

# The culture of collecting: the National Library as a memory institution

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## Introduction

Heritage and collection are concepts that go hand-in-hand, as do collection and preservation. Similarly, preservation and access, while potentially in conflict, are partner concepts in the heritage context. It is the specific responsibility of South Africa's heritage institutions to develop collections, to preserve such collections and to make these collections accessible. Useless if not accessible, heritage items hold both access to memory and the possibility of many untold histories

The manner in which our heritage is assembled into collections, researched, interpreted and presented has been subject to ongoing intellectual and political debate,<sup>1</sup> particularly in terms of the impacts on community memory and identity. The manner, for example, in which South African museums address the issue of heritage has come increasingly under the spotlight in the last two decades, and whether initiatives and solutions have been successful is also currently under debate<sup>2</sup>. History has always been fiercely contested terrain. Although the exact nature of the contest may have changed, the

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- [National Library of South Africa.](#)
  - 1. [G. RITCHIE, \*Dig the Herders/ Display the Hottentots: the production and presentation of knowledge about the past.\* \(MA, UCT, 1990\). More recent South African examples of the contests around History include the closure of Iziko's "Bushman Diorama" in Cape Town, as well as heated debate prior to, and following, the return of the remains of Sarah Bartmann from France to South Africa. Such debate included a public discussion on the issue of Sarah Bartmann and how/when/where she was to be buried, hosted by the South African Museum on 18th May 2002.](#)
  - 2. [For example, the September 2001 \*Mapping Alternatives\* workshop at the Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town.](#)

ferocity of battles around who gets to research, write and present accepted or dominant versions of history still remains.<sup>3</sup>

Context determines the questions we ask about our lives. It influences and shapes the historical and contemporary questions we ask about the political, cultural, social, religious and economic issues which affect our being ... our knowledge ... and what we envisage our lives and future to be.<sup>4</sup>

It is the specific role of memory institutions such as libraries, museums and archives, to collect, preserve and make accessible the most comprehensive and representative samples of historical and contemporary culture precisely so that those contextually-defined questions can be asked at any time. To ensure that such changing questions can be fully serviced, it is the role of cultural heritage institutions to collect and preserve those objects that reflect where we have come from and that provide a base from which to pose such questions.

The following description by Denver Webb aptly encompasses the role of all heritage institutions, including libraries, museums, archives and galleries. They are:

dynamic and accountable public institutions which both shape and manifest consciousness, identities and understanding of communities and individuals in relation to their natural, historical and cultural environments, through collection, documentation, conservation, research and educational programmes that are responsive to the needs of society.<sup>5</sup>

Museums (though increasingly contested in terms of collection content<sup>6</sup> and decisions about what is made accessible) are the heritage institutions most familiar to the public. Archives are also understood for their role as keepers of memory. National Libraries are less known for this role. Yet, with millions of items in its holdings, the National Library of South Africa has the specifically legislated role of collecting, preserving and making accessible

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3. This is with particular reference to First Nation or indigenous communities challenging access to, and ownership of, cultural property.
  4. J. PILISO-SEROKE, *Cultural Genocide, Identity and Nation Building in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. Paper presented at Institute for Justice and Reconciliation Conference, December 2001, UWC, Bellville, 2001.
  5. Denver Webb, Acting Director: Museums and Heritage Resources, Eastern Cape in M BRIEDENHANN AND E.A. VOIGT (eds.), *Accreditation Handbook 1: Introduction to the Grade System*. unpublished booklet, Southern African Museums Association.
  6. M. Legassick and C. Rassool, *Skeletons in the Cupboard: South African museums and the trade in human remains 1907-1917*. (South African Museum, Cape Town and McGregor Museum; Kimberley, 2000).

South Africa's national published documentary heritage (*National Library of South Africa Act, Act 92 of 1998*).

As Musiker points out, the “very nature of collecting guarantees that many valuable items will survive their immediate period of usefulness”.<sup>7</sup> The collecting of books, however, and the assembly of these collections into private, public and national libraries means that not only are the objects preserved, but so too is the information, knowledge and memory contained within these documents. This record is preserved for others to read, with potentially endless interpretations as cultural context, emphasis and interests shift and change.

Although there is nothing fundamentally different between, for example, library and museum practices of assembling collections of cultural heritage, libraries face a specific challenge in ensuring that documentary collections are accessible, i.e. users of most library collections must be able to read. The particular challenge for South African libraries – and for South Africa's National Library in particular – is that the vast majority of the NLSA's collections<sup>8</sup> are only accessible to those with functional reading literacy. In a country with more than 15 million functionally illiterate adults, the bulk of the cultural memory represented by the vast documentary treasures remains locked and inaccessible for that sector of South Africans.

### **Memory Institutions**

South African Libraries, Archives and Museums are all memory institutions in that they organise the South African cultural and intellectual record. As Dempsey puts it,

(T)he collections contain the memory of peoples, communities, institutions and individuals, the scientific and cultural heritage, and the products through time of our imagination, craft and learning. They join us to our ancestors and are our legacy to future generations. They are used by the child, the scholar, and the citizen, by the business person,

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7. R. Musiker, “Collecting Librarianship in South Africa” in P. WESTRA AND L. TWENTYMAN-JONES (eds), *The Love of Books. Proceedings of the Seventh Conference of Bibliophiles held at the South African Library*, (South African Library, Cape Town, 1997), p.179.

