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# ACCESSING UK ARCHIVAL HOLDINGS FROM SOUTH AFRICA

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This paper presents my ideals for ensuring that African researchers and those from the Global South achieve direct access to UK archival holdings with the time and consideration required to make substantive interventions in our research projects and fields of study. My observations and recommendations are derived from my experience of archival research gained as I travelled across the United Kingdom unearthing records of the 19th century Xhosa intellectual, the Reverend Tiyo 'Zisani' Soga, for my doctoral studies of Soga's English works. Soga had studied in Glasgow and Edinburgh between 1846 and 1856 and was ordained as a minister in the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland (UPC); in 1857 he returned as a missionary to the AmaXhosa with his newly-wed bride, Janet, née Burnside. I believed there would be significant archival records about Soga and his in-laws in the United Kingdom to which South(ern) African researchers had not had the privilege of access because of the distance and the time required to find them; while I had no funding, I had a spousal visa to the United Kingdom which permitted me to live and work in the UK. With these benefits, I was able to spend weeks in particular archives, investigating clues, returning to archives as the relevance of items dawned on me, and to take temporary work alongside my research. As I progressed, I retrieved almost an entire alphabet of records on Soga, records which directly inform knowledge of Soga's life, the histories of South African theology, the translation of the Bible into Xhosa, literacy in South Africa and South African languages, and debates around the uniqueness of each language. I also noted a wealth of sources about South Africa and the whole African continent located from Oxford to Cambridge, to London, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dollar and beyond.

Issues around the ownership of and access to these archival sources and resources were immediately visible and indeed imperative to me. I came to literary analysis as a proponent of Black Consciousness, my eye trained on the redemption of African narratives and histories and black excellence: redemption, and repatriation. As a student I was a representative at the *Transformation in Education Conference* held at the University of Cape Town between 1994 and 1995, where we negotiated for outcomes very similar to those prioritised by the *Fees Must Fall* movement, with some notable successes. I was surprised that archives as sites of university life were not a feature of these recent student-led decolonisation movements, as I believe that archives should be included within these debates because they are frequently located within universities, although some are in independent research libraries and the observations in this paper should be addressed equally to those repositories. Perhaps

however archives have not featured as sites for decolonisation in these student movements because of the remove at which archival research remains from the expected reach of undergraduate scholarship. Public programming and outreach programmes may introduce more students to the wealth of information in archives and in turn inspire decolonisation debate around which resources are located in which archives, which omitted, and to whom they belong, as well as around how to impact on and shape holdings, and increase access and usage for African scholars. Who holds archives and how holdings came to be is of direct relevance to decolonisation. As repositories of records deemed important enough to be retained, archives constitute the DNA of academia, the building blocks from which we build our analysis of how societies functioned, function, and shall function. Those who use these resources impact on how these meanings are construed; ensuring that all researchers can access them is significant for the creation of multiple meanings. Decolonisation theorists have shown that universities are responsible for producing and reproducing discriminatory systems which nurture socio-political and socio-economic inequalities. These activists stress that ontologies from Western-centric universities are simplistic and unscholarly, especially those which refute the equality of critics who challenge Western and Global North scholarship. Archives are also a site for decolonisation because the size and extent of holdings is a key determiner of prestige and power for institutions. This in turn generates revenue as some visiting researchers pay admission fees, many pay for permission to reproduce content and again for the actual reproductions. A university or research library without archives lacks this significance, prestige and revenue stream, and the cycle is perpetuated.

Decolonisation activists in other critical disciplines have insisted on the importance of returning items of which nations have been dispossessed through the colonial encounter, especially land, natural resources and cultural resources, with the objective of reclaiming full ownership for source nations for unfettered access to, and custodianship and use of, and enrichment by, those resources. Of course I would prefer all the materials relevant to South Africa to be available in South Africa – which I achieved by including all the sources which were found in my doctoral thesis, and insisting that they be included as appendices in the book which arose.<sup>1</sup> I strive to overhaul areas of university life which remain exclusive and to find ways to make all avenues accessible to all scholars, especially students excluded financially, and I decry the continued veneration of the overtly racist founders and leaders of these institutions. While I am driven by the urgent need for South and Southern African researchers to access these documents, this paper will present my arguments against moving these sources from their current lodges. Rather, I propose that African researchers particularly and researchers from the Global South be ensured unequivocal and autonomous access to the archival resources of their choice at archives in the United Kingdom, and by extension all countries in which they are found. Underpinning all of this is a notion of the role of education in social

mobility and the nature of the knowledge in that education for social mobility and, again, access: to capital, whether intellectual or financial.

