

Permissions Process:

Swaziland Oral History Project

The Initial Permissions Processes and Public Uses

In 1969, Philip Bonner, then a doctoral student at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, working under the supervision of Professor Shula Marks, commenced fieldwork in Swaziland. The express purpose of the fieldwork was the recording of oral histories for use in Bonner's doctoral research. The recording was motivated by the researcher's recognition that there were gaps and biases in the available documentary archival record, and that much information pertinent to the history of the area was held in oral form by Swazi historians.

Bonner followed the permissions process that prevailed at the time and secured official permission from the Swazi authorities for the project. Maganeni Dlamini (umntwfanenkhosi) was appointed by the Swazi authorities to be Bonner's facilitator in arranging the interviews and in securing the participation of interviewees. A librarian at the Manzini archives was responsible for the production in written form in English of summaries of the bulk of these interviews. This material was cited extensively in Bonner's Phd (completed in 1977) and in the book based on the Phd which was published in 1983.

In 1983 Carolyn Hamilton, then a master's student in the History department at the University of the Witwatersrand working under the supervision of Bonner, commenced fieldwork in Swaziland. The fieldwork project was separate from her master's thesis research. The express purpose of this fieldwork was to build on the work done by Bonner and to focus on the recording of materials pertinent to the periods before British colonialism. Hamilton, in turn, followed the permissions process that prevailed at the time and secured official permission from the Swazi authorities for the project. This fieldwork took place shortly after the death of King Sobhuza II in 1982, and this permission came through the ruling council, the Licoco. Untwfanenkhosi Henry "Hlahlamehlo" Dlamini, a grandson of the Swazi king Mswati, was appointed by the Swazi authorities to be Hamilton's facilitator in arranging the interviews and in securing the participation of interviewees.

Recorded interviews were transcribed and translated in Swaziland, at the Swazi National Archives, by University of Swaziland students/graduates working with Hamilton. They further assisted in a number of follow-up interviews based on queries that were raised in the course of the transcription process. The transcription process was not completed by the time this project, known as the Swaziland Oral History project, and incorporating materials collected by Bonner earlier, came to an end and a number of interviews remain untranscribed. The material appeared in three items published in Swaziland at the time. The first was a history textbook (In Pursuit of Swaziland's Precolonial Past: Kulandza Umlandvo,

for use in schools, published in 1990 by Macmillan Boleswa. It was accompanied by *In Pursuit of Swaziland's Precolonial Past: Teacher's Guide*, also published in 1990 by Macmillan Boleswa. The third item, *In the Tracks of the Swazi Past: A Historical Tour of the Ngwane and Ndwandwe Kingdoms*, was published in 1992, also by MacMillan Boleswa.

In this period the Swaziland Oral History Project received a number of donations of recorded oral materials pertinent to the precolonial past. These included copies of a handful of interviews originally aired on the Swaziland Broadcasting Service, copies of interviews conducted at the behest of the late king, Sobhuza II, and interviews conducted by Dr. Anderson Nxumalo.

The recordings were placed in the safe custody of the Wits Historical Papers Research Archive and in 2012, with a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the sound recordings were digitized. A full set of the of the digitized sound recordings was deposited by Wits Historical Papers Research Archive in the University of Swaziland Library for public access and research.

Second Phase of Public Use and a Further Public Process

In 2013, Hamilton inaugurated the Five Hundred Year Archive (FHYA) project for the creation of an on-line digital archive exemplar pertinent to the history of the southern Africa in the late independent era, that is, the five hundred years or so before European colonialism. The aim of the exemplar is to develop a way of convening online a host of different materials (oral, documentary, artefactual, physical), relevant to this period, drawn from a variety of institutions and individuals in the region and internationally. One of these was the Swaziland Oral History project.

The FHYA undertook the digitization of the transcripts and has arranged for these, as well as a copy of the digitized audio, to be deposited at the Swazi National Archives (ie the second copy of the digitized audio to be placed in a Swaziland repository). The FHYA further paid for an archivist, Ruth Muller, to expand the existing Wits Historical Papers finding aid to the collection, which was shared with the Swazi National Archives.

While publication and researcher access was understood by the permission-granting authorities involved in the original recordings, to be a likely outcome of the fieldwork, digital availability was not imagined in the 1970s and 1980s.

