assumption that almost everyone in Matabeleland is an Ndebele. They have therefore even proposed that instead of the region being called Matabeleland it

should be renamed Mavetokaland, which will be a term representing the Venda, the Tonga and the Kalanga. In one of the Bu-Kalanga-Muka-Kwayedza Circular X11, the Association argued that:

There should be no cause for people to be restricted in learning their own language and be made to switch to other ethnic groups' language, what for? What is wrong with theirs? These should be the evils which went with the colonialists; the long independent struggle was to eradicate such things The history of the Kalanga people should be printed now without delay not by the Kalanga themselves but by the usual history writers. Who does not know the Kalanga people were always here, Matabeleland Central, Matabeleland West, Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South. The Kalanga people were the first to see the Victoria Falls not Dr. David Livingstone as falsely stated in history. All the places here in Matabeleland were first seen by the Kalanga people. To prove this all their names are spelt in Kalanga, as follows: Tjolojolo, Tjolojolo, Tjilalabuhwa, Tjingwangombe (Mpangana), Pangani Mine (Matopo), Matombo, etc, etc ...

This long quotation is meant to show how sensitive the issue of language is in the so-called 'minority groups'. It becomes apparent that it will be a grave mistake for the National Archives of Zimbabwe to then venture into these areas and try to collect oral traditions in the language of the Ndebele 'oppressors'. In order to understand these sentiments expressed by the Kalanga, it is necessary to quote from May (2000: 369), cited by Maja (2008:3), in the following words:

... language loss is not only, perhaps not even primarily, a linguistic issue – it has much more to do with power, prejudice, (unequal) competition and, and in many cases, overt discrimination and subordination Language death seldom occurs in many communities of wealth and privilege, but rather to the dispossessed and disempowered.

Through the oral history interviews conducted with the Kalanga people, the issue of the language and the demotion of their chiefs during the colonial times were prevalent themes. In the interview, Siti (interview, 14 June 2012) said we want our children to learn their Kalanga language from grade one to form four without being forced to use the Ndebele language. Guma (interview, 13 June 2012) asked the interviewer that since he is claiming that he is here in order to preserve our culture, then how he is going to do that since he is conducting the interviews in Ndebele for Kalanga customs.

DRAWBACKS IN THE ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME AT THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF ZIMBABWE

The transcription of oral history testimonies is a very important stage as it converts the spoken word into printed paper. It is a cornerstone of oral history. In the developing world, especially in Zimbabwe, it is very important because the National Archives of Zimbabwe and its clients are used to a paper record. It is likely that they will

prefer to skim over the transcribed record than to listen to the recorded tape. And for logistic reasons, it is easier for the institution to provide the transcribed record than to give access to the recorded tape or a soft copy of the oral interview. In other words, transcription facilitates access to the oral archive. Shopes (2012) observed that:

The absence of transcripts, it must be noted, obviates some oral history's traditional protocols, including narrator review, annotation, and correction of narrator errors, which rely on transcripts. Omitting these steps can diminish the completeness and accuracy of the record. The lack of transcripts can also result in misquotation and inconsistencies in quotations of the same material appearing in different publications. The absence of paper transcripts is especially problematic for long-term preservation, given the instability and obsolescence of digital media.

Transcribing has always been a challenge at the National Archives of Zimbabwe. Clearing the backlog of those recordings that need to be transcribed has proven elusive. Mainly, this has been caused by the fact that there are few oral historians at the National Archives of Zimbabwe. There is one Oral Historian at the Head Office and in the five provincial centres there is one in each. As transcribing is a labour intensive job, it means that staff cannot cope with the work load. Failure to transcribe means that this oral history collection has been a waste. And all these objectives of trying to build a 'national' archive, which will represent 'everyone', will come to naught.

In order to mitigate these challenges, the secretaries and students on attachment have been roped in to assist in reducing the backlog of those recordings that have not been transcribed. However, the results of such an approach means sometimes one should expect shoddy work to be produced. One of the oral historian interviewed lamented that if too much time elapses before transcription, some tapes are affected by what he called print-through, lack of rewinding, and general neglect may mean that they deteriorate beyond transcription.