Perhaps archives were omitted from decolonisation activism because it looks as if this work has already been undertaken: for decades, and especially since the late 1980s, Black Consciousness philosophers and post-colonialists have provided a sustained critical interrogation of the legitimacy of knowledges and informations held in archives, predating and almost presaging decolonisation activism which “acknowledg[es] and affirm[s] subjectivities that fall outside the purview of Western modes of thinking and expressions of being” (Hirmer, Istratii and Lim 2018:10-15). Also, archivists at ECARBICA<sup>2</sup> and then ESAR-BICA<sup>3</sup> have for some sixty years repeatedly called for the return of archives in exile and migrated archives, including records of governance, manuscripts and artistic and cultural scripts; these archivists even passed resolutions for pragmatic steps to regain these archives as early as 1969, then again in 1983, and twice in 2003 (Mnjama and Lowry 2018:105-108). More recently in November 2017, the Association of Commonwealth Archivists and Records Managers released a position paper [...] regarding the Migrated Archives and a call for their return to the relevant countries during its annual meeting, though, states Karabinos, “the effects of this paper have yet to be seen” (2018:2). It is worth noting that not one resolution has ever resulted in archival repatriation, which failure may equally explain their omission from contemporary calls for decolonisation. However, archives have become more aware of due diligence when offered manuscripts or sources which should more appropriately be held in the African or Global South context. Perhaps decolonisation critics believe, as certainly I was told, that archives are so superficial as to be beyond democratisation because colonial sources omit holdings for, on or by [Southern] African peoples. Researchers would like archives to provide knowledge which they wish to have, and representations of themselves and their societies which they could validate. Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, co-founder and publishing director of Cassava Press, quoted her FaceBook exchange about “the power, violence and misrepresentation of the archive” with Ainehi Edoro, then of Brittle Paper, in her keynote address at the Abantu Book Festival in South Africa in 2018 entitled “Archive Fever” which focused extensively on archives and their impact on world knowledge:

Edoro: Reading the 19th century archive on Africa always leaves me with a feeling of melancholy. It blows my mind that all this drivel was passed off as incontrovertible truth.

Bakare-Yusuf: This is why we have to start the archive of the future now! For as long as we are not deliberate and purposeful about the project of archive creation, mourning AND melancholia will be the order of the day. [...]

As a counter-balance, Bakare-Yusuf stressed her interest in

how we create what I am calling the African archival future which will then form part of a global archive. Publishing for me is therefore essentially the work of archival creation and a potential tool of power and control, a tool that helps to shape how we view ourselves and make sense of the world.

I too have encountered extremely racist depictions of black and African peoples, of Third Nation and peoples from the Global South in the archives. I too am excited to consider “the archive of the future now,” and later in this paper I hope to contribute to this pivotal and intriguing avenue of exploration by envisioning characteristics of archives which would enable researchers in their scholarship. However, my experience is also that archives are not limited to such representations of African peoples, and I still consider archives sites of relevance to the study of African history and historiography. As the information I found on Soga shows, information researchers seek might well be held in archives; the problem is that as a point of order, few have had access to it. And those who have, do, with huge reward: in 2017 South African professor Jeff Opland received a national award, “the Order of Ikhamanga: Silver for his outstanding contribution to the field of history and an impressive body of works in literature”. Opland had retrieved a trove of Xhosa literature from newspapers and journals held in a South African archive which he published within *The Opland Collection of Xhosa Literature* series, with to date six full books, and more in the pipeline. The award read: “Your work exhumes stories of the dead and brings them to life so that the living can continue to learn and benefit.” The political importance of these documents in redoing history, recovering respect, cannot be overstated.<sup>4</sup> I agree with Helen Bradford, who in a 2008 paper on Rev Soga’s contemporary William Wellington Gqoba demanded to know, “Why, then, have we been presented with a desert so far as black authored sources are concerned?”.

However, despite my avowed insistence on ensuring access for African researchers to these pivotal information sources, I would like to present my arguments against “repatriating” or “returning” documents.

Firstly, and briefly, as I have mentioned, for sixty years the formal calls to return stolen documents have fallen on deaf ears; we must acknowledge that this tactic has failed and as a point of order we need to find alternative routes to ensure that researchers achieve access to these holdings.

