



One step at a time: towards inclusive memory through unmuting silenced athletics voices

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ABSTRACT

One of the rhetorical slogans in the South African archival arena has been ‘taking archives to the people’ and the need to transform public archives from an elite domain to a community resource through inclusive archives. This slogan was coined in the early days of democracy to express the belief that the formative power of archives should be harnessed to promote archives as a tool for reconciliation, social cohesion and nation building. Due to limited funding, the euphoria surrounding the slogans has waned as little action has been taken. This paper uses a literature review, personal experience and visits to the Comrades House Museum to explore the possibility of transforming archives by including silenced voices in national archival systems, such as athletic memories from running events like the Comrades Marathon. The paper argues that this is possible because South African archival legislation allows for the collection of non-public records of value to the country to fill gaps left by the colonial era. The paper recommends that archival institutions in South Africa consider incorporating the memories of athletes, particularly winners of marathons such as the Comrades Marathon, as a step towards inclusive memory. In this regard, even if the Comrades Marathon Association collects and digitises such memories in the form of photographs and other items such as running shoes and vests of the winners, the inventory can be incorporated into the national archival portal accessed through AToM. This may allow the collection to be made freely available under a Creative Commons licence. In this way, accessibility could be greatly simplified and extended to users around the world. Finally, archival repositories should begin to collect memories of international events held in South Africa, such as the 1999 All Africa Games, the 1995 Rugby World Cup and the 2010 FIFA World Cup. Records of such events can be collected from government departments and individuals.

Keywords: archives; records; memories; Comrades Marathon; athletics; inclusive archive.

INTRODUCTION

The phrase ‘one step at a time,’ implies that to progress gradually and carefully from one stage to the next, a person or process has to go step by step. This idiomatic expression is also relevant to the discourse on archival transformation in South Africa. One of the rhetoric slogans in the transformation of archives in South Africa had been to ‘take archives to the people’ and the need to transform public archives from a domain of elite into a community resource (Harris, 2002). Indeed, Jimerson (2007) argues that many voices in society remain absent from the archival holdings of the mainstream heritage sector and are not given enough representation in the greater public records. In the early days of democracy, “[...] this slogan was expressed in the view that the shaping power of archives should be harnessed to promote archives as a tool for reconciliation, social cohesion and nation building [...]” (Harris, 1996, p. 16). Due to limited funding, the euphoria around the slogan has been diminishing, as little action is taken. However, a project by the University of South Africa on ‘taking archives to the people’ (2014-2024), in partnership with the National Archives and Records Services of South Africa (NARSSA) and all nine archives repositories, attempted to resuscitate the slogan. This project has developed a strategy on public programming to be implemented by all public repositories in South Africa (Ngulube *et al.*, 2017). This was due to the fact that national and provincial archives repositories are unable to reach out and attract people due to an inadequate outreach strategy, the absence of a consistent message to the public, insufficient resources and limited skills among archivists. Hence, there was a need for a single and consistent message when making the public aware of the existence of archives. However, even when a common consistent message was crafted, it is still a challenge to get people to use the archives. This may be that public archival holdings in South Africa are not inclusive. This is emphasised by Matshotshwane and Ngoepe (2022) that many years after the democratic South Africa was conceptualised and implemented, the archival arena still reflect apartheid and colonialism in terms of its holding.

The aforementioned situation calls for transformation of archival holdings. Indeed, this situation needs to be transformed so that the people can use archives and, as Ketelaar (1992, p. 5) reckons, archives can then “[...] become archives of the people for the people by the people.” Citizens may only use archives when they are considered relevant and made accessible. In South Africa, this can be rectified as the archival legislation advocates for the collection of non-public records valuable to the country to fill the gaps that stem from the colonial era. The sole purpose is for collecting all the national experiences that were previously suppressed to be documented. For example, section 3(d) of the NARSSA Act No. 43 of 1996 states that

NARSSA should collect non-public records with an enduring value of national significance which cannot be more appropriately preserved by another institution, with due regard to the need to document aspects of the nation’s experiences that had been neglected by archives repositories in the past (Republic of South Africa 1996, p. 1).

One way of building inclusive archives can be through collection of athletics memories, as this area has not been fully explored in South Africa. Therefore, the focus of this paper will be on moving towards inclusive archives through athletics memory, specifically looking at the memories relating to the Comrades Marathon. According to Cameron-Dow (2011, p. 1),

[...] the Comrades Marathon is an “ultra-marathon of a distance ranging from 86km to 90km which is run annually in the KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa between the cities of Durban and Pietermaritzburg. It is the world’s largest and oldest ultra-marathon race with the inaugural race that took place in 1921. The direction of the race alternates each year between the “up” run (87km) starting from Durban and the “down” run (90 km) starting from Pietermaritzburg.

