



The silences and absences in Botswana's archives: Cross-examining colonial legacy

Tshepho Mosweu 

Department of Library and Information Studies, University of Botswana, Botswana

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Abstract

Focusing on colonial subjugation, this article examines the gaps and silences in the archives concerning Indigenous knowledge stewardship. Colonialism entangled African countries in colonial structures, including the preservation and archiving of Indigenous peoples' documentary heritage. As a former British colony, Botswana inherited the British method of archiving histories at the time of independence. Consequently, the national repositories do not accurately reflect the population's diversity and Indigenous knowledge production systems. This article takes a qualitative research approach by using a literature review to examine the silences and absences in the archives of Botswana. The findings indicate that the absences and silences at the national repositories in Botswana are attributed to factors such as foreign archiving methods, the abandonment of traditional and cultural practices, tribal discrimination and language suppression. Inspired by the concept of decoloniality, the article proposes an inclusive archiving practice that considers the country's diverse population and knowledge production.

Keywords

Indigenous knowledge, archives, Botswana, colonialism, documentary heritage

Introduction

Archives, in their various forms, are invaluable to nations, corporations, organizations, communities and individuals. They provide proof of activities or transactions, keep stories alive, capture the souls of individuals and can be an unparalleled source of information. Thus, there have to be set legislative and policy frameworks to manage and utilize them effectively (National Archives, 2025). Archival legislation requires national archival institutions to acquire, preserve and provide access to a country's documentary heritage. These institutions gather archival documents from various sources for future use and accessibility. However, there are instances where users or researchers are unable to find the information they expect in archival repositories due to gaps and silences in the archives. Moss and Thomas (2021) explain that the concept of archival silences and absences is familiar to anyone who has worked in a public reading room at a records office. They further say that this issue can be captured by the following question: Why are members of the public, who arrive at an archive with a reasonable expectation of finding the information they seek, often left disappointed? (Moss and Thomas, 2021) In

most cases, the silences and absences are attributed to colonial legacy. This has given rise to the term 'decolonizing the archives' in the archival literature. Decolonizing the archives involves examining and comprehending the factors that shape archival infrastructure, which includes understanding the conceptual scope of the principle of provenance, the criteria for selecting materials to digitize, the methods of description and the forms of agency involved in providing access (Jeurgens and Karabinos, 2020). Bastian and Griffin (2024) advise that as archivists can neither right the wrongs of the colonial past nor rewrite the records of those wrongs, they can seek and uncover new records that more accurately and authentically reflect decolonized populations. Furthermore, Bulhan (2015) points out that the legacy of colonialism on the way formerly colonized peoples acquire knowledge, understand their history, comprehend their world and define themselves has

Corresponding author:

Tshepho Mosweu, University of Botswana, Private Bag 00703, Gaborone, Botswana.
Email: lydhoss@gmail.com

not been sufficiently investigated. Hence, this article explores the role played by colonialism in creating the silences and absences in the archives in Botswana.

Contextual background

Botswana, situated at the centre of southern Africa and bordered by South Africa, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe, was one of the world's poorest countries at independence in 1966 (Morton and Ramsay, 2018). However, it quickly became a development success story, due to significant diamond wealth, good governance, prudent economic management and a small population of about 2.4 million. As a result of these developments, it aims to become a high-income country by 2036 (Botswana Press Agency, 2023; World Bank Group, 2023).

The mandate for archives and records management in Botswana is held by the Botswana National Archives and Records Service (BNARS) (Mosweu and Simon, 2018). The department was established by an Act of Parliament in 1978 under the Ministry of Home Affairs – the National Archives and Records Services Act of 1978, amended in 2007. The establishment of Botswana's archival institution was not a deliberate government effort but rather a matter of chance. Before 1966, Botswana was administered from Mafikeng, South Africa, as a British colony. As preparations were made for the Bechuanaland Protectorate (now Botswana) to gain independence and move its administration to Gaborone in 1965, there was a need to transfer the accumulated records to the new independent country. The Colonial Office seconded an archivist from the UK, C. H. Thompson, to appraise and transfer records dating back to the 1800s, which now constitute a sizable portion of Botswana's documentary heritage. This ensured administrative continuity from the colonial government (Thompson, 1970). In 1967, when the records were moved to Gaborone, there was no archival building, so one of the carport buildings of the presidential block was converted to house the archives. BNARS was officially inaugurated as a department of the Ministry of Home Affairs and moved to its current building in 1982. At the time of writing this paper, the department was under the Ministry of Youth, Gender, Sport and Culture Development.

Since independence, BNARS has faced several challenges, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. Keakopa (2010) identifies issues such as the collection of oral traditions, the repatriation of records from overseas, appraisal backlogs, training and retention, legislation, preservation, digitization, conservation, outreach and marketing, and the integration of records management programmes. Some of these issues persist today.

Mosweu (2021) notes a deficit in the preservation of private archives at BNARS, attributing this to a lack of legislative guidance on acquiring private archives before 2007, the short history of archives administration in Botswana, and the fact that archival institutions were traditionally the domain of state governments, which promoted the interests of the government in power over the people. These factors likely contributed to the silences and absences within the Botswana archival repositories.

Problem statement

The colonial history of most African countries has left significant silences and absences in the national archival repositories, shaping the way historical narratives are construed and limiting access to Indigenous voices and perspectives. Sartori (2021) contends that colonial archives are frequently filled with records that lack documentary agency and texts that are devoid of epistemic value, which fail to support the narratives of influential individuals. This is one of the reasons why archival institutions in the colonial era should embark on initiatives that fill the gaps and absences in the post-colonial archives. Bastian and Griffin (2024) argue that the archival memory of the Caribbean is shaped by colonial documentary legacies, which overshadow human triumph over adversity, pride in self-sufficiency, and the fierce and persistent dedication to political and social independence of the former Caribbean colonies.

In Africa, Namhila (2015) notes that Namibia's national archives, like those of other African countries, inherited distorted records from the colonial government. These records marginalized the colonized people and misrepresented their self-determination efforts – a problem that persists. Ngoepe (2022) contends that despite South Africa's 28 years of democracy then, the archival landscape remained unchanged, continued to be dominated by western influences with minimal Africanization. This pattern is prevalent across Africa. Bhebhe and Mosweu (2018) highlight that during the colonial era, the histories of the Black populations in Botswana and Zimbabwe were ignored in favour of the colonial masters' narratives, leading to a form of cultural genocide where African knowledge production was undervalued. Consequently, they advocate for the collection of oral histories to address the gaps in national archival repositories. Netshakhuma (2019) also suggests that national archival institutions in southern Africa should initiate oral history projects to address the gaps in the undocumented history of previously disadvantaged Africans caused by colonial powers. Hence, this article

explores the silences and absences in the archives of Botswana with a view to proposing an inclusive archiving practice that considers the country's diverse population.

Research questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What has given rise to the silences and absences in Botswana's archival repositories?
2. What alternative methods are there to address these a silences and absences?

Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative research design with a literature review that examines the way colonial biases have shaped historical records, resulting in gaps in the archives (Rana et al., 2021). Creswell (2012) states that a literature review is vital to a research project, as it enables the researcher to show the importance of their topic. This is done by an exploration of the literature and the identification of studies that illustrate the significance of the problem being investigated. This article relies on secondary data from academic sources relevant to archival silences in post-colonial Africa, especially Botswana.. A systematic search using databases like Google Scholar and JSTOR was conducted with keywords such as 'archival silences' and 'colonial archives'. Thematic analysis identified key themes, such as colonial bias, the marginalization of Indigenous voices and efforts to decolonize archives, as advised by Kumar (2011) on data processing in qualitative studies. The study does not include empirical data and is based on existing literature, with no ethical concerns related to human subjects.

A brief literature review

This section presents the literature review based on the research questions. The article has been shaped by a growing literature that examines the impact of colonial record-keeping practices on historical narratives and memory construction.

Although Bulhan (2015) posits that the legacy of colonialism on knowledge acquisition and the understanding of the history of former colonies has not been adequately explored, many researchers are now investigating this phenomenon. In their book, Ngoepe and Bhebhe (2023) advocate for African people to embrace Afrocentric approaches in preserving their memories, rather than relying on dominant Eurocentric epistemologies. They propose a concept they term 're-Africanising the archive', which includes strategies

such as repatriating migrated archives, redescribing archival records, establishing community archives and decolonizing the curriculum. Bastian and Griffin (2024) support this argument, suggesting that the increasing interest in communities creating and maintaining their own unique forms of archives reflects a redignification of their elders and cultural heritage.

In their study on rethinking the history of marginalized communities in the Caribbean, Bastian and Griffin (2024) point out that the archival memory of the Caribbean is built on colonial records of conquest, enslavement and suppression. However, within these communities, there is also evidence of human triumph over adversity, pride in self-sufficiency, and a fierce dedication to political and social independence. They argue that this resilience is demonstrated through political movements, oral narratives, heroic legends and alternative interpretations of colonial records. They recommend decolonizing 21st-century archival holdings by incorporating digital technology to advance, promote, preserve, and provide access to spoken and performed records, treating them with the same importance as textual records.

The Caribbean situation mirrors Ngoepe's (2022) findings regarding African societies. Ngoepe (2022) argues that dominant western frameworks have historically categorized oral memories in Africa as pre-legal and non-legal. In a study examining oral memory as a reliable record during turbulent times, Ngoepe (2022) posits that African societies have long communicated and preserved valuable information through memory, murals and rock-art paintings. The study concludes that oral memory indeed qualifies as a record and necessitates proactive preservation efforts.

Collaboration between memory institutions has been recognized as a key strategy to ensure public access to oral history. Schellnack-Kelly and Saurombe (2024) report on a scholarship project between the University of South Africa's Department of Information Science and the Gauteng Provincial Archives. This project has successfully trained archivists, academic staff and community members to conduct oral history projects, thereby developing a more inclusive archival collection. In 2022, an open educational resource was created to teach archivists oral history research techniques and the application of research ethics. Schellnack-Kelly and Saurombe suggest that such collaborative efforts could accelerate changes in the archives sector.

Findings and discussion

This section presents the findings and discussions based on the aim of the study – that is, questioning

the silences and absences in the archives regarding Indigenous knowledge stewardship.

The rise of silences and absences

The use of archival materials at BNARS is minimal, due to the silences and absences within the repositories. Moss and Thomas (2021) argue that these silences are latent and only become apparent when researchers seek specific information. For example, in Botswana, there was a time when users attempted to access records on the drafting of Botswana's constitution and BNARS could not provide constitutional consultation minutes (*Sunday Standard* (2015)). Some related records were later found at the UK National Archives. This section explores the factors contributing to these silences and absences in Botswana's archives.

Foreign archiving practices. As a British protectorate, Botswana adopted British archiving methods. The British archivist C. H. Thompson appraised the records and determined which were to be classified as archives based on European standards. Archival theory, which prioritizes written records, may not effectively capture African societies' memories, which are often passed down by the spoken word. For generations, traditions and culture in Africa have been transmitted orally. Currently, BNARS's archival sources include government offices (public archives), private organizations, individuals, non-governmental bodies (private archives), oral history and other countries (migrated archives). Similarly, in Latin America, Roldan (2022) notes that colonial and nation-building models based on Latin traditions have left a lasting impression on archival practices. Consequently, local people often do not relate to these archival repositories, leading to absences and silences in the archives. Ngoepe (2022) reports on a comparable situation in South Africa regarding African societies.

Abandonment of traditional and cultural practices. The missionaries who introduced Christianity convinced people that their traditional and cultural practices were heathen and sinful, forcing some to practise these traditions secretly to avoid being labelled as witches. Nkomazana and Setume (2016) argue that despite the rich cultural and religious traditions of the Batswana, western missionaries chose to reject or marginalize these traditions, which were based on the concept of the Supreme Being from time immemorial. This rejection has led to less documentation of these traditions and cultural practices, resulting in silences and absences in Botswana's archives.

Tribal discrimination. Before amendments, Botswana's Constitution, the Tribal Territories Act and the Chieftainship Act recognized only '8 major tribes' (Nyathi-Ramahobo, 2009), despite that the country had over 30 others. Nyathi-Ramahobo (2009) argues that these recognized tribes enjoy linguistic and cultural rights that are not afforded to non-recognized tribes, including access to chieftaincy, permanent membership in the House of Chiefs, group rights to land, territorial and ethnic identity, public celebration of their culture, and the use of their language in education and the media. Bennett (2002) notes that, unlike other parts of Africa where colonial governments used 'divide and rule' tactics, the Bechuanaland Protectorate (Botswana) maintained the power of the chiefs as the most convenient form of government, suppressing minority resistance to Tswana power. Mooketsane and Suping (2018) observe that Botswana's approach to minorities, such as the Basarwa, has been to exclude or limit their participation in decision-making and policy formulation. This discrimination and exclusion has led to the documentation of the histories and narratives of mostly the eight major tribes at the expense of other ethnic groups, resulting in absences and silences in the archives.

Language suppression. In Botswana, Setswana is the national language and the official languages are Setswana and English. Most official records are written in English. Consequently, the education system supports dominant societal ideologies, where the mode of instruction in schools is English and Setswana. It is only now that the government is considering introducing first languages in schools. The language situation in Botswana has been extensively documented, even during the colonial period, through the research of the anthropologist Isaac Schapera (Chebanne, 2016). Chebanne (2016) points out that Botswana is both multi-ethnic and multilingual, with about 26 ethnic languages spoken in the country. The languages can be divided into three groupings: (1) those of the Bantu family, spoken by over 96% of the population and comprising Setswana, Ikalanga, Shekgalagari, Chikuhane, Thimbukushu, Shiyeyi, Sebirwa, Setswapong, Nambya, Otjijherero and Zezuru; (2) those of the Khoisan (Basarwa) family, spoken by only about 3% of the population but comprising many linguistic entities, including Naro, !Xoo, Hua, Jul'hoan, Kx'au 'ein, Nama, Kua, Shua, Tshwa, Kwedam and G//ui; and (3) those of the Indo-European family – namely, Afrikaans and English (Chebanne, 2016). The government's policy of designating Setswana as the national language has

led to the under-representation of other ethnic groups' languages in mainstream narratives and knowledge production, thereby creating silences and absences in the archives.

Alternative archiving methods

This study has identified several ways in which African communities – specifically Botswana – express and document their culture and history, effectively 'archiving' their heritage. Incorporating non-textual formats such as oral history into archives helps achieve a deeper understanding of knowledge and memory production, and establishes equity in the value and significance of this knowledge within the community context. To address the silences and absences in the archives, several factors should be taken into consideration.

Recognition and documentation of Indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge encompasses the accumulated wisdom that societies use in their socio-economic activities, social interactions, spiritual connections, healing rituals and life aspirations (Batibo, 2013). Unfortunately, Indigenous knowledge systems in southern African countries have been marginalized and suppressed. Nevertheless, the Botswana possess knowledge and practices related to nature and the universe. For instance, traditional doctors have knowledge of herbs, and Botswana can predict annual droughts by observing the shape of the moon. As an agricultural society, they rely on rain for crop cultivation and have Indigenous knowledge about weather patterns. Another example is the Basarwa's animal-tracking skills, where they can determine the distance an animal has travelled and the status of its health just by examining the footprints. This knowledge resides within knowledge carriers and is not documented in writing. Therefore, if archivists focus solely on written records, they risk missing the preservation of a society's cultural heritage in its entirety.

Oral history. Oral tradition encompasses narratives (or stories) that are used to teach skills, transmit cultural values, convey news, record family and community histories, and explain the natural world. Zimu-Biyela (2022) found that oral history archives in a village community in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, were not sufficiently managed, preserved or published to enhance accessibility and visibility. Traditional archives have often been used by the powerful to tell their stories at the expense of marginalized, under-represented and minority groups (Bhebhe and Mosweu, 2018). Recognizing that knowledge transmission in African societies tends to be oral and

acknowledging the marginalization brought by colonialism, there is a need for African archival institutions to document oral histories for long-term preservation and access. Schellnack-Kelly and Saurombe (2024) highlight ongoing efforts to decolonize and transform archives by incorporating oral history accounts into existing collections. This was the route taken by national archival institutions in Botswana and Zimbabwe, where they introduced oral history programmes to address the silences and absences in the historical records of Black populations left by colonization (Bhebhe and Mosweu, 2018; Mosweu, 2011). Documenting oral history for sustainable community development includes recording all aspects of languages, cultural experiences, history and folklore for long-term preservation. Ngoepe and Bhebhe (2023) recommend reinventing, reusing and promoting the oral African archive, which is embodied in African traditional literature such as riddles, proverbs and folk tales, as well as murals and rock-art paintings.

Traditional craftsmanship. Traditional craftsmanship encompasses pottery and other crafted objects, focusing on traditional knowledge and skills rather than the tangible items themselves. These skills and knowledge are passed down through generations through customary modes of transmission and regulations. For example, earthenware-pottery-making skills are practised within the Bakgatla-ba-Kgafela community in south-eastern Botswana, where they are passed down to daughters and granddaughters through observation and hands-on practice (UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2017). Therefore, their preservation would bring the voices and presences in the archives and memories of Botswana.

Other traditional practices. In Botswana, rain-making rituals involve performing dances such as the Wosana to invoke rain. During these performances, valuable information and knowledge are transferred, much of which remains undocumented – for example, the Wosana rain-making ritual performed by the Bakalanga in the North-East and Central Districts of Botswana. According to UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage (2022), the related knowledge and skills are transmitted through observation, regular practice and mentoring, although the observance of the ritual has decreased over time. As these practices become scarce, national archival institutions should proactively ensure their preservation for future generations and access, thereby filling the gaps in the archives.

There are also festive events like Dikgafela in Botswana – a harvest festival that celebrates the

current harvest and requests rain for the next season. During this festival, women sing rain songs while carrying pots of traditional beer on their heads, which they present to the *kgosi* ('king') to be later shared with the villagers. Men carry branches of the sacred Moologa tree (*Daily News*, 2019). Other traditional ways in which the Batswana transmit knowledge include dances and songs, such as the Wosana, Tsutsube and Seperu. For example, the Seperu dance involves singing, dancing and sacred rituals among Veekehane community members and is performed during significant life events such as weddings and the installation of the Dikgosi (traditional leaders) (UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2019). These traditions are not easily found preserved in national repositories for access, and documenting them would ensure representation and inclusion.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the western archival methods adopted by African societies during colonialism, which primarily focus on written records, have been insufficient in capturing the full spectrum of African memories, leading to the silences and absences in national archival repositories. This inadequacy highlights the need for new archival models that address the demands of the post-colonial and decolonial era in Africa. Post-colonial national archival institutions must recognize and embrace the diverse forms of knowledge – tangible and intangible, textual and oral, fixed and fluid – through which societies document themselves. The archives and records of a society are integral to its cultural heritage, and archival institutions are among the key entities responsible for documenting, preserving and providing access to archives. In doing so, archives would move towards presence and representation, where voices are not just preserved but also recognized and valued.

Recommendations

The complete integration of all voices in the archives is still a challenge, despite encouraging indications that formerly colonized societies are increasingly establishing their own voices, decolonizing their history and rejecting imposed frameworks. Based on this study's findings, the following suggestions are made:

- Botswana's national archival institution should improve its documentation efforts by creating national programmes to methodically document

Indigenous knowledge, oral histories and traditional practices.

- The archival legislation and other heritage laws of former colonies must be changed to specifically require the acquisition and preservation of records from marginalized groups. Inclusive documentation policies ought to be put in place to acknowledge the cultural contributions, knowledge practices and life stories of marginalized communities.
- The official status of Botswana's Indigenous languages must be extended beyond English and Setswana for more diverse collections. Furthermore, archival training in local languages is also recommended to empower community-based documentation efforts.
- Post-colonial archives should create formal partnerships between archives, libraries, museums and other heritage institutions to promote knowledge-sharing and collaborative preservation efforts. Supporting interdisciplinary research projects that mix archival science, anthropology and Indigenous studies is crucial for a more comprehensive preservation approach. The outcomes will no longer be silences and absences, but voices and presences that reflect the full scope of lived experiences.

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ORCID iD

Tshepho Mosweu  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2144-7544>

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Author biography

Tshepho Mosweu is a senior lecturer at the University of Botswana specializing in archives, records and knowledge management. Her background includes serving as an archivist at the Botswana National Archives and Records Services. Holding a PhD in Information Science from the University of South Africa, Dr Mosweu actively contributes to international projects such as InterPARES Trust AI and

Catalyzing African Community Archives project at the University of Illinois. She also serves as deputy editor for the *Journal of the South African Society of Archivists*, chairs Records and Information Association in Botswana

(RIAB) and is an International Council on Archives (ICA) Expert Group on Advocacy member. Her scholarly work spans publications on diverse topics such as electronic records, digital curation and oral history.