Secondly, many of the sources I used were not migrated or stolen, nor were they South African or concerned particularly with South African issues, but they were nonetheless directly relevant to Soga. For example, Soga’s Baptism Certificate and his marriage certificate were held in the Scottish National

Archives because he was baptised in the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland in Glasgow in May 1847; this document gives Soga's stated date of birth. Correspondence about the translation of the Bible into Xhosa is in the archives of the British and Foreign Bible Society, as is correspondence for hundreds of languages; the archives of Scottish and English mission societies in South Africa were generated under their own auspices as part of their daily functions and routinely sent to the UK head-offices.<sup>5</sup> The repatriation of migrated documents would exclude documents such as these despite their importance to African scholarship; my concern is that once archival holdings have been pared researchers may find we can access merely part of the sources we require. This would stop what I call "lateral surprises" — unpredictable discoveries of unanticipated extant records — which spark new avenues of exploration and insights. It would also stop a second more sinister surprise, which is that of the "shadow" archive identified by Karabinos: "records that we have no knowledge of, and unlike known destroyed records, there is no physical trace of their existence" (2018:5). These are stolen sources which are stealthily hidden from users, and which become apparent through a deep knowledge of sources which enables the detection of a trace, or omission. If researchers are continents and time-zones away from the original files of primary sources, we shall find it very difficult to identify and trace those "shadow archives".

Thirdly, pragmatic logistical decisions need to be considered. Merely choosing decision-makers and methods for identifying documentation as particularly African would take years, let alone taking the actual decisions over what should be sent to Africa, for we should consider that folders featuring African peoples and history are intertwined with documents pertinent beyond Africa to peoples from China, India, the South Pacific, the Americas, the West Indies, and several European countries. Further, each page in each folder of each box must be assessed for each stakeholder, including scholars, nations, governments, religious organisations, business corporations and private researchers. Next, we would have to locate the rightful owner/s of each source to request permission to remove or copy documents, and clarify issues around copyright, negotiating terms upon which the reproductions may themselves be reproduced by, or even shown to, further researchers; these may change from copyright holder to copyright holder and Mnjama and Lowry have noted this work as being extraneous (2018: 109). The logistics would involve commitments over generations, especially given that we do not know the location of all documents, nor volume or content — before any of this work occurs, we would need to audit the entire UK archival holdings for every bit of information, including significant resources for auditing the "shadow archive". Then, researchers would need to study holdings across Europe to achieve a fully representative collection of stolen items, and all over the world for a fully representative collection of pertinent items; the United Kingdom is just one zone with records on Africa. Of the utmost importance is that researchers still require access to the documents and primary sources at stake for the entire

duration of this work and it should not be under embargo or our scholarship will be severely adversely affected.

Fourthly, if documents were moved, rehomed and catalogued, existing scholarship on and of those sources would become untraceable and unverifiable, possibly defunct. This would create an ironic disjuncture – ironic because it defies the stated objective to promote access and transparency. I am wary of any move which in any way exacerbates a lack of access to African archives. Although my archivist interviewees acknowledge that documents are sometimes moved and that cross-referencing is possible in this situation, it is not ideal and certainly would not work for vast swathes of information. Furthermore, Karabinos recounts that when Kenya successfully sued the British government for the release of hidden stolen documents which he termed “shadow archives” (2018:19) it took two years (2018: 7) to move the documents a mere 60 miles from Hanslope Park, outside of London, to the National Archives in Kew, London, during which time, crucially, the documents were all inaccessible. Two years can exceed the research component for doctoral studies. The irony is compounded by the glaring fact that African researchers on African scholarship stand to be affected adversely through interruptions to research on these sources and related scholarship, even as African scholars are progressing with their research.

Neither do I support copying these documents and records, chiefly because of my fears that use of copied documents would adversely impact on the quality and critical reception of scholarship based on them. Questions may arise about the authenticity of a source dislocated from its original context. Reproductions are often infelicitous. How to handle an oddly-sized page so that the paralinguistic meaning in the page-size is legible? A scrap of paper? How to perceive palimpsestic information, or pages that have been written on in strange ways, sideways? Many of the documents I read looked like this — maps were never A3, 4 or 5. Once the documents have been copied, it is virtually impossible to verify perceptions of their contents. I laboured over water stains, inkblots and age spots, which went to the quality and experience of the documents. Researchers would be asking of a copied map: is that a river or a crinkle? How did a mark come to be on a page? Crucially, could researchers or institutions who can afford high-resolution reprographic images access different information than those who pay for low-resolution images? This impacts on the sustainability of the research and its conclusions. We should consider whether scholarship which relies on copied sources would be equally worthy of publication as scholarship based on original sources, and query the further possible impact on career advancement and access of researchers to top academic posts. Furthermore, the question of what would be ‘curated’ and what omitted would always concern the thorough scholar, as would the knowledge that others use the original and are more empowered than ze, she or he, in knowing this history and this culture. The existence of records of British involvement

in torture of Mau Mau peoples further to those in the public domain was officially denied at least twice (Karabinos 2018:7) when in fact “200 feet of boxes” (Karabinos 2018:7) were involved. Mnjama quotes an archivist:

They give you what they want to give you and those that they feel you should not view are kept from you. We purchased practically all our colonial reports from the Commonwealth Office. The records from the National Archives were microfilmed at a price and we have them in our repositories. We know for a fact that they did not give us everything pertaining to our country.  
(Mnjama 2015: 50)

The cost of copying is itself an issue which affects access. Ghana requested archives from the Dutch Royal Archives in 1976 and microfilmed them; and Kenya set up a cultural office at the High Commission in London, with dedicated staff working with Kenyan scholars, to copy archives and repatriate them after initial surveys of Kenyan records in UK archives in 1978 and '79 (Mnjama and Lowry 2018: 106). Botswana microfilmed documents from the UK National Archives in 1980; similarly, Tunisia microfilmed ‘some 2,483 35mm reels’ (Mnjama and Lowry 2018:106) in Paris between 1981-3. These were unsustainably expensive undertakings with the overhanging questions of who should pay for them versus who will pay, as Mnjama and Lowry (2019:110) report, citing Musembi (1982:13). Some people favour digitisation of archival holdings, however I do not, and my reticence is rooted in the persistence of the question of access, mainly because digitised documents are not eye-legible, we need both machines to read them and the power necessary to run them. African/Global South countries have different access to these machines than Europe. Purchasing computers with internet connectivity may also lock African archives into indentured expenditure as machines are expensive to purchase and maintain and the relevant software must be kept up to date, and another aspect of the North-South divide is perpetuated unless African archivists are trained in digital copying themselves. Sometimes the medium might be frustrated by incompatible software and hardware. Even in Europe this is an issue: I recently watched two films digitally copied from Irish archives at a university film studio in London. The first lost its sound and then hung because of incompatible software. The nerves of the audience and the facilitator were palpable as we considered that our intellectual investment was in vain, but luckily the studio had a second type of software which worked. The second film was an infelicitous reproduction of variable quality, which inconsistency impacted adversely on both the meaning which we drew from the film and in turn on our discussion of the content. Furthermore, there is an uneven pace of digitisation across different countries; Sigauke and Nengomasha of the National Archives of Zimbabwe comment, “digitization as a programme for the improvement of access and preservation of historical records lags behind and falls in the shadow of progress being made by regional neigh-



bours [to Zimbabwe]" (2011:6). Laptops are now produced in Europe without CD drives because Northerners prefer to stream data rather than own materials, but broadband is not equally accessible to ordinary people in the African context. Internet storage in digital format is subject to fees; whether the original country or the target country will pay this will need to be decided. And if sites go down then notwithstanding payment for fees, the information is inaccessible. Power-outages may curb digital access; in South Africa access to electric or other kinds of power is not guaranteed as power-outages called 'load-shedding' regularly interrupt my colleagues' work, during which access to digital sources is not possible. And what of a state simply switching off access and thereby censoring the archives? Would archives become even less available in a dystopian framework which insists all have access while only granting partial representation? Again, there are trust issues in the decisions around who will be in charge of how the digitisation is undertaken and whether they would have my own attention to detail and my politics for making sure each and every word of each and every document is truly and clearly represented. Finally, the language of computers may also be a barrier, if the computer gives options in a foreign language with no human interaction and no non-verbal communication, then it would be impossible to work.

Let me assure you that I am not afraid of Herculean tasks; I do not shirk the possibility of hard work. I come back to issues surrounding ensuring that researchers have access to the sources. Whilst answers to these questions are sought, researchers from Africa and the Global South continue to require access to UK and also world holdings of documents relevant to our continued scholarship, with the time and consideration required to make successful interventions and inroads into this scholarship. My aim is to enable and ensure that access, and to consider how an accessible archive might look. Archivists insist proudly that all researchers are treated equally at their institutions within their remit – archivists provide help with research pathways and catalogue navigation for the myriad motivations for research. This is an honourable option but belies distinguishing factors related to two invaluable resources differentiated between local and foreign researchers: time and money. I suggest that an intersectional assessment of different abilities to access documents will allow us to see not only equality but also structural discrimination and inequality, and seek different ways to overcome these in the shorter term.

