

The Archives and the Keys

**Address on the occasion of the DNA mobile exhibition opening, 9 August 2011,
Polytechnic Library**

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I must admit that I was a bit taken aback when the Rector invited me to give a keynote address at this occasion. Archivists don't usually do that, that's the job of politicians and motivational speakers. We are supposed to sit in our dusty archives and keep them safe and sound, and not to give speeches.

But then it occurred to me that maybe the Rector's office mixed up the programme a bit, and that his intention was that I should talk about locks and keys. So that is what I am going to do. Because Archives have a lot to do with locks and keys.

When you look back two centuries, those archives out of which today's national archives developed were not for people like you and me. They were instruments of power, they were there to serve the interests of the ruling dynasty, and they were jealously guarded against any unauthorised access. They were literally under lock and key. And they were not called National Archives, but State Archives, they were not serving the nation at large but the state machinery. In fact, the common term in Europe was Court and State Archives – serving the royal court was the first imperative.

Then came the first paradigm shift in archives, the realization that nations have a history that should be the common property of all its citizens. And archives opened up to the historical researcher, to the academics who got the privilege to take a look behind the curtain, to research and digest and write up for the rest of the nation. Those academics might have to go through a rigorous process of accreditation, presenting their credentials and letters of recommendation before they were admitted to the sacred space of the archives. The lock was opened, but only for a privileged few. And in some archives it is like that up to this day.

But then came the second paradigm shift, the realization that a democratic nation must give free and wide access to its archival treasures, instead of having them monopolised by a few gatekeepers only. Because the archives itself is a key, a key to our common past, a key to our common heritage. Or maybe in the case of Namibia, the key to our divided past, but even that divided past should be owned by the entire nation. How can we keep that key locked away? Every citizen has the right to use that key, and every archivist has

the duty to facilitate access. Access is the new paradigm of archives, the keyword.

But that is easier said than done. Archival records usually exist only once in the whole world. They are not like books where you can buy another copy – if you have the money. They are unique, when they are gone they are gone, forever, *finish en klaar*. And that puts us archivists and our users in a dilemma. Our users have the problem that they have to come to Windhoek if they want to consult the national records, even if they have to travel all the way from Katima or Odibo or Oranjemund. We archivists have the problem that we have to safeguard and preserve our treasures. One of our greatest treasures is the diary of Hendrik Witbooi, a world-famous document that was inscribed on Unesco's list of Memory of the World. Shall we give it to everybody to read, shall we make photocopies for everyone who wants to study it in peace at home? No, we will keep it in the safe, and the key to that safe is in the pocket of the Head of Archives and nobody else.

In case you have wondered, what all this has to do with the DNA, I can tell you now. The key to get over those dilemmas is digitization. We have to create the digital national archives. There is a clear link between the democratic ideal of free and equitable access and the digital technology. Once a document is digitized, you can copy it as much as you want without loss of quality, you can put it on the internet for everyone to see, you can send it by email to whom you want. That is the beauty of digitization.

Let me be clear about one thing. There is a widespread perception that we digitise to keep the digital copy, and that we can throw away the original which takes so much space and so much trouble to preserve. Nothing could be more wrong, and let me say it again, nothing could be more wrong. Not only is the original irreplaceable, but in most cases it will probably last longer than the digital copy, and I will not go into the technical details why that is so. Let me just mention one example. The famous Bluebook that was lost and found again, was digitised after its rediscovery. Because of so much public demand, we wanted to make it available on a CD. What can I tell you? We lost the digital copy in a computer crash before it was saved on a server and properly backed up. We have to do it again. Don't worry, the original is still there.

Let me also clear up another misconception. Maybe I am now no longer in keynote speech mode, but in press release mode, but it has to be said. When the DNA project was first announced, I was asked, so now you are putting the whole archives on the internet? Ayee, the whole archives put into one pile of paper would be 7 km high, just imagine that, neither the Archives nor the Polytechnic has the staff capacity nor the storage capacity to do that. Nor is it necessary, because not everything is of the same wide general importance to be digitised and to be put on a webpage. All archival institutions that do digitization, make a selection, first things first, and some things maybe never.

It would also not be correct to create the impression that the DNA is the only digitisation activity when it comes to the National Archives. The National Archives has done, and will in future do, digitisation activities on its own and with many other partners and special programmes. Aluka, AACRLS, ETSIP and the Biodiversity Programme may be mentioned. This is absolutely necessary, because – bureaucracies are slow – budget funds and staff positions for digitisation are still non-existent at the National Archives. But here I should come back to the key. Because, while in the past we have dealt with paper records only, the DNA project has proven a key in unlocking the secrets of the digitisation of sound and audiovisual material. Here we are dealing with technological issues and knowhow that is not easily available in Namibia, although it is more urgent than dealing with the paper.

Unlike the paper records – which will still be readable in hundred years if we treat them carefully – our heritage of sound and particularly of film and video is in acute danger of getting completely lost. Already now, the specialised equipment needed for certain video formats is no longer manufactured, and like with biological species, there is a list of “endangered” and “extinct” video formats.

You might ask, is it really necessary and worthwhile to digitize that. To answer that question, you have to come to the National Archives and the NBC Archives and see the rows and rows of tapes and videocassettes and the lists what they contain. Can we afford to lose the San healing ceremonies filmed at Nyae Nyae in 1950, the voice of Hosea Kutako in 1959, the speeches taped at the Herero Day in Okahandja in 1966, the video of Hermanus Beukes explaining how he makes shoes, the sermon of Bishop Auala while visiting the exile camp of Nyango, the children’s choirs of Kwanza Sul, the interview with Andimba ya Toivo after his release from Robben Island that the SWABC did not dare to broadcast but nevertheless archived, or the oath of office of President Nujoma on 21 March 1990, or the countrywide collection of grassroots opinions for the land conference in 1992?

Something needs to be done, and to be done fast.

We could – and one could get donor money for that, in the name of cultural preservation and whatnot – let it be done for us. Get the whole stuff flown to, let’s say to Luxemburg, and get our ready-made DVDs back. Some of our neighbours do it like that. Now that is exactly what we do not want. It is imperative that we create our own capacity, maybe – probably - also make our own mistakes, but in the end we will be able to do it. And that is what this trilateral cooperation called DNA is trying to achieve.

It has been a pleasure to work again in the past few weeks with the professors and advanced students from Utah Valley University, the staff and students of the Polytechnic and – I must add, although this was not planned – the College of the Arts, and our own Archives staff, and the NBC, and to witness their enthusiasm for this work. It is very

encouraging that the network involved in this really important task is growing. I am confident that we have really come to a point where we can say, we will be able to save our heritage if – and that remains the big IF, in capital letters – we proceed from the project mode to a properly funded and institutionalised digitisation programme and digitisation laboratory. That, and nothing less, will be the key, so that the gained expertise can be really utilised and will not dissipate away. We will still in future need expert advice, and UVU I am sure will be most welcome for this, but the work must be done by us.

I hope I have convinced you, and that together we can convince all relevant bodies.

Thank you for listening.