The Oral History Programme has been affected again by the issue of funding. The institution has found it difficult to sponsor its oral history programme. It has to rely on partnerships in order to make progress. This is not a new phenomenon. It has been there during pre-independence times. One Oral Historian interviewed mentioned that until the mid-1980s when the then Director's successes in the field of international aid became a feature, procurement of modern tape recorders and transcribing machines, and supply of tapes, was a problem; as was getting current oral history books and journals. In the Rhodesian sanctions years and early 1980s, interviewers often had to tape on top of existing interviews, that is re-use tapes, whereas ideally they should have been permanently preserved. In the current years the funding problem still persists. Murambiwa (2009: 33) complained that 'the National Archives of Zimbabwe does not have the resources, goodwill or intention to be the sole custodian of the 'Zimbabwe Archive'. Maybe at this juncture we can consider some of the reservations that have been expressed by some scholars who

think that Archival institutions should not engage in oral history collection. Dryden, cited by Swain (2003: 145), argued:

Active involvement of archivists in oral history is a dangerous departure from the traditional role of archivist. Archivists can identify “gaps” in their collection, but they do not have the expertise, the funding, or the time needed to conduct extensive research or anticipate questions of future researchers.

Nevertheless, despite these reservations, it is now generally agreed with postmodernism reasoning that archival institutions can just not be mere acquirers of material but need to create records that will fill the gap in the national record, hence their presence in the oral history programmes.

In some areas visited, the interviewees, especially those below 50 years, tended to ask how much money we are going to pay them for their testimonies as they stated that others who once came in the area paid them something for their oral tradition interviews. This is another issue that should be seriously considered when conducting oral history. Should Archives, academics or even journalists pay for the interviewees for their oral testimonies? As mentioned in the beginning of this essay, the academics and sometimes the journalists tend to collect oral history mainly for self-interest, so they can even pay for that information for them to be able to publish their academic articles or to complete their academic theses or dissertations. It therefore becomes unfortunate that once they set a precedent, those who come after them to collect oral history will find it difficult to break that precedent of paying for information.

The shortfalls that result from interviewing interviewees in a foreign language have been a serious drawback, as this essay has already expressed. The composition of staff at the National Archives of Zimbabwe is biased towards the so-called ‘majority’ ethnic groups. Minority groups are not visible in the staff at the National Archives of Zimbabwe. The Shona dominate whereas the Ndebele follow distantly. There are no Venda, Kalanga, Suthu, Xhosa, Shangani, Chewa, Nambya, Tonga or any from the so-called minority groups. So these communities of minority groups are then interviewed either in Ndebele or Shona. This challenge can, however, be addressed by adopting Thompson’s (1998: 21–28) approach, which advocates for the community itself to collect its own oral testimonies. Thompson (1998: 27) suggested that ‘through oral history the community can, and should, be given the confidence to write its own history’. Thompson argued:

There have been telling criticisms of a relationship with informers in which a middle-class professional determines who is to be interviewed and what is to be discussed and then disappears with a tape of somebody’s life which they never hear about again – and if they did, might be indignant at the unintended meanings imposed on their words.

Thompson (1998: 21-28) seems to argue that a community approach method is recommended for oral history. This approach can be best for the National Archives of Zimbabwe as it will also address the issue of the language. The minority groups as

communities can tell their testimonies in a community set-up under the supervision of the archival institution. Community language will be the one that will be used. Some critics may argue that this can lead to a biased history and they will prefer the outsiders because of their neutrality. However, the benefits seem to far outweigh the limitations. On the issue of language, the National Archives of Zimbabwe can also consider employing those from the minority groups even if it means adopting the affirmative policy that will favour the recruitment of these groups. This will also have the benefit of giving a positive impression that the National Archives of Zimbabwe is there for every creed in the nation and therefore also its collection is an embodiment of the whole nation, despite its ethnic and racial differences.

CONCLUSION

The National Archives of Zimbabwe is trying and doing its best in collecting the oral testimonies of different ethnic groups. Initially when the Oral History Unit was established in 1968 the target was very old white settlers who did come here as children or young adults in the early 1890s/early 1900s. That was the priority, to get their memories before they died. Later the approach changed as prominent black people were interviewed. Then after independence, the Programme then cut across all classes of the society. In other words it became inclusive. Minority groups' oral testimonies were also then collected and archived. However, the journey has not been smooth as such as issues such as funding, language, politics of ignoring the 'other' and the challenge of using 'proper oral history methodologies' continued to rear their ugly head. All these challenges have meant that while some gains have been noted, it has proved to be difficult to achieve a 'national archive' that represents the whole nation. That ghost of the 'archive of the elite', which was always there during the colonial period, appears to be difficult to exorcise as it is still present now but in different skin colour. What has changed are just actors.

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