Firstly, I will consider the resource of time. Researchers require enough time in the country to undertake successful research. However, African researchers are denied access for spurious reasons, so I suggest the creation of a UNESCO-sponsored visa for a year. It should run for eight months minimum, from March to November, over the exam and summer season, omitting the coldest months of the year. This visa should come with a scholarship for subsistence and should be renewable for valid scholarship and research.

To save time registering at each institution to which a scholar needs access, I propose we use a Foreign Scholar Access Pass, so that once one archive has granted a researcher accreditation and access, the researcher can access any institution with holdings relevant to that scholarship. Access itself is not difficult to attain, most archives will admit anyone with photo ID, for which researchers present passports, and proof of address or bespoke form completed by their institution. Applying for a new access card at each institution can shrink a research day to seven or even six out of eight hours: if a researcher uses six institutions, that is a full day of research regained. Accreditation is speedier if institutions provide an online form, wherein researchers complete half the application before presenting corroborating evidence for final sign-off, which would remain useful even if for the issue of one pass card. A Foreign Scholar Access Pass would also obviate refusals such as I experienced at the British Library when I was refused access because by fluke, none of the important documents for my house were in my name. Although my bona fide credentials were evident from my accreditation from both SOAS and Oxford University, following bespoke documentation from my supervisor, the British Library would still not grant me access. I was really aware of my unprotected vulnerability in this situation. Once I had taken temporary admin work, and received a payslip with proof of address, I was permitted entry; there, I had a vital breakthrough. However this opportunity is not open to the majority of foreign researchers.

I would also like to propose that we stretch the current archive research week from 40 to 63 hours, an increase of more than fifty percent. This would truly bolster a foreign researcher's results. Archives could extend their hours to 8pm on weekdays simply by redistributing staff within the library. The archives are the only part of a library in which researchers are truly dependent on a librarian for help but they are the earliest to close, whilst librarians are present for longer in the rest of the library. Simply swapping these staff and extending opening hours by three hours permits 55 hours of work instead of 40, a bonus of two working days in each week. Foreign researchers do not need to get home by 6pm and prefer the productive environment of archival research for an extra three hours. Opening archives on Saturdays, even from 9am to 5pm, would mean a further day of work extra to the current research week, representing a true bonus to the productivity of a foreign scholar on a tight budget.

I also suggest that all archives or libraries produce maps and catalogues of their spaces and holdings in all languages represented in their archive, as for Braille floor-maps shown at the British Library *Writing: Making Your Mark* exhibition. Translations of the maps of the library and catalogues would overcome a language barrier with severe time-wasting implications. This may seem an inordinate expense but once done, and only once, the benefit for any user who speaks a language represented in the archives would be immense: being able to find his or her way around the library without getting terribly

lost several times over, and to read the catalogue in his or her language. This would save each person many hours, including librarians whose time is also taken up with this.

The second resource I would like to consider here is money. It is a huge investment to undertake foreign research. After flights and accommodation, organising sabbaticals or unpaid leave, a person's life savings can be on the line, as indeed were mine. There are a few ways in which we make it cheaper. Firstly, I propose that the international bursaries and training for digitisation and digital archiving currently made available from UNESCO, ICADLA (International Conference on African Digital Libraries and Archives) and ESABNICA (Sigauke and Nengomasha, 2011, p. 12) and ESARBICA (*ibid.*) (Sigauke and Nengomasha, 12) be redeployed for scholarships and top-up funds for archive research, instead of paying for repatriation of the documents. Anyone wishing to use those archives should be eligible for this funding irrespective of whether they have institutional backing, because researchers sometimes undertake studies which are unpopular with their institutions or governments.

Then, the actual archive environment can be modified to enable better value. I propose a toilet and tearoom within the archive itself, attached to or beside the staff kitchen. Cold, hunger and exhaustion are the single-most significant barriers to research once in the UK; having a warm beverage and a quiet place to eat a packed lunch should be easier than leaving your desk and the library with your belongings (your prized laptop, charger, all of which take time to pack up and unpack) to find a canteen, get lost, and found, and wander all about the place. The Glasgow University Student Records Archive (GUSR) offers such a tea room immediately beside the reading room stocked with water, cordial, