

Challenges presented by digitisation of VhaVenda oral tradition: An African indigenous knowledge systems perspective

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The 21st century has witnessed an urgent need to digitise, learn, manage, preserve and exchange oral history in South Africa. This forms the background of the demonisation of indigenous knowledge systems that has impacted negatively and eroded the African values, norms, purpose, growth, sustainability and improvement of indigenous communities. In light of this realisation, this article explores the challenges offered by digitisation of VhaVenda oral history. It is well known that the digitisation of oral tradition carries both the good and the bad. Journalists, academics and archivists of oral history cannot become spectators and allow challenges to stop them from collecting, recording and managing valuable heritages. The article is premised upon the Sankofa and critical theory frameworks. An Afrocentric participatory and exploratory qualitative research design was employed to investigate the data. VhaVenda knowledge holders, journalists, academics, and archivists' views were solicited using semistructured interviews. Participants were selected using purposive sampling. The article's findings unveiled that the digitisation of VhaVenda oral tradition has been an acute daily agony because of the following thorny issues: language issues, methodological challenges, sponsorship and the politics of preferring. Because the country faces the danger of losing out on gaining the benefits of VhaVenda oral history, the authors encourage and promote a holistic approach embracing multiple stakeholders to overcome the challenges faced in digitising the VhaVenda oral tradition.

Contribution: The study advocates for the balancing of ancient traditional forms and relating them to present technology so that oral history trajectories march into the future, grounded in Afrocentric expressions whilst maintaining flexibility to accommodate the versatile nature of culture by embracing technology.

Keywords: oral history; oral tradition; digitisation; indigenous knowledge systems; archivists; VhaVenda.

Introduction

Sillitoe, Dixon and Barr (2005:3) note that in antiquity, most African countries relied on their diverse Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKSs), which were an 'important tool to govern peace, tranquillity, harmony and order in the midst of people and their physical and spiritual realm'. However, with the advent of colonisation, IKSs which were their 'flesh and blood' were demonised, thereby resulting in neglect and throwing the hopes and potentials of IKSs in the dustbin (Mawere 2014:18). This dawn of colonial rule and birth of Christian churches witnessed Africa being labelled the 'dark continent', and followers of traditional norms called heathens and witches (Kugara 2017; Kingsbury 1998). Thus, from the colonial epoch to this modern day, IKSs have been lost, and if they remain unpreserved, they will go extinct (Mdhluli et al. 2021). Furthermore, Masoga (2005) opines that numerous indigenous communities in Africa were directly and indirectly affected by colonisation, which led to the loss of individual and community identity. As such, cultural norms and values were lost. What is heartbreaking is the manner in which African indigenous methods of knowledge management were disrupted.

Fundamentally, despite the onslaught on African indigenous thought (predominantly their knowledge and culture), the Vhavenda communities in South Africa did not negate their IKSs. Through the apartheid regime, African indigenous law was promulgated to govern African

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indigenous communities. According to Ludsin (2003:66), the 'colonial government recognised and allowed customary law for pragmatic purposes'. An analysis of these customary laws showed that they were only allowed to be laws if they were consistent with the rules of natural justice. It is also argued that in this way, IKSs were veiled in legal obscurity as they were tailor-made to meet their suzerains' standards. Consequently, some IKSs were replaced with alien laws that distorted the pure IKSs as they are known today. For instance, the long-standing and deeply entrenched male primogeniture is no longer accepted and seen as discrimination against women. According to the Conflicts of Law, South African Legal Communication Discussion Paper 76 (30 June 1998:1-2), 'the colonial governments considered recognition of African value systems through customary law as a privilege awarded to natives, a privilege that could be taken away or awarded'. Despite all this, oral history proved an indispensable tool to sustain oral tradition, especially amongst the Vhavenda people in Limpopo.

Oral history, in its simplest form, hinges on a dialogue between 'a speaking interviewee and a listening and questioning interviewer' (Ritchie 2014). On the other hand, Baum (2007:22) defined it as 'the systematic way of collecting oral testimonies from people passed from one generation to another by word of mouth through interviews'. In spite of such definitions, it should be made clear that the dynamic and creative nature of oral history makes it difficult to conform it to a single definition. Looking at it as a method in oral history, it is argued to be efficacious in capturing and collecting history, poetry, literature and other diverse oral forms. Capturing such stories of the marginalised, oppressed and economically disadvantaged is of indispensable value for sociopolitical transformation.

Like most traditional societies, the Vhavenda people preserve their culture, traditions, beliefs, values, norms and other cultural practices through word of mouth or orally (Raphalalani 2017). From time immemorial, the custodians of culture in the Venda society have been the elders. Because of the lack of durable and sustainable indigenous knowledge preservation mechanisms, considerable sections of this wealth of knowledge are lost when elderly people die. This reality leaves younger generations culturally deprived and without a reference point or an absolute sense of indigenous consciousness, awareness and self-identity.

Looking at the extinction of VhaVenda oral history, the importance of digitising oral history cannot be overemphasised. Before proceeding, one should have a glimpse of who the VhaVenda people are. The VhaVenda (Venda or Vhangona) are Southern African Bantu people residing generally close to the South African-Zimbabwean border. According to historical studies:

As with most of the other tribal peoples of Southern Africa, the Venda migrated southwards from Central Africa. They are regarded to be one of the last black groups to have crossed the Limpopo River. They first settled in the Soutpansberg Mountains. King Shiriyadenga was the first king of Mapungubwe and Venda, who united the two and formed Vhangona or Vhavhenda. (Le Roux 2003:44)

Extrapolating from the above, one can argue that the history of the VhaVenda starts from the 9th century at Mapungubwe under the reign of King Shiriyadenga. During the apartheid system, the land of the Venda was designated a homeland. Today, numerous Venda-speaking people reside in Vhembe district, Limpopo province, South Africa. Like most traditional societies, the VhaVenda people preserve their culture, traditions, beliefs, values, norms and other cultural practices orally.

The 21st century has witnessed an urgent need to digitise, learn, manage, preserve and exchange oral history and oral tradition in South Africa. Against this background is the demonisation of VhaVenda IKSs that have impacted negatively and eroded the African values, norms, purpose, growth, sustainability and improvement of indigenous communities. It is because of this that the authors choose to interchange ideas and see the efficacy of digitising the VhaVenda oral tradition.

Even though the capturing, managing and preservation of digital information is unquestionably expensive and requires highly skilled personnel and apparatus, Ritchie (2014:16) advises that the 'new technology should be approached with vigilance with respect to oral tradition'. The digitisation of VhaVenda oral tradition has raised challenges related to the methodologies followed, funding and politics around the preservation of digital heritage materials for archivists and librarians. The alleged erosion of VhaVenda indigenous knowledge and cultural values is a process that negatively affects oral history scholars in the African Studies discourse. Through oral history, children and adults learn about their communities, which helps in the perpetuation of societal structures, laws, language and values inherited from the past (Nxumalo & Mncube 2018). Hence there is a call for the digital preservation of knowledge within a decolonised, Afrocentric framework. The following objective was explored: to explore the challenges presented by digitisation of VhaVenda oral tradition from an African IKSs perspective.

Literature review and theoretical framework

This section is categorised into two parts, namely the theoretical framework and literature review. The first section maps out the theoretical landscape upon which this article is premised. The second section situates the article in relation to the body of literature on indigenous knowledge, oral history and their digitisation. The article is premised upon the Sankofa and critical theories which are discussed below.

Sankofa theory

Sankofa is presented as a principle by the Akan people of going forward to the future but having retrieved things that are in the past which are at risk of being lost. The authors

harness Sankofa as a theory because it underpins the fact that African indigenous peoples ought to capitalise on their African indigenous knowledge in a bid for a sustainable roadmap to the future (Dei 2012). On this basis, the Sankofa theory stems from the Sankofa bird found in West Africa which can look behind itself whilst flying forward. The Sankofa theory derives from the Adinkra symbol, a bird looking backward but flying forward with an egg in its mouth. The theory construes the egg as a precious treasure that has been passed from generation to generation and should be preserved for the future generations. It is also anticipated that this precious treasure ought to be handled with care lest it break and deprive future generations of such valuable knowledge. Therefore, the authors through this theory submit that African indigenous communities must be proud to revisit their past and ensure they take hold of all indispensable knowledge that can be useful in the future and for sustainable development. The Akan people of Ghana reckon that the past enlightens the present and that the quest for knowledge is a continuing process (Beale 2013). Slater (2019) provides vivid imagery about the Sankofa bird and Sankofaism:

This bird has its feet planted firmly on the ground, and the head is turned backwards. The symbol and the word, when translated together, literally mean it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind. This symbol has been interpreted and re-interpreted in several different ways, but what it really symbolises is that the Akan people's search for knowledge is based on critical reasoning, as well as intelligent and patient investigation of the past. The Akan people are of the opinion that the past serves as a guide when planning for the future and obtaining the wisdom of the past enables planning for a strong future. Visually and symbolically, Sankofa is expressed as a mythic bird that flies forward while looking back with an egg (symbolising the future) in its mouth, or sometimes portrayed as a stylised heart. (pp. 2-3)

Within the context of this study, the general belief is that African indigenous knowledge is being eroded and there is no hope of recovering it if scholars in African Studies and other relevant disciplines do not come to the fore to gather, preserve and disseminate this information. Buttressing the latter, Dei (2012) submits that from the conceptualisation of Sankofaism, African indigenous ways of knowing are promoted. Thus, from this theory, a sustainable and rewarding future is promised as past, present and future bridges are built. Furthermore, Eshun (2011) opines that this gives the renaissance catalyst for the better management of African indigenous knowledge, a bedrock that paves the way for unadulterated methodologies, policies and laws for African people. Bastos (2009) also agrees that the Sankofa theory is the right direction for pursuing decolonisation of education, philosophy and other aspects worthy of confronting to represent African indigenous peoples.

Critical theory

In this article, VhaVenda indigenous knowledge is also explored from a perspective of being a culture-specific and responsive approach to challenges presented by digitisation

(Liddell & Talpade 2014). A part of critical theory involves balancing the Sankofa's path of going back to ancient traditional forms and relating them to present technology so that oral history trajectories march into the future, grounded in Afrocentric expressions, whilst maintaining the flexibility to accommodate the elastic nature of culture by embracing technology. The values inherent in VhaVenda oral history are explored and the pearls of knowledge from the institutional holders are invoked as a way of looking back in order to accentuate the sociocultural significance of oral history for the present.

Literature review

The current literature review interweaves key aspects gleaned from these subject areas into a tapestry through which to rethink, reimagine, reshape and steer the safeguarding, preservation, access, promotion and dissemination of VhaVenda oral tradition.

Indigenous knowledge

Integrating IKs with conventional systems, also called Western Scientific Knowledge (WSK), is a difficult enterprise based on the culture of silence and failure by the government to confront the truth (Ajayi & Mafongoya 2017). From the latter, it can be deduced that even though policies and laws have been promulgated to give recognition to the rights of indigenous peoples and their indigenous knowledge, much needs to be done as there is a lack of practical recognition and implementation. According to Phuntsok (2012:943), the 'plight to address these rights and recognition surfaced in the international sphere, culminating in 2007 with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)'. Nonetheless, the indispensable question of 'definition, identity, ethical values, rights and beliefs' of indigenous peoples are still obscured and it is no wonder that the policies and laws fail to fully address it. This narrative is noted to attempt to scratch the surface of the same state regarding oral history. The essence of this undertaking is to lay a solid foundation in understanding oral history within African indigenous communities and the thorny issue of digitisation.

Additionally, to date there has not been a single definition formulated in legislation to define 'indigenous peoples' (Sillitoe 2010). This lacuna in the law has been caused by the fact that there are still thorny debates on who exactly are indigenous peoples. The burning question regarding the nature and status of rights possessed by indigenous peoples was tabled in the context of Africa by the African Commission in the notorious case of Endorois (no. 276/2003). Astonishingly, the word 'peoples' also emerged as a contentious term. As such, the African Charter drafters abstained from making any proposal for any definitions. The African Commission couched the following words regarding the concept of 'peoples':

Despite its mandate to interpret all provisions of the African Charter as per Article 45(3), the African Commission initially shied away from interpreting the concept of 'people'. The African Charter

itself does not define the concept. Initially the African Commission did not feel at ease in developing rights where there was little concrete international jurisprudence. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights do not define 'peoples'. It is evident that the drafters of the African Charter intended to distinguish between traditional individual rights where the sections preceding Article 17 make reference to 'every individual'. Article 18 serves as a break by referring to the family. Articles 19–24 make specific reference to 'all peoples'. (Udombana 2003:32)

In the above quote, 'people' is construed as closely linked to collective rights. The term 'indigenous people(s)', just like 'people(s)', attracted heated debates that will not be easily resolved. According to Martinez (2001:557), 'indigenous peoples' were defined in 1991 by the World Bank as 'social groups with a social and cultural identity distinct from the dominant society that makes vulnerability to being disadvantaged by the development process'.

Conversely, Lane (2011:23) elucidates 'indigenous peoples' as 'culturally distinct ethnic groups with a different identity from the national society, draw existence from local resources and are politically non-dominant'. Similarly:

[I]ndigenous people are those which have a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. (Martinez 2001:556)

Notwithstanding the variations in the different definitions given by diverse scholars, one standout is the fact that they have some common elements. As such, one general definition that is easy to extrapolate from the numerous definitions is that 'indigenous peoples' are:

[P]ersons living in an area within a nation-state prior to the formation of a nation-state, but may identify with it and have maintained a great part of their distinct beliefs, cultural, and organisational features. (Kugara 2017:67)

The currents scholars submit that 'indigenous peoples', on the basis of this article, will be construed to 'mean the proprietors of unique cultural, social, beliefs, and knowledge systems of practices that can be utilised for sustainable management of natural resources and governance of life' (Kugara 2017:67).

Digitisation

Digitisation is the conversion of the physical format of material into electronic format. According to Enhuber (2015), digitisation involves:

The conversion of analogue information in any form (text, photographs, voice, etc.) to digital form with suitable electronic devices (such as scanners or specialised computer chips) so that the information can be processed, stored, and transmitted through digital circuits, equipment, and networks. (p. 127)

The rapid loss of indigenous knowledge within communities, particularly in Africa, is a cause for concern and calls for

interventions to safeguard such knowledge (Sraku-Lartey et al. 2017). In modern times, from the moment modern children are born, they are greeted by a torrent of digital entertainment platforms (UNICEF 2017). In the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage, UNESCO (2017) defined safeguarding as:

[M]easures aimed at ensuring the viability of intangible heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and informal education and revitalisation of the various aspects of such heritage. (p. 17)

Digital technologies have thus ushered in new opportunities and threats to the cultural fabric of most societies. The cultural sector is presented with a challenge to find appropriate ways to navigate in this new reality, as digital technology involves rendering certain practices obsolete whilst certain practices which were deemed impracticable and unviable have become the new normal (Uzelac 2010). Lenzerini (2011) laments that not only are certain diverse expressions of culture becoming extinct, but also that 'the rich cultural variety of humanity is heading towards uniformity'. In cultural terms, uniformity means not only loss of cultural diversity in terms of heritage, but also the standardisation of the 'different peoples of the world and of their social and cultural identity into a few stereotyped ways of life, thinking, and perceiving the world' (Uzelac 2010:27). Digitisation opens up opportunities for long-term preservation and wider dissemination of (and much easier access to) oral history (Sraku-Lartey et al. 2017).

Asking about the possibilities of digitising VhaVenda oral tradition, the authors engaged with a participant on the challenges that digitisation can unleash. In his response, he noted:

'Digitisation clones the original nature of a thing; in addition, it takes it to foreign context [rather] than local. In other words, digitisation makes our traditional norms and values ... lose their traditional flavour.' (V3, archivist)

Given the above response, one can say that digitisation damages the traditional flavour of oral tradition. Moreover, it can also be argued that digitisation is a Western concept which involves the integration or infusion of technology in IKs.

Methodology

An exploratory qualitative research design was chosen to give an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the subject matter (Creswell & Creswell 2017). The authors chose to use semistructured interviews to give flexibility to participants. Depending on the status of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) restrictions and having to consider the lockdown regulations, e-methods and face-to-face interviews were used for the interviews. Three VhaVenda knowledge holders who are elders of 60 years and above, three journalists who report on oral history, three academics who study oral history and three archivists based in the Vhembe and Capricorn districts

of Limpopo were chosen through purposive sampling. They were first chosen on the basis of being part of the VhaVenda ethnic group and also the knowledge they possessed. The authors also adhered to social distancing to prevent the contracting and spread of the novel coronavirus. The authors also meticulously ensured that confidentiality, privacy, voluntary participation, informed consent, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice were upheld (Creswell 2014).

Discussion of findings

The findings are discussed thematically below.

Language issue

Participants indicated a thorny issue in the way interviews were done and how data was collected and finally analysed. The authors learned that in collecting VhaVenda oral histories, the process is mainly dominated by non-Tshivenda speakers and few Tshivenda translators. The issue of using non-Tshivenda languages for interviews emerged as an obstacle. The fact that the team of archivists cannot speak Tshivenda was noted to be a discomfort amongst Tshivenda communities. Tshivenda communities were taken aback and demanded answers as to why Tshivenda people and/or speakers could not be employed by an oral history initiative so that they could learn, capture, digitise, manage, preserve and disseminate VhaVenda oral history.

Based on the above, the whole process of learning, capturing, digitising, managing, preserving and disseminating VhaVenda oral tradition was perceived as discriminatory and political. Lessons must be learnt by oral history practitioners in finding ways that accommodate and resonate with diverse indigenous communities' values and norms. Bhebhe (2015:51) argues that 'language is the vehicle of culture, [and therefore] some of the IKSs are preserved within the language'. Deducing from this quote and participants' submissions, the authors argue that if language is the vehicle of culture, then the usage of a 'foreign language' in collecting oral traditions of a specific indigenous community should be avoided and native speakers of the language should be employed to ensure that all aspects are captured precisely without any room for error. It also emerged that the use of 'foreign languages' to speak to Tshivenda knowledge holders created an awkward environment that made the interviewer and interviewee not at ease in a casual environment and unable to properly establish a solid personal rapport. One elderly participant said:

'Mmmmm ... do you know the feeling of talking to someone who doesn't hear what you are saying? They only rely with their translator. It's never a dialogue. You discover when they probe that they are saying what I never said. At times, I would have used deep Venda to imply something, but what they will be reporting is something else. As Africans, we also speak with our hands and facial expressions, and if the person is an outsider, it's [a] disaster.' (P1, VhaVenda knowledge holder)

The usage of verbal and non-verbal language within VhaVenda communities was considered an indispensable tool. With

sadness of heart, the researchers learned that outsiders gave weird and bizarre interpretations to some of the Tshivenda gestures used in their oral tradition. For instance, *ulotsha* [bowing down] by women has been in the past construed to mean a patriarchal society rather than genuine selfless respect. As such, it was necessary for an oral history practitioner to be well oriented and to pay attention to the interpretations they attach to verbal and non-verbal language. Adding to this, the communication skills peculiar to the community were said to be key in the process and were noted to impact the information that was reported. Two examples were cited by the participants in this regard. Firstly, they noted the ability of the interviewer to ask or present difficult questions without upsetting the informants. Secondly, they indicated emphatically that a good interviewer should always be a good listener, and this will give them a good reputation when they choose the right questions to elicit a good testimonial when probing.

Extrapolating from the above, participants opined that because oral history is a transformative process of listening and retelling, the reporting language was noted to be a challenge in many respects. Participants concurred that listening and retelling was one of the challenging parts in oral history, as it was difficult to pass on a story precisely when writing or speaking on behalf of another. However, it was noted that being faithful to the testimonial given and shunning exaggeration was key to avoid misrepresentation. To achieve this, the person carrying out the interview should fight tooth and nail to appreciate the informant's unadulterated perspective. The latter is key as the 'political ideologies, attitudes towards the topic of the interview, or the opinions and experiences of the informant' (Sepúlveda 2000:14) greatly impact the story interpretation.

Methodological challenges

Participants opined that there is analysis paralysis when Tshivenda oral tradition is collected, managed, analysed and disseminated in a methodology that does not embrace the values and norms that are indispensable for that community. In other words, the researchers unearthed that if Tshivenda cultural practices (values and norms) are disregarded in compiling Tshivenda oral tradition, then that research may be applied in deplorable ways. Consequently, participants advocated that if justice is to be done, Tshivenda methodologies must be underpinned by an African setting and administered from a Tshivenda viewpoint without belittling the community of origin.

Even though some participants argued that African perspectives are never relegated to the dustbin in African oral tradition, they agreed that the existing methods in some way fall short of satisfying all the African indigenous ethics. In that vein, the authors argued that existing oral history methodologies should not be accused of being malicious as there is no documented rubric that stands as a guide to follow. Without casting a blind eye to the recently emerging African methodology approaches, the antecedent oral history methodologies were and are meticulously designed to

respect and uphold basic human values and norms (human rights). Assessing how the existing oral history methodologies are consistent when it comes to upholding human rights, one of the participants noted:

'Firstly, the interviewer goes through the difficult task of establishing a good rapport with the informant until he or she is comfortable. This can be followed by disclosing the ethical considerations: privacy, informed consent, confidentiality, right to withdraw, etc., etc. This is key to attaining a successful interview. To attain this, the setting must be done in a quiet room with no and/or minimal background noise. Then the issue under discussion is introduced (topic and the purpose of the study). All the demographic information should be obtained from their informants at the beginning of the interview in order to contextualise their experience and to interpret their testimonials. Data is then collected in the form of warm-up questions. From then on, thoughtful questions can be formulated so that informants can tell narratives and life experiences.' (A2, academic)

Apart from the aspects mentioned in the above quote, the other participants added that researchers had to improve on some key social skills and African qualities like sensitivity and empathy. Tamale (2011) states that:

Though it is extremely important to develop our homegrown theories ... and to always be keenly aware of the dangers of uncritically using theories that are constructed from the global north to explain African societies, the latter cannot be completely ignored. (p. 25)

In light of the above, Tamale substantiates this with three reasons. Firstly, the grounding rationale and practice is grounded in the perspective of Western worldview. Secondly, ample time can be lost reinventing the wheel if we are to do away with Western methodologies. Thirdly, it is advantageous to build on existing theoretical foundations and supplementing it to contextual issues of contemporary African studies. Against this backdrop, the current authors opine that African scholars need to also embrace the foundation laid as convenient to reflect upon and then absorb insights regarding African methodologies used in oral histories, which can then be tailor-made to fit the Tshivenda communities in this case. In addition, the authors submit that the idea of learning from one another breeds a podium of objective reflection on different ethical procedures and research tools that are used in oral history. To summarise this theme, participants emphasised that when visiting and/or engaging Tshivenda and other indigenous communities to digitise, manage and preserve oral history, due diligence should be observed to safeguard the indigenous dignity, equity and belief systems that are sacrosanct to them. In a case when these are omitted, participants acknowledged that it allows the opening of hard questions regarding the researcher's positionality and its causal effects.

Sponsorship

Academic institutions, museums and the Department of Arts and Culture were cited in the process of collecting oral tradition and traditions for reconstruction and development on a national level:

Every effort should be made, through research into surviving documents, photographs and particularly oral history, to trace the direct involvement of all concerned with a particular memorial. In particular, the formerly silenced voices must be heard. Commemorations of conflict and war should include multiple perspectives – there should be a feeling amongst all South Africans that their own history is respected and reflected, directly and indirectly in commemorations. (DACST discussion document, Legacy Project 1996)

From the onset, 'oral history and oral narratives are employed as authenticators of essentialist understandings of culture and ethnic groups' (Erskine 1996:18). From this, teachings are taken that the outline and probable contributions of oral history ought to be valued and used for memory work. To support this, institutional coffers need to be full to attain such initiatives. However, the global sponsoring climate is now more competitive than before, and numerous institutions struggle to raise sustainable sponsorship. Even where sponsorship is available, the escalation of technocratic discourses erected and remote-controlled by administrative and financial bureaucrats makes it impossible.

Participants noted that the Tshivenda oral tradition has been greatly affected by the lack or absence of sponsorship. On the other hand, the authors established that it is a mammoth task to digitise, learn, manage, preserve and exchange oral tradition in South Africa. As such, those involved in this process lament lack of sponsorship, as the process is costly and makes it hard to fund its oral history initiatives. According to Dryden, cited by Swain (2003), opines:

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. (p. 145)

Regarding the funding conundrum raised in the above quote, the authors learned that Tshivenda oral history projects have numerous gaps that are key but side-lined in the contemporary competitive funding markets. Furthermore, the departments that house oral history in many institutions lack research funds and clear roadmaps to embrace and digitise oral tradition, thereby exacerbating its erosion. One elderly participant could not hide her tears as she opened her heart:

'I am a bitter and an angry oral historian. My anger is that oral history is facing a serious threat of becoming even more socially and academically marginalised and under-funded than it was during the apartheid era.' (P2, VhaVenda knowledge holder)

Other participants were unhappy with the trends in how oral history is now being conceptualised and funded. Some cited malicious sabotage for unknown reasons. All participants unanimously contended that the worth of oral history is not only symbolic but impacts the public memory processes in modern-day South Africa. It was disheartening to learn that most museums in the Limpopo province are facing financial difficulties, and there seemed to be no plans to resuscitate them. The nearby universities, NGOs and related stakeholders were alleged to be incapacitated to lend a helping hand. It is

therefore alleged that because of this, institutional structures have done piecemeal work on real oral history research regardless of numerous interview collections in the archives.

The politics of preferring

The participants cited the politics of preferring as one of the challenges in digitisation of VhaVenda oral tradition. To support this, it emerged that women who took part in many phenomenal events are skewed and invisible in oral tradition. One participant contended that the glaring gap is the exclusion of women in the popular oral archive of the triumphalism of African National Congress (ANC) cadres. It was indicated that such a blind spot is key to unravel the silent oral archive. This is more pronounced when one engages with the available data and sees that women in VhaVenda history are few, thus giving an impression that women were and are not at all active in VhaVenda oral tradition. Brown-Iannuzzi, Lundberg and McKee (2017:13) emphasise 'the importance of transforming modern approaches to history so as to take account of the politics of gender'. Participants in the study were vocal that histories must strive to harvest narratives that embrace and recognise the presence and role of women in the past. The latter produce 'multiplicity of histories that explore the ways in which the differences within and between sexes have been controlled, denied or suppressed by patriarchal societies' (Weeks 2007:144). From the above, it is therefore imperative that this distortion of VhaVenda oral tradition be addressed by including women in the memory institutions.

The politics of preferring was also raised by participants in the exercise of discretion or objectivity by those who capture perspectives, namely journalists, academics and archivists. Participants cited that these three ways of approaching oral history have a great impact. Firstly, the approach of the journalists was alleged to have the tendency of editing oral tradition in a bid to fit in, to entertain readers and to seek present-day political correctness. To reinforce this, Bauer (2021:56) contends that 'it is difficult to know at what point this editing process crosses the line of historical credibility into journalistic licence'. Notwithstanding the latter shortfalls, this cannot be used as a reason to water down the societal effects of journalists. Secondly, academics were labelled as soliciting oral testimonies principally for self-interest. It was maintained that it is for self-interest because their work (including these oral testimonies) is protected under intellectual property laws which have restricted access and usage. Lastly, the oral history perspective (unlike the journalistic and academic perspectives) is obviously archival in nature. In this regard, Lohead (1976:9) opines that it is the 'responsibility of the archivist to ensure that the historical record is as complete as possible for other persons to research'. Some participants cited that this field is not immune to racial and ethnic conflicts. Therefore, some unscrupulous people seek to obliterate unwanted memories of atrocities and suppression through destroying available evidence, access control and distortion of history. Some thorny questions were raised against archivists:

'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?'

Extrapolating from the above, the glaring gap in the 'politics of preferring' in the exercise of discretion or objectivity by those who capture perspectives should be eliminated. This is because the indigenous communities concerned should be involved and engaged from the onset of oral history planning and on how the road map is designed.

Conclusion and recommendation

It can be noted that the collection, management and preservation of oral tradition with digital technologies attracts both the good and the bad. On one hand, digitisation brings access to heritage and staff skill development. On the other hand, the adopted technologies can bring problems such as lack of adequate resources to manage digital processes. Despite all these, the article argues that digitisation presents the following challenges gleaned from an indigenous perspective: language issues, sponsorship, methodological issues and the politics of preferring. The article thus recommends that to enhance a smooth digitisation of VhaVenda indigenous knowledge, a multistakeholder's engagement is needed to go with the rest of the world and adopt the technologies used to collect and preserve oral tradition. Because the country faces the danger of losing out on the benefits of VhaVenda oral history, the authors encourage and promote a holistic approach embracing multiple stakeholders to overcome the challenges faced in digitising the VhaVenda oral history. Digitisation problems should not hinder the work of oral historians, but their work should be tailored and designed to make the enterprise flourish.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

S.L.K. was the principal investigator and writer under the mentorship of S.M.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Venda, Research Ethics Committee (ref. no. SHSS/16/AS/01/1309).

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Data availability

In terms of standard operating procedures for data storage, data were stored in an encrypted memory stick and computer devices and password protected, with the passwords only known to the researcher. Hard copies or written materials of the data are kept in a secured cabinet in a locked room with no access to others except for the researcher and mentor to ensure adherence to ethical requirements.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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