The study proposes that key figures in the Comrades Marathon may contribute their non-public records, such as photos and other items, as donations towards digitisation. This way, the collection can be made open access under a Creative Commons licence, so that accessibility is much easier and extended to users from all over the world. The Creative Commons licence allows for the creation of a digital pool of creative material where materials such as sports photos, archives, certificates, and newspaper clippings are free to be used, distributed, and remixed by others, but only under certain conditions while the copyright owner still manages and controls the rights to his or her materials (Coates 2007, p. 73). It should be noted that this is only a small fraction, as not all people are interested in sports.

Sport has been demonstrated as an instrument of solidarity between fragmented cultures. Hence, Fagan (1992, p. 42) questions why, “[...] in a country where sport is of such significance, it is so minimally represented in archival holdings.” For example, the late president Nelson Mandela (1918–2013), the founding father of modern South Africa, used the Rugby World Cup of 2005 as one of the tools to reconcile and unite the divided nation, as reflected in the movie *Invictus* and the above quote by him. We have seen through the 2010 Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup hosted by the South African Football Association. As the host nation of the world soccer tournament, South Africans were united across racial lines. Sport has humanised a great many people who had nothing to be excited about and perpetuated the anti-apartheid struggle internationally. This has also been the case at the Comrades Marathon, where people from diverse backgrounds and racial lines gather to cheer the athletes on. South Africans have always loved, taken pride in, and taken part in sport. Therefore, it is in the view of this researcher that sporting activities may be used successfully in archives, as many people appeal to sports in different codes. The paper proposes how Comrades Marathon memories can be used as a testbed for transforming archival access through inclusion in the national archival register.

BRIEF BACKGROUND TO COMRADES MARATHON

Many historians and commentators have written about the Comrades Marathon. Cameron-Dew (2011) indicates that this multimillion-rand event owes its origin, title, and ethos to Vic Clapham, who was a railway driver. Apparently, during the First World War (WWI), while stationed somewhere in central Africa around Kenya, Vic Clapham collapsed and was unable to carry on. A comrade, Ernest Freemantle, carried him across the sand, over rocks, uphill, and through the bush for more than 50 kilometres in the heat of 40 degrees. When he became well, he travelled home to Pietermaritzburg in South Africa via Mombasa by waggon and then by hospital vessel until he reached Durban. Based on his experience, Vic Clapham inaugurated the race in 1921 to commemorate fallen comrades of the WWI. He wanted to express his gratitude to one special wartime comrade who had saved his life, Ernest Freemantle. After the war, returning soldiers formed the League of Comrades of the Great War. In 1918, Clapham approached the organisation with his idea of a road race between Pietermaritzburg and Durban. He received an unwelcome response. He again approached the League in 1919 and 1920 without success. In 1921, he was permitted to stage the race under the auspices of the league but without funding. He was given a loan of one pound sterling, which is equal to about twenty thousand to fifty thousand rands today. He organised the first race, the “Comrades Marathon go-as-you-please,” between Maritzburg and Durban on May 24, 1921, and his dream became a reality (Cameron-Dew 2011, p. 3). Initially a memorial to those who had lost their lives during the WWI, the Comrades Marathon would become an annual expression of the pioneering spirit of all South Africans, encompassing the hopes, fears, aspirations, and doubts of a divided population that would take 73 years (1921–1994) to reach their true nationhood. Such thoughts were far from the minds of those who were mad enough, brave enough, and prepared enough to face the starter on this auspicious occasion. For them, this was a once-only gesture of togetherness in adversity. In the words of Cameron-Dew (2011, p. 3), “[...] there were no upcomrades, no downcomrades, and no next year’s comrades.”

In the early days of the Comrades, Clapham was more or less chairman, secretary, publicist, and arranger of the race (Cameron-Dew, 2011). He personally organised the race for 17 years but never ran it. He was a phlegmatic pragmatist rather than a passionate idealist (Cameron-Dew, 2011). There are many highlights for the race. For example, in 1922 Bill Payn ran the Comrades Marathon in rugby boots and finished position eight (8). In 1923, eyebrows were raised at the sight of a woman standing among the sixty-eight hopefuls on the start line outside Pietermaritzburg City Hall. Frances Hayward ran unofficially and set in motion a dream that would take another fifty-two years to be realised. The first black person to participate unofficially in the race was Robert Mtshali in 1935. He was not given a medal but was recognised in 2019, through a medal named after him. Between 1941-1945 there was intermittence due to the Second World War. In 2010, the 85th edition of the Comrades

Marathon hosted the largest number of runners in an ultra-marathon. The race was recognised in the Guinness Book of Records for the 14 343 finishers, and everyone who completed the race that day was mailed a certificate by the Comrades Marathon Association (see figure 1).

FIGURE 1 - Example of a certificate issued to all Comrades finishers in 2010, as the race set the new Guinness World Record



Source: Photo by researchers (2021).

Since the first running of this most glorious of human endeavours in 1921, hundreds of thousands of people have started and finished the Comrades Marathon, all of them winners. Many have attempted to be the first human to cross the finish line, but by 2023, only an elite group of 52 men had done so. Only thirteen of this elite group are Black South Africans. Despite the fact that black people (and women) were barred from competing until 1975, winning Comrades from the beginning of South Africa's unequal history is almost incomprehensible. That some have done so, and on multiple occasions in some cases, or have won multiple top ten finisher gold medals at Comrades are stories and memories that

must be shared and known around the world. These humans, like all of us, will perish. But we dare not let the stories of what was accomplished fade away. These stories and memories can help to build South Africa's national archival system.

Nonetheless, memories from sporting events such as the Comrades Marathon rarely receive enough attention to make it into the archival mainstream. Sports historians, such as Smith (2002), express concern that the largest archival collections relating to sports organisations and sports clubs, where some of the archival collection is preserved, never take the archives of their associations seriously, owing to financial, time, and space constraints that force archivists to choose what to keep and which collections to take on. While Garaba (2018) believes that a lack of a policy framework and established procedures, as well as a series of leisure records belonging to sport clubs, lead to incomplete sports archives and the deposition of sports archives outside the scope of archives. As previously stated, South African archival legislation promotes the collection of non-public records such as those from the Comrade Marathon. Section 3(d) of the NARSSA Act No. 43 of 1996, for example, states that

NARSSA should collect non-public records of enduring value of national significance which cannot be more appropriately preserved by another institution, with due regard to the need to document aspects of the nation's experiences that had been neglected by archives repositories in the past (Republic of South Africa, 1996, p. 1).

Such memories must be archived in the national system. That is, to correct what Halim (2018) refers to as disparities caused by the selective archiving of South Africa's colonial and apartheid histories. However, if organisations such as the Comrades Marathon Association are able to preserve their memories, an inventory of such collection can be shared and included in the national archival system.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study utilised document analysis and literature review to explore the inclusion of Comrades memories in the national archival system. The literature review was augmented with observation through a visit to the Comrades House Museum in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, as well as newspaper articles and personal experience of the researchers through involvement in the marathon. The Comrades House museum was visited by the researchers five times. Some of the visits coincided with exhibitions and registrations for the race by the runners. During the visit, access to primary records were granted and photos were captured. The findings are presented through narration and photos.

INCLUSION

Since the dawn of democracy, the heritage sector has urged the inclusion of previously muted and silenced voices in public archival institutions. When the NARSSA talks about

inclusivity, the only memories that come to mind are of those who were involved in the liberation struggle. For example, Matshotshwane and Ngoepe (2022) argued that for many years, the South African oral history association, which was founded by NARSSA and is still funded by it, focused its efforts on collecting significant memories and documenting the perspectives of the more dominant communities that represent power and government. To create an inclusive archive and fill gaps in archival institutions caused by colonisation and apartheid, the government launched the national oral history programme through NARSSA in 2001 (Bhebhe; Ngoepe, 2021). Given Africa's high levels of illiteracy (in the Western sense), orality is the primary means by which most people express themselves. Oral history is an important part of recreation and rethinking the past, especially for those who have never had the opportunity. The Oral History Association of South Africa was founded in 2003 to provide alternative narratives through the collection of oral history, but it is still focusing on the memories of the elite, as Bhebhe and Ngoepe (2021) argue that even in critical emancipatory there is elitism. Bhebhe and Ngoepe (2021) emphasise that the situation is similar in Zimbabwe, where memorialisation and commemoration focus solely on the memories of ZANU-PF, at the expense of other political parties and minority groups. If the emphasis is placed on events such as the Comrades Marathon, more people may participate in archival activities, and thus reducing bias. The Comrades Marathon has nothing to do with politics or racial segregation. It is about crossing these invisible lines and tracing how dreams and miracles can happen when South Africa and South Africans are inspired and come together (Matshotshwane; Ngoepe 2022). Stories, including those of many great South African distance runners, must also be told. Unfortunately, these stories have yet to be written down. As Ngoepe (2020) points out, until they are preserved, an important part of South Africa's history in which South Africans ran together as a nation and in the same direction will be lost. Such memories can be included in South Africa's national archival system, which consists of NARSSA and nine provincial archives repositories. NARSSA was established as a "[...] mitigation strategy in shaping public memory by filling gaps caused by past imbalances by acquiring non-public records and actively documenting the experiences of those either excluded from or marginalised in colonial and apartheid archives" (Halim, 2018, p. 4). The inclusion strategy began as a result of South African sport's strong regulatory apartheid policies, which resulted in a situation in which the history and performances of black athletes were largely obscured and unreported (Labuschagne, 2016).

According to Halim (2018), the NARSSA Act opened the door for the state to commit resources to bringing sidelined collections by anti-colonial and anti-apartheid organisations into focus. Despite the fact that Bhebhe and Ngoepe (2020) and Rodrigues (2013) argue that these policies primarily push the historical narrative of the day, focusing their efforts on collecting records of national significance and documenting only perspectives of dominant communities that represent power and government while concealing the stories of minority groups, the strategy can be used as a transformation tool towards inclusive archives. Archives that reflect the broad narrative of South African history are in the care of a diverse range

of organisations, intuitions, and individuals because they were created or acquired within and outside of the country. Nonetheless, gathering memories from the Comrade Marathon, including them in archival mainstreams, and digitising them could contribute to a more inclusive archive. Indeed, the digitisation project could be launched with the newspaper clippings in the possession of individual athletes, such as the one in **FIGURE 2**, and the files in the Comrade Marathon House (**FIGURE 3**).

FIGURE 2 - Newspaper clipping at Comrades House



Source: Photos by researchers (2021).

If such memories are digitised, as Jones (2015) alluded to, the initiatives may help overcome the barriers of geography and social capital that discourage some from visiting traditional archives. If well negotiated by archives repositories, athletes, especially champions, who participate in the Comrades Marathon may also contribute their photos and other items as donations towards digitisation. In a study by Matshotshwane and Ngoepe (2022), interviewed athletes indicated that they are willing to donate their memories if there is a guarantee that such memories can be preserved for posterity. Others were willing to provide surrogates for their records. Such surrogates can be in the form of digital copies. Digitisation is needed to ensure the survival of analogue materials. This way, the collection can be made open-access under a Non Commercial Creative Commons licence. There are different types of Common Creative licences, such as Attribution (By), No Derivative Works (ND), Share Alike (ND) and Non Commercial (NC). Non Commercial Creative Common Licence lets others display, copy, distribute, and perform the work for non-commercial purposes (Coates, 2007).

FIGURE 3 - Filing cabinet at the Comrade House



Source: Photo by researchers (2021).

Even though they operate in fragmented silos, South Africa has a number of best practice community archives. Molobyse (2014), for example, reports on the successful implementation of digital archives for the Royal Bafokeng community in South Africa's North West Province. This records are about the history of Bafokeng nation. At the individual and community levels, the majority of these archives or museums are 'two or three in one,' that is, the archives or museum houses collections for both objects and records ranging from photos, boots, and shoes of some winners, clocks, records, books, and so on. Although some of the athletes' homes have been turned into museums, as previously stated, they are willing to donate such memories.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while community archives such as the Comrades Marathon are well organised, as indicated in **FIGURE 3**, the same cannot be said about individuals' athletes' memories, as reported by Matshotshwane and Ngoepe (2022a). Such memories in the hands of individuals need to be identified and preserved. It should be noted that Gauteng Provincial Archives has already embarked on a project to collect sports memories (Matshotshwane; Ngoepe, 2022).

Public archives repositories are encouraged to embark on collecting memories of international events hosted in South Africa, such as, 1999 All Africa Games, the 1995 Rugby World Cup, the 2010 FIFA World Cup, etc. Records of such events can be collected from government offices and individuals to build and supplement the archives. It should be noted that while National Automated Archival Information Retrieval System provides the collection of non-public records, it does not state where those non-public records are or how those

records will be acquired, nor does it adequately address copyright issues related to ownership of these archival records or regulate those who seek to obtain commercial gain out of these sports records. In other words, the provision of non-public records should include the latter to build a feasible, inclusive archival collection. If the above concerns are not addressed, a selective archive may result in a situation where only prominent members, such as liberation strugglers and business tycoons, of the communities are documented, leaving out the ordinary and the marginalised, as already reiterated by literature about similar problems in other archival repositories. As a mitigation strategy, archives repositories should create a national catalogue or register of archives to be included in the NARSSA system. This way, inclusive archives can be achieved, and more people will have an interest in archives as the holdings will reflect diversity. It matters as we will be able to produce books like “Memoirs of a Comrades Champion”, as written by Ngoepe (2022), and documentaries of athletes and events.

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