For this reason, the FHYA resolved to undertake a public process to make known as widely as possible the proposed digitization effort, to register and deal with any concerns by surviving interviewees. This created an opportunity for them to exclude their interviews from the digitization process, or to place any limitations necessary on the use of the interviews, as well as to promote public knowledge and understanding of the materials.

To this end the FHYA commissioned a historian, Dr. Nhlanhla Dlamini, of the University of Swaziland, to design and run the public process.

Work by Dr. Dlamini commenced in November 2015 and continued to the end of February 2016. The Public Process designed by Dr. Dlamini comprised three elements.

The first element was the involvement in the process of the Swaziland National Archives in their role as the custodians of the national archival estate. The Director of the Swaziland National Archives Director, Mrs Kholekile Mthethwa, and her staff were fully briefed on the FHYA project. They supported the initiative. The Director invited Dr. Dlamini to use the regular radio slots normally used to air programmes of the Swaziland National Archives and their regular newspaper column in the Swazi Observer Sunday to present the FHYA archive and the permissions issues to the Swazi public. Furthermore, the National Archives hosted a meeting for all stakeholders in the matter, as well as seminar for students in the institutions of higher learning in the country.

The second element was thus an extensive media campaign. The radio programmes that focused on the digitization of Swazi clan histories were recorded and broadcast from 26 November 2015 and newspaper articles appeared from 29 November 2016 and continued until the end of January 2016, as well as television coverage. The media strategy was to find a new and interesting angle each week and to link it to the call for the interviewed parties or any other stakeholders to come forward and make direct contact with Dr. Dlamini. In one instance, Dr. Dlamini arranged for one of the surviving interviewees, Bongani Nxumalo, to be interviewed for a broadcast that discussed the project and related issues concerning Swaziland's oral heritage. The list of names of the interviewees whose material was proposed for online presentation was formally published or mentioned on air numerous times in this period. The result was an exceptionally high level of media saturation concerning the issue. Dr. Dlamini reported that he received a number of calls showing support for making available the digitized histories online. Several people requested copies of particular interviews. No objections were received.

On 30 November 2015 Dr. Dlamini and the Principal Archivist who represented the Director, Archives, met with the Private Secretary, Ministry of Information, Communication and Technology, who warmly welcomed the digitization initiative and noted that it was in line with Swazi government's 2022 vision for paperless records (e-archive). He noted that the Swazi government had a programme to repatriate and digitize archival material and that the Five Hundred Year Archive had already spearheaded this process without any costs to government. The project was further endorsed by the Prime Minister of Swaziland.

The Swaziland National Archives, supported by the Ministry, then invited Professor Hamilton and Dr. McNulty of the FHYA and Professor Bonner (retired) to undertake

a visit to Swaziland as their guests to complete the public process. This occurred in January 2016. The visit coincided with the stakeholders' meeting and the seminar.

These meetings comprised the third component of the public process. The stakeholders meeting was attended by surviving interviewees, including Dr. Anderson Nxumalo, whose own interviews comprise a sub-section of the collection, Prince Tshekedi?

representing the Royal Family, and the Deputy Prime Minister, as well as a host of other parties interested in the archive. The Director of the Swaziland Broadcasting and Information Services was also present and endorsed the making available of the SBS component of the collection that was originally created for broadcast. The visit and the meetings were further supported by UNESCO Swaziland.

The entire public process, and the extent of the media coverage and stakeholder consultation, was on a scale that exceeded anything that the FHYA had imagined would be possible. Individual stakeholders were afforded the fullest possible opportunity to gain information about the project and to register privately with Dr. Dlamini any anxieties about public accessibility. Significantly while numbers of people used the opportunity to make contact with Dr. Dlamini, no material was placed under any kind of restriction. Multiple Swazi authorities in various capacities considered and endorsed the project. In addition, the Swazi National Archives noted that it would keep a watching brief on the permissions issue with an eye to ensuring that individual interviewees rights are continuously considered.

The public process designed in the first instance to deal with differences between earlier permissions processes and current conventions had a variety of further positive effects, notably in stimulating public, and academic, interest in Swaziland's oral heritage and in the region's long past.

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