8. This excludes, at first review, the National Library of South Africa's iconographic collections – but the broad accessibility of this component of the National Library's collections requires in-depth investigation.

the tourist and the learner. These in turn are creating the heritage of the future".<sup>9</sup>

Further, Dempsey argues that memory institutions contribute directly and indirectly to prosperity through support for learning, commerce, tourism and personal fulfilment.<sup>10</sup> In the South African context, "prosperity" and "development" are related (but not interchangeable) concepts, where "prosperity" is a goal, a desirable state, and where "development" is a process. In terms of nation-building, the concept of development is key, and Wolfensohn is clear about the pivotal role of cultural expression in the development process.<sup>11</sup> Development therefore cannot happen without focused attention to sustainable support for the cultural context of developing communities. Memory institutions are then key in promoting and contributing to development. Wolfensohn comments on the importance of putting materials into libraries that relate to local culture.<sup>12</sup> The National Library of South Africa needs to challenge its relationship to these issues constantly to ensure that it is able to support, to the fullest possible extent, these kinds of development initiatives.

### **The Heritage Industry**

While there may still exist widely held public perceptions that memory institutions simply *reflect* a particular culture or group of cultures, academics have largely moved on from the outdated perception that these institutions occupy positions of neutrality as "mere facilities for the presentation of individual acts of creation."<sup>13</sup> Hewison argues that these institutions "profoundly affect our perception of what is judged to be history or art" and work actively to shape a culture.<sup>14</sup>

Hewison's analysis of the "Heritage Industry" examines the difference between history and heritage, and more importantly examines how the

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9. L. DEMPSEY, "Scientific, Industrial and Cultural Heritage: a shared approach: a research framework for digital libraries, museums and archives", *Ariadne*, 22, 2000, pp.2-3 <http://www.ariadne.ac.uk/issue22/dempsey/intro.html>

10. *Ibid.*

11. J. WOLFENSOHN, 1999. Remarks by the President, World Bank Group at Culture Counts - A conference on financing, resources and the economics of Culture in sustainable development. <http://www.worldbank.org/html/extdr/extme/jdwsp100499.html>

12. *Ibid.*, p.5.

13. R. HEWISON, *The Heritage Industry. Britain in a climate of decline*, (Methuen London Ltd, London, 1987), p.9.

14. *Ibid.*

growth of a “heritage culture” distorts the past.<sup>15</sup> Hewison is critical of the use of the word “heritage”, arguing that it is attached to anything “from national institutions to garage doors”,<sup>16</sup> where “heritage” it is not only about memory and creating pasts, but where it is also about wanting to associate with the perceived positives and status of a constructed past. Nostalgia about the past includes a sense of a lost authenticity that can be regained by adherence to some “heritage” programme, where the past is mythologised to contain all the good morals and values that are deemed missing from our present and, by extrapolation, from our future. Hewison warns against the perpetuation of a *heritage culture* and calls instead for a *critical culture*.<sup>17</sup>

As in the UK, the site of Hewison’s analysis, South Africans have also recently witnessed the impact of a heritage industry – in the local context on our gambling habits. One increasingly popular form of recreation/re-creation (of the past and of environments of nostalgia) are South Africa’s great new gambling estates.<sup>18</sup> Amongst others, Gold Reef City “recreates” the 19<sup>th</sup> century gold-mining village, Grand West Casino attempts an inclusion of the spirit of District Six, the Lost Palace offers the African Adventure, and Monte Casino captures the essence of the Italian village. In an era where there is a self-conscious awareness about creating popular memory, cultural heritage institutions will need to work harder to promote South Africa’s vast local and national memory resources.<sup>19</sup>

As Marilyn Martin has stated of the South African National Gallery, it is the position of memory institutions to

bring the past into the present, to challenge perceived culture, to stimulate creativity, and to counter the separation between heritage and contemporary cultural production, between history and cultural expression.<sup>20</sup>

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15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, p.11.

17. *Ibid.*

18. After ideas discussed by Professor Martin Hall at the September 2001 *Mapping Alternatives* workshop at the Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town.

19. Is it possible that heritage institutions might find themselves increasingly replaced by these popular casino histories?

20. M. MARTIN, “Odds On - Creating and Maintaining a National art Collection in South Africa”. In *Head North: Views from the South African National Gallery Permanent Collection*. (BildMuseet, Umea, 2001), p.11.

## Libraries as Memory Institutions

Libraries have long been recognised internationally as an important component of the cultural heritage network, a recognition reflected particularly in UNESCO's focused *Memory of the World* Programme launched in 1992 with the specific objective of protecting and promoting the world's documentary heritage through preservation and access.<sup>21</sup>

What is apparent internationally is that there is a kind of revival of libraries. Far from losing their value, an enormous amount has been invested<sup>22</sup> in the last five years in re-energising libraries, both community and national. Far from dying a rapid death, libraries are increasingly appearing more interesting. Moving from their established position as places of study and as centres of information, libraries are seeking to maximise what it is they can offer. Libraries are increasingly being drawn on as sources of memory and cultural expression, becoming forums for creating and nurturing identity (at both a community and national level). Libraries are being called upon to be much more to a much broader range of audiences than they used to be.<sup>23</sup>

The potential for multiple memories to be held in one document, or set of documents, is highlighted in Hall's account<sup>24</sup> of specific memories captured and contained in the documentary record. Basing his analysis on South Africa's only *Memory of the World*-registered collection,<sup>25</sup> Hall uses an imagined meeting of Wilhelm Bleek<sup>26</sup> and /Kabbo.<sup>27</sup> Meeting in front of the

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21. See UNESCO's *Memory of the World* website at <http://www.unesco.org/webworld/mdm/index2.html>
  22. For example, the new British Library, the new French Library, the Great Library of Alexandria, and the recent DACST commitment to a new Library building for the Pretoria campus of the National Library of South Africa.
  23. See for example the legislated responsibilities of the NLSA in the National Library of South Africa Act of 1998.
  24. M. HALL, M., "Earth and Stone: archaeology as memory" in S. NUTTALL AND C. COETZEE (eds), *Negotiating the Past. The Making of Memory in South Africa*. (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1998).
  25. The Bleek Collection is South Africa's only UNESCO-registered *Memory of the World* Collection, and is one of less than 30 such collections in the world. This Collection has three components at separate institutions - the National Library of South Africa, the University of Cape Town Library and Iziko Museums. Hall (1998) bases his account on documents from the University of Cape Town collection.
  26. A German philologist working in Cape Town from 1862 to 1875 studying the /Xam language of the San people.
  27. One of the /Xam men who worked with Bleek to create an extensive written record of San mythology, folklore, rituals and cultural expression.

Grey Statue and the monumental Library building<sup>28</sup> in Cape Town's Company Gardens, Hall demonstrates the record of relations of power, dominance and submission embedded in the written records that constitute the Bleek Collection.

### **The National Library of South Africa (NLSA) as a Memory Institution**

Reference is often made to the fact that while collectors could live without libraries, libraries would not have been born had there not been collectors.<sup>29</sup> It is directly on the foundation of bibliophilia, the love of books, that libraries have been built, and Barben<sup>30</sup> writes that libraries with special collections cannot exist without the generosity of book collectors.

Musiker points out that the leading art galleries and museums of South Africa are "prototypical collections of collectors".<sup>31</sup> This is wholly true for the National Library, whose existence was founded initially on one particular collection, the Von Dessin Collection,<sup>32</sup> and where a good part of the NLSA's holdings reflects this indebtedness to collectors. Such private collections, either acquired by or donated to libraries, are greater than the

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28. For an analysis of monumental architecture in the Company Gardens in Cape Town, see Murray (2001).
  29. See, for example, Thompson (1977), quoted in Barben (1997).
  30. T. BARBEN, "Genesis of a Book Collector, with a peep at some of the creators of personal collections in UCT libraries" in P. WESTRA AND L. TWENTYMAN-JONES (eds), *The Love of Books. Proceedings of the Seventh Conference of Bibliophiles held at the South African Library*, pp.150-151.
  31. R. MUSIKER, "Collecting Librarianship in South Africa" in P. WESTRA AND L. TWENTYMAN-JONES (eds), *The Love of Books. Proceedings of the Seventh Conference of Bibliophiles held at the South African Library*, p.179.
  32. Also known as the Dessinian Collection, this collection was donated to the Dutch Reformed Church in 1761 from where it became the founding collection in 1820 of what is now the National Library of South Africa. This collection is a "gentleman's library" of approximately 4,500 volumes, covering law, theology, medicine, philosophy, mathematics, history, natural history, geography and philology. This collection also includes some manuscript material, one such being one of two contemporary copies of Adam Tas's diary made before the original was destroyed in 1706.

sum of their parts since, as collections owned by identified individuals, they provide a good reflection of the intellectual world of their owners.<sup>33</sup>

The National Library occupies a very particular position in South Africa's cultural heritage environment. There is one National Library clearly briefed to collect, preserve and make accessible South Africa's published documentary heritage. Collecting is the rationale for the National Library and, as pointed out above, the National Library was founded on the donation of a discrete collection and its milestones have often been marked with subsequent donations of private collections. The separate and combined wealth of these private collections now represents a rich source from which to build new histories, write new stories and from which to research both our collective, intertwined pasts and the multiple stories that make up our community histories.

The backbone of any cultural heritage institution, however, is its permanent collection. While all of the National Library's collections are in fact permanent, the largest component of its holdings is the South African legal deposit collection. The Legal Deposit legislation<sup>34</sup> is specifically aimed at preserving South Africa's intellectual and cultural heritage. The Act is specific:

to provide for the preservation of the national documentary heritage through legal deposit of published documents; to ensure the preservation and cataloguing of, and access to, published documents emanating from, or adapted for, South Africa; to provide for access to government information; to provide for a Legal Deposit Committee; and to provide for matters connected therewith.<sup>35</sup>

The scope of legal deposit requirements is broadly defined in the Act, where "document" means:

any object which is intended to store or convey information in textual, graphic, visual, auditory or other intelligible format through any medium, and any version or edition of a document which is significantly different from that document in respect of its information content, intelligibility or physical presentation, is considered to be a separate document as outlined in the Act<sup>36</sup>

and where "medium" means:

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33. E. BUYS, "Silent Witnesses: the books in the private library of N.P. van Wyk Louw" in P. WESTRA AND L. TWENTYMAN-JONES (eds), *The Love of Books. Proceedings of the Seventh Conference of Bibliophiles held at the South African Library*.

34. Legal Deposit Act, No. 54 of 1997.

35. Legal Deposit Act, No. 54 of 1997. Preamble.

36. Legal Deposit Act, No. 54 of 1997. Section 1.



any means of recording or transmitting information intended for subsequent reading, listening or viewing.<sup>37</sup>

Since legal deposit arrangements in many countries were implemented to cover mostly print on paper, national libraries have increasingly sought to expand requirements to cover as much of the nation's cultural heritage as possible.<sup>38</sup>

### **The National Library of South Africa's collections<sup>39</sup>**

The main components of the National Library of South Africa's collections are books, newspapers, periodicals, official publications, foreign official publications (Southern African and International), electronic publications, maps, photographic materials, manuscript materials, and an eclectic collection of paintings and other artwork.<sup>40</sup> These are collected either by legal deposit, purchase or donation.

#### **Book collections**

The general book stock of the NLSA mainly covers the social sciences and humanities. While general reference works on the sciences are available, the historical focus has been on books and periodicals covering history, literature, philosophy and the arts, and subjects of related interest. In the past, special attention was paid to works on librarianship and related subjects including binding, printing and reprography. From this focus, attempts were also made to purchase notable examples of fine printing and the work of private presses. The National Library thus has a comprehensive historical collection of such work.<sup>41</sup> The National Library also holds the very first example of printing in South Africa – a page from an almanac printed in Cape Town by Ritter in 1796.<sup>42</sup>

The *Africana Collection* comprises material on Africa south of the Sahara and, more particularly in recent years, material on southern Africa. The aim of the NLSA is to have as complete a collection as possible of material

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37. Legal Deposit Act, No. 54 of 1997. Section 1.

38. G. CORNISH, "National Libraries". In Maurice Line (ed), *Librarianship and Information Work Worldwide*, (Bouwker Saur, London, 1998).

39. See *Guide to the South African Library* (Cape Town, South African Library, 1997) and *Guide to the National Library of South Africa* (Cape Town, National Library of South Africa, 2002).

40. Including paintings by Charles Bell, Thomas Baines and Thomas Bowler.

41. The NLSA is unable to continue building this collection due to lack of funds.

42. *Guide to the National Library of South Africa*. (Cape Town, National Library of South Africa, 2002).

published in South Africa and/or written about South Africa or by South Africans,<sup>43</sup> and is aided in this by its status as a legal deposit library. As well as being a source of current legal deposit material, the *Africana Collection* is particularly rich in older publications and is therefore a key source of memory for examining the development of South Africa.

In addition to the NLSA's general book stock and the legal deposit-enabled *Africana Collection*, the Library has numerous other special book collections,<sup>44</sup> covering collection-specific areas such as (amongst others) mathematics, cookery, historical foreign language dictionaries, genealogy, heraldry, law, shipping, etiquette, chess, and mountain climbing. Of particular note is the Grey Collection - an invaluable collection that includes early missionary press prints of African language material with specific importance for the study of Southern African languages;<sup>45</sup> 114 medieval manuscripts, and 119 incunabula. It is widely acknowledged that Sir George Grey's 1861 donation of his Collection to the then South African Library<sup>46</sup> may well have saved the library, otherwise in continuous financial difficulty. This collection "immediately put the Library on the map in a way in which it had never been before and its claims to Government support could no longer be refused".<sup>47</sup> Also of note is the Fairbridge Collection, a diverse private library of about 7,000 books purchased for the Library in 1925 by Sir Abe Bailey and particularly known for the quality of fine printing and binding and for its books from private presses.

### **Newspapers and journals**

The NLSA holds a comprehensive collection of South African newspapers, many of which are available on microfilm. Because of legal deposit legislation, copies of all journals and newspapers currently published in South Africa are received by the National Library. The newspaper and journals collection includes the first South African newspaper, the *Cape*

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43. The National Library of South Africa Act of 1998 determines that a function of the National Library is to build up a complete collection of published documents emanating from, or relating to, South Africa.

44. Including the many of the kind of donated private libraries discussed earlier in this paper.

45. This collection includes earliest printed texts in the indigenous languages of Southern Africa in the form of pamphlets and documents published at mission stations such as Lovedale, Mount Coke, Beersheba and Kuruman.

46. Now the Cape Town Campus of the National Library of South Africa.

47. A.M. LEWIN ROBINSON, "Charles Aken Fairbridge and His Library" in C. PAMA (ed), *The South African Library: Its history, collections and librarians 1818-1968*, (A.A. Balkema, Cape Town, 1968), p.5.

*Town Gazette and African Advertiser*<sup>48</sup> (1800), and *the South African Commercial Advertiser*<sup>49</sup> (1824). Numerous long-run historical periodicals are also available at the Library such as the *Gentleman's Magazine* (1731 - 1907), the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* (1655 - 1950), and the highly illustrated *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* (from first issue in 1787).

### **Official publications - South African**

The National Library has systematically built up an extensive collection of South African government publications,<sup>50</sup> mostly received under legal deposit. In addition to collections of publications from the historical Transvaal, Natal, Orange Free State and South West Africa/Namibia, the National Library is continuing to build its collections from the nine provinces in line with new national requirements for Official Publications Depositories.<sup>51</sup>

### **Official publications - Southern African**

The National Library has collections of official publications from neighbouring SADC states, ranging from the comprehensive Rhodesia/Zimbabwe collection and including Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Zambia and Malawi. In addition, the National Library has a comprehensive collection of British Parliamentary papers relating to Southern Africa and a collection (incomplete) of Colonial Office Confidential Prints on Southern Africa.

### **Official publications - Foreign**

The National Library has significant collections of foreign official publications collected in terms of various agreements. Historically, the NLSA's two campuses have variously been depositories for League of Nations publications (1920-1946), publications from the United Nations and its related organisations, and World Bank publications. In addition, the NLSA has collections of official publications from countries such as Australia, Belgium, Canada and Germany, collections which include national bibliographies, complete series of government publications, patent abstracts, statistics, government regulations, international treaties, conventions, agreements, resolutions and reports. South Africa is also the only other African country besides Egypt that has full depository status for US Federal

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48. This publication was the forerunner of the *Government Gazette*.

49. The first privately published newspaper in South Africa.

50. Central and Local government.

51. Legal Deposit Act, 1997: Amendment of Legal Deposit Regulations (Gazette No. 22340)

Government publications. These publications are kept in the National Library.

### **Atlases and maps**

The NLSA has a large collection of early and modern maps and atlases with specific emphasis on Southern Africa. The earliest published atlas is a 1619 edition of Mercator's *Atlas sive Cosmographicae meditationes de fabrica mundi et fabricati figura*. Among other well-known atlases are the NLSA's two copies of the Blaeu Atlas (1664-5), one being a beautifully colour-engraved copy. Apart from a comprehensive collection of early and modern sheet maps, the NLSA also holds the Goad Insurance Maps and maps produced by the British War Office during the Anglo-Boer War. The NLSA's acquisition of new locally published maps is covered by South Africa's Legal Deposit legislation, and the NLSA therefore holds copies of the most up to date South African maps.

### **Picture collection**

The NLSA has a substantial collection of photographic prints, photographic negatives (including glass plate negatives), photograph albums and postcards. These provide extensive coverage of specific subjects, such as shipping, slavery and press photography, and are an invaluable reference and research resource recording many socio-cultural aspects of life in South Africa.

### **Manuscript collections**

The NLSA has in the course of its history accumulated almost 1,000 collections of manuscript material that provide a documentary record of the social, cultural, political and economic development of South Africa as a whole and of specific sectors of its people. Collections of personal papers include those of Jan Hendrik Hofmeyer, John X. Merriman, J.C Molteno, W.P Schreiner, Olive Schreiner, Clare Goodlatte, CP Hoogenhout, C. Louis Leipoldt, Ruth Prowse and John Knox Bokwe.

Significant also the Bleek Collection and the manuscript component of the Grey Collection. Most noteworthy of the pictorial items in the Manuscript Collections are the anonymous Khoi sketches (ca 1700), and the !Kung drawings in the Bleek Collection.

### **The National Library of South Africa's client groups**

To ensure that it is able to serve the greatest number of people, and provide access to the widest range of information and knowledge sources, the National Library is working to develop an enhanced understanding of its

existing and potential clients. Broadly speaking, the NLSA's clients fall into the following groups:<sup>52</sup>

*Individuals:* members of the general public, professionals, researchers, and secondary and tertiary level students. Most of these clients are on-site users. However, the NLSA services substantial inquiries and requests via phone, letters, fax and e-mail.

*Libraries and other institutions:* The NLSA provides support and infrastructural services to other libraries, such as bibliographic control and preservation assistance, as well as substantial sharing of resources. Such support helps to build the capacity of hundreds of libraries in South and Southern Africa.

*The Book trade and related industries:* Through bibliographic services, the allocation of international standard numbers to publications, and through the long-term preservation and accessibility of publishers' output, the NLSA particularly serves publishers and booksellers, as well as other components of the book chain.

*The State:* the NLSA serves the State by serving as a repository for South Africa's published documentary heritage (books, newspapers, periodicals, electronic publications and other types of documents, including state publications) as well as important collections of its original materials heritage.

