Whose truth is true? can we use archival diplomatic in authenticating oral tradition?

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Define tomorrow.

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Roadmap

- Concepts elucidation
- Oral tradition
- Archival diplomatics
- Truth & Trust
- Case stories
- Authentication
- Conclusion

Luke 1: 1- 4

- Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

- 'As archivists, we do what we always been doing. The job does not change but media'. Dr Richard Higgs (3 July 2018)

Key concepts

▸ <u>Oral history</u>: the method that uses oral traditions and/or oral testimony as a form of historical evidence. Oral histories are usually gathered by historians/researchers through interviews, often using a tape recorder (Lekgoathi 2014).

▸ <u>Oral traditions</u>: stories or narratives which have been transmitted by word of mouth beyond the generation that gave rise to them; these accounts are no longer contemporary – e.g. folktales, epics, genealogies, praise songs, etc. (Lekgoathi 2014)

▸ Diplomatics: the study of record form, and of the process of record creation
  – A method of analysis that distinguishes: contexts, actions/transactions, persons, procedures, relationships, elements of form, status of transmission
  – First use of diplomatic concepts were to study medieval charters, instruments, and deeds
  – Second use adapted, elaborated, & developed the classic concepts and methodology to study modern documents of all types – it looks at the present and predicts the future
  – A means of verifying origin
  – Certifying intactness
  – Makes the record indisputable and incontestable (non-repudiation function)
  – Diplomatics' understanding of authenticity is the foundation of the law of evidence as we know it

Oral tradition

▸ In a study of memories of AIC in SA by Ngoepe and Ngulube (2014) it was revealed that African societies used memory to store valuable historical information

▸ African voices were not adequately captured in official sources.

  ▸ Even where such perspectives existed, they were marginalised or simply suppressed, e.g. mining and metallurgy and involvement in international trade in precolonial societies, e.g. Mapungubwe (Lekgoathi 2014).

  ▸ Prior to 1994 South African history was written from the point of view of the ruling white elites, e.g. 1652 as the beginning of SA history; focus on white men's activities in SA, etc.

▸ Growing emphasis on oral history in schools and broader society based on a genuine effort to recover our silenced voices.

▸ Correct biases and distortions in the official archives & other sources.

▸ Helps open up new areas of inquiry.

▸ Oral tradition as a means of discovering written documents and visual archives which would have otherwise remained obscured.

Oral tradition . . .

▶ Build inclusive archives in SA
- Archives remain largely the domain of elites.
  - Situation needs to be transformed.
- Archival holdings do not reflect the diversity culture in SA.
  - Citizens will only use archives when they are made accessible and when they are considered to be relevant.
  - Visitor numbers are low. Citizens don't know about archives, they consider them irrelevant, often because they are tainted by their colonial and apartheid past and they are difficult, and sometimes impossible to access.

Limitations with oral tradition

▸ Unreliability of memory and remembering
▸ Memory often triggered by interest
▸ Translation
▸ Manipulation of oral sources and deliberate distortion of facts
▸ Problem of chronology
▸ Silences or refusal to discuss certain topics, e.g. rainmaking process, emotions, burning of witches, etc.
• Oral history projects are common, but are both random and undertaken in modes that are profoundly problematic.
• Generally public archives in SA have been unable to transform themselves into active documenters of society.
• All these calls for authentication.

Truth vs Trust

- The **historical truth** is not directly accessible: facts and acts slide into the past as they happen

- There are two ways of indirectly accessing the past: witness testimony and the **documentary truth** represented by the written accounts of the facts and the material instruments of the acts, the **records**

- In both cases, <u>what we will regard as truth will entirely depend on our trust in its source</u>

Getting to the truth

- One of the means to access the historical truth is the **documentary truth,** but understanding **whose truth** we are dealing with requires to
  - use <u>traditional archival principles, concepts and methods</u>
  - <u>collaborate with technology experts</u> while cultivating our disciplinary and professional knowledge
  - produce functional requirements, tools, methods, and guidelines to ensure people's ability to access <u>complete factual information based on authentic, accurate and reliable contextualised records and archives</u>, and

- Archival bond

- Archives are the means to unveil and denounce misinformation and disinformation and get to the truth, even if only the documentary truth and a partial one.

What is trust?

- Some view it as a four-level progression:
  - **individual**, as a personality trait,
  - **interpersonal**, as a tie directed from one person to another (son to father);
  - **relational**, as a property of a mutual relationship (people doing business); and
  - **societal**, as a feature of a community as a whole.
- Substantially, trust involves acting without the knowledge needed to act, by **substituting the information that one does not have with other information**, e.g. the testimony of witnesses, oral tradition, documentary truth

Case stories

- King Malebogo
- Madibana Clan

Winding up: digital records authentication

- As **digital technology has separated content and structure from form**, we can **no longer determine authenticity on the object-record**, which is **composite and permanently new**, but must make an **inference of authenticity from its environment**.

- Record content, structure and medium are no longer inextricably linked

- The stored entity (content, form and composition data) is distinct from its manifestation, and its digital presentation has to be considered as well as its documentary one

- When we save a record, we take it apart in its digital components, and when we retrieve it, we reproduce it (it is not possible to preserve a digital record, only the ability to reproduce or recreate it)

- Therefore, we can no longer determine trustworthiness on the object-record, which is composite (stored + manifested) and permanently new (re-production), but must **infer trustworthiness from its environment of creation, maintenance & use and preservation**.

In conclusion – oral tradition authentication

- Preservation of both oral and digital memory depends on proactive effort, i.e. migration from one carrier to another
- Oral tradition refers both to the acts of remembering and transmitting orally
  - Is it possible to refer to oral traditions as records?
  - Does this tradition fit the concept expressed by the definition archival theory provides?
- The concept of archival theory posits that, to have records, we must have information (i.e. an understandable message) conveyed (i.e. created and used)
  - The information is stored and deemed worthy of retention by its creator for its own future reference.
  - **Oral tradition fits the perfectly the description of record**
- The remembrance is no different from any medium of communication and its storage function is as reliable as that of any other medium
  - It might be objected that this human storage is subjective
  - It certainly needs to be for survival and adaptation (this is what authentic and reliable evidence is for in oral tradition

Finally

▸ Oral tradition is trustworthy if its context of transmission is trustworthy
  ▸ It is not non-legal or pre-legal
  ▸ Formal telling of oral tradition in the feast, together with the display of crests and the performance of songs, family praises confirms the official history
▸ Elements of diplomatics can be used to authenticate oral tradition
▸ Oral traditions should be seen as key <u>BUT</u> not exclusive sources in the project of documenting our history and heritage.
▸ Oral traditions is not a panacea for addressing historical distortions and exclusion of African voices, but can play a pivotal role in reclaiming and preserving our heritage.
▸ Oral tradition will give the voiceless the voice and not leave dust
  ▸ 'History will be kind to you if it is written by you' Winston Churchill
  ▸ 'The victors will never be asked if they tell the truth' Adolph Hitler