*The Nation:* By collecting, preserving, making accessible and promoting the nation's documentary heritage, the NLSA serves the long-term information and cultural development needs of the South African nation. The NLSA's holdings – as a source of pride, unity, and national cultural memory – are an important reflection of South African diversity.

### **NLSA's position as a memory institution – past, present and future**

As stated above, libraries are being called upon to be much more to a much broader range of audiences than they used to be. The South African challenge is to ensure that our National Library is able to meet the requirement or the demand to be all that it could be. This challenge must be addressed in all three of the Library's core service areas - collections (what we collect), preservation (ensuring it is appropriately conserved for the future) and access (how and to whom we make our collections available).

The NLSA's collections policy is broadly defined in the 1998 National Library Act. It is in the implementation of this legislative imperative, in the

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52. P. LOR, *Business Plan - Transformation of the National Library of South Africa*. (unpublished, 2000).

context of decreased resources for purchasing those materials outside of the legal deposit catchment, that the National Library will be most challenged to ensure that its collections represent and encompass the heritage of all South Africans.

The preservation of South Africa's documentary heritage is determined according to international best practice translated to our local context. Critical in this is preventative preservation, focused on climate and environmental control ensuring long-term preservation through appropriate storage of materials. The challenge to the National Library is that its collections are currently under threat. Approximately half of the holdings are undergoing measurable physical deterioration, with collections dispersed in inadequate accommodation over various buildings in different locations in Cape Town and Pretoria.<sup>53</sup>

Microfilming is a key mechanism amongst the methods of ensuring preservation and accessibility of materials. While most other institutions in South Africa are closing their microfilming programmes in favour of digital technology, the National Library continues to build its centre of excellence in the microfilming field to ensure the long-term preservation of most of its newspaper collections and some of its manuscript materials. Building on this preservation platform, however, the National Library does offer limited digitisation services. The Library seeks to build this into a comprehensive preservation and access programme (focused initially on its large iconographic collections) that services the NLSA objective of putting its collections on-line and making them available on CD.

Other mechanisms for making the NLSA's collections accessible include, for example, Reference and Information services, the Inter-Library Lending scheme, and the compilation of bibliographies. The best-known bibliographic product of the NLSA is the South African National Bibliography (SANB), a comprehensive bibliographic record of South African publications. The NLSA further publishes a number of other bibliographies that rely not only on material from the Library's own collections but also on material from other libraries in South Africa and elsewhere. Of note are the language-specific bibliographies that record works published in South Africa's indigenous languages. To date the National Library has compiled and published bibliographies focused on isiXhosa<sup>54</sup>, Northern seSotho<sup>55</sup>, and seTswana<sup>56</sup> language publications.

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53. [Ibid.](#)

54. M.A. PETERS AND C.P. BOTHMA (Compilers), *Bibliography of the Xhosa language to the year 1990*, (Pretoria, State Library, [1992](#)).

The place of South Africa's National Library in the life of the nation has been a topic of interest for many years. A commentator, Anthony Trollope, observed in 1878 that it would be easy to begrudge the rare volumes contained in the Grey Collection to a distant Colony such as the Cape.<sup>57</sup> Trollope suspected that there might be doubt that readers<sup>58</sup> would appreciate the value of the materials. However, with its origins in the Dessinian Collection, the National Library of South Africa has a "longer continuous history than almost any other library in the Western World outside Europe". Its present campuses, in Cape Town and Pretoria, currently service over 110,000 on-site users every year. This number excludes the thousands of clients who use the Reference Desk query service for phone, letter, fax and e-mail queries, and who use the NLSA's regional Inter-Library lending scheme.

In a discussion on the place of the library in the cultural life of South Africa, Varley argued that throughout the history of the library had existed a tug of war between those who wanted the library to be a "centre of true research" and those who wanted a "popular library".<sup>59</sup> In some senses this tension still exists in that the National Library, while having invaluable manuscript and special collections and while honouring its status as a legal deposit library with an obligation to preserve our holdings, also needs to be able to fulfill its legislated brief to become more accessible.

A 65-year old document, the 1937 Inter-Departmental Report on the Libraries of the Union, sums up the conundrum that affects all cultural heritage institutions as holders of national memory: to assure the status of the institution as a "repository of the ... treasures of the nation", while at the same time ensuring the development of the institution as a "dynamic tool of informal education".<sup>60</sup>

The National Library, as a memory institution, must engage actively with issues of nation-building, nationhood and collective history and identity.

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55. C.P. BOTHMA (Compiler), Northern Sotho bibliography to the year 1993, (Pretoria, State Library, 1994).

56. M.A. PETERS AND M.M. TABANE (Compilers), Bibliography of the Tswana language: a bibliography of books, periodicals, pamphlets and manuscripts to the year 1980, (State Library, Pretoria, 1982).

57. D. SIMPSON, "Anthony Trollope on the South African Library" *Quarterly Bulletin of the South African Library*, 4(4), 1950, pp.125-126.

58. Trollope noted there were only two or three readers in the Library at the time (*ibid*).

59. D.H. VARLEY, "The place of the South African Library in the life of the nation", *Quarterly Bulletin of the South African Library*, 13(2), 1958, pp.37-44.

60. *Ibid.*, pp.38-39.

How, then, does the NLSA engage with historical route-markers such as, for example, 6<sup>th</sup> April 1652?<sup>61</sup> This year, 2002, saw the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that date. Along with many other institutions, the National Library has not, for various reasons,<sup>62</sup> used its collections to acknowledge this significant date. This is despite the fact that there are very important holdings<sup>63</sup> in the library on this topic that could have been used as a discursive entry into the topic of Dutch Settlement at the Cape. It is the NLSA's challenge to engage with the cultural heritage environment by actively pursuing its potential to provide entry points around issues of memory, identity and nationhood.

If one accepts that the collections in cultural heritage institutions are a source of pleasure and emotional response, as well as historical information and knowledge, cultural meaning and memory, then what do the NLSA's collections say about what has historically been deemed significant in South Africa? The dominant colonial, Eurocentric mindset has meant that the Grey Collection, for example, has been held in great esteem for its illuminated manuscripts and its incunabula rather than for its early African language printed material. It has also meant that the Bleek Collection has been effectively neglected, particularly that component of the collection consisting of over 400 drawings done by !Kung youth between 1878 and 1882.

The National Library's collections necessarily influence what is judged to be historically important. More specifically, it is the way that these collections have been managed, profiled, promoted and researched that elucidates what is judged to be significant as South African history. Taking this further, these judgements change with time and it is now, with some distance, that clear examples of these changing judgements can be determined. One of the best current examples is the changing status of the National Library's Bleek Collection.

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61. This date marks the arrival to the Cape of Jan Van Riebeeck, the Dutch settler tasked with establishing a refreshment station at the Cape of Good Hope. 6th April 1652 is a date that used to be recognised in dominant histories as the "beginning of Cape Town". This is no longer accepted since it is well-known that Khoi herding communities and San hunter-gatherer communities had been living off the land at the Cape for thousands of years.
  62. Including lack of staff and exhibition resources.
  63. Examples of documents that could assist in providing a new approach to this topic include the famous Khoi drawings (see A.B. SMITH, *The Khoikhoi at the Cape of Good Hope : seventeenth-century drawings in the South African Library*. South African Library, Cape Town 1993.) the San drawings in the Bleek Collection and the famous Charles Bell painting of the meeting of Cape Khoi with Jan Van Riebeeck.



One specific issue facing the NLSA is that of Indigenous Knowledge (IK), linked necessarily to Oral History as a memory and knowledge source.<sup>64</sup> It is fundamental to the NLSA's future to engage in debates on Indigenous Knowledge, on the role of IK in national memory and on the role of the NLSA in working to preserve and protect IK systems both from being exploited at the expense of the holders and proponents of that knowledge, and from being destroyed through lack of due care and attention.

As Powell argues, holdings that might be deemed indigenous are seldom highly visible in national libraries and, unlike museums and archives, they are usually dispersed throughout the collections. Internationally, however, most national libraries are taking action to ensure that their indigenous holdings, where appropriate, are more accessible.<sup>65</sup> Powell also cautions that it may be extremely offensive to put some materials (for example, photographs) on display or to make them openly accessible, and suggests that advice be sought about appropriate use.<sup>66</sup>

Powell also makes the point that:

Compared with museums and archives, national libraries and other research libraries appear to have more difficulty in defining their role in relation to indigenous communities. Occupying monumental buildings in the centres of capital cities, the libraries are remote from most communities, their holdings are not known to or valued by those communities, and they have seldom offered services aimed specifically at indigenous peoples.<sup>67</sup>

As argued above, the National Library needs to engage more actively with such issues towards defining its role and how it can positively support those communities historically excluded from cultural heritage institutions in the terms outlined above by Powell.<sup>68</sup>

This engagement will remain important for all cultural heritage institutions while South Africa continues to grapple with the issue of cultural identity

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64. The issue of how libraries engage with Indigenous Knowledge systems is still new and was addressed recently at the April 2002 SCECSAL conference. (For conference papers, SNYMAN, R., 2002: *SCECSAL 2002: From Africa to the World - the globalisation of indigenous knowledge systems*. LIASA, Pretoria.

65. G. POWELL, *National Libraries and First Nations*. (1995) at <http://www.nla.gov.au/nls/staffpaper/powell.html>

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Ibid.*

68. *Ibid*, p. 3.

and the right to self-determination within identified cultural communities<sup>69</sup>, where self-determination is a constitutional right. The National Library, for example, will need to investigate its role supporting the right of communities to preserve the essential elements of their identity in terms of religion, language, traditions and cultural heritage.

## Conclusion

Internationally the LMA<sup>70</sup> community is examining ways of providing learning, research and cultural opportunities, as well as examining how to identify and encourage new communities of users. The new focus on the digital preservation of documents (including born-digital documents) and their integration into the cultural record is “an important step in ensuring the memory record for future generations”.<sup>71</sup> To fully serve an expanding user base,<sup>72</sup> LMA’s in South Africa are increasingly addressing the issue of how to make the value of their collections accessible in a digital environment.

Libraries, museums and archives share the goals of collection, preservation and access, and in many cases share research interests. As institutions that organise the cultural and intellectual record, they are responsible for providing learning, research and cultural opportunities that can transcend institutional and, increasingly, national boundaries.

This raises a host of issues in terms of digital access and the need for institutions to be working more synthetically, as referred to above, towards enhancing opportunities for the creation of knowledge and the analysis of memory. In this, the National Library seeks to build its links locally and internationally with libraries, museums and archives towards sharing of content and services, and towards other possibilities enabled by an electronic environment. To facilitate a more efficient, user-oriented research environment, these institutions need to be enhancing their knowledge partnerships to assist in managing the complementary components of physical, digitised and born-digital resources.

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69. J. VAN DER VYVER, *Cultural Identity as a Constitutional Right in South Africa*. Paper presented at Institute for Justice and Reconciliation Conference, December 2001. (UWC, Bellville, 2001).
  70. Libraries, museums and archives.
  71. L. DEMPSEY, “Scientific, Industrial and Cultural Heritage: a shared approach: a research framework for digital libraries, museums and archives”. *Ariadne*, Issue 22, 2000. <http://www.ariadne.ac.uk/issue22/dempsey/intro.html>, p.3.
  72. Bearing in mind that internationally the user-base is, according to Dempsey (2000:3), increasingly less interested in institutional or national boundaries.

The challenges outlined by Dempsey are clear:

1. To develop business models that recognise the long-term ownership costs of digital media while preserving the public interest in equitable access.
2. To establish and promote best practice for content creators and others which reduce the long-term costs of data ownership.
3. To explore what it means to develop cultural institutions in a digital environment.<sup>73</sup>

This third challenge is centred on the issue of content. Memory Institutions in South Africa will increasingly be following the international trends of using network services to offer access to their content, yet it will be some time before we begin to look at seamless interfaces between institution-specific catalogues, or even before we routinely communicate with each other on content. One initiative that speaks to some of these concerns, and highlights ways in which institutions are beginning to work together, is the Iziko Museum's Slavery website project that draws on content across institutions but will not yet rely on networked inter-institutional catalogue access.<sup>74</sup>

The National Library of South Africa needs to build its capacity in response both to increasing interest in South Africa's multicultural heritage, and to Mbeki's vision of an African Renaissance.<sup>75</sup> This capacity can be greatly enhanced by working in partnership with other memory institutions. The words of the Librarian, D.H. Varley, written in 1958, still ring true:

I firmly believe that this Library, for all its history, is only on the threshold of its usefulness to the nation, and to the world beyond.<sup>76</sup>

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73. L. DEMPSEY, *Scientific, Industrial and Cultural Heritage: a shared approach: a research framework for digital libraries, museums and archives*. *Ariadne* Issue 22, 2000.

74. An Australian example of a very successful memory portal is the National Library of Australia's *Picture Australia* network facility that provides on-line access to many remote image databases located at other libraries and museums. See <http://www.pictureaustralia.org/>

75. P. LOR, *Business Plan - Transformation of the National Library of South Africa*. (unpubl., 2000).

76. D.H. VARLEY, "The place of the South African Library in the life of the nation", *Quarterly Bulletin of the South African Library*, 13(2), 1958, p.39.

## Opsomming

### **Die kultuur van versameling: die nasionale Biblioteek as ‘n instelling van herinnering**

As instellings wat die intellektuele en kulturele herinnering van die gemeenskap organiseer, is biblioteke, museums en argiewe verantwoordelik daarvoor om leer-, navorsings- en kulturele geleenthede te skep wat alle grense oorskry. Hoewel museums bevraagteken word op grond van wat in die verlede versamel is en wat toeganklik gemaak word, bly dit die mees bekende erfenisinstelling vir die publiek. Argiewe staan ook bekend as die bewaarders van herinnering. Nasionale biblioteke is minder bekend in daardie rol. Nogtans is dit spesifiek die taak van die Nasionale Biblioteek van Suid-Afrika om Suid-Afrika se gepubliseerde dokumentêre erfenis te versamel, te bewaar en toeganklik te maak. Met miljoene items in sy besit word die Nasionale Biblioteek volgens wetgewing verplig om te “*versamel*”. Dit is die uitsluitlike taak van Suid-Afrika se erfenisinstellings om te versamel en voorwerpe in hulle besit toeganklik te maak. Erfenisitems het daarin opgesluit herinnering asook die moontlikheid van talryke verhale.

In hierdie verband probeer die Nasionale Biblioteek om ‘n netwerk te vestig met ander biblioteke, museums en argiewe ten einde inhoud en dienste te deel, en ander kontak wat moontlik gemaak sou kon word deur die elektroniese omgewing, te fasiliteer. Ten einde sodanige meer gebruikersvriendelike navorsingsomgewing te bevorder, moet hierdie instellings hulle kennisvennootskappe versterk om die bestuur van komplementêre komponente van fisiese, digitale en ander bronne te vergemaklik. In navolging van internasionale tendense probeer die Nasionale Biblioteek sy rol as die kern Suid-Afrikaanse herinneringsinstelling te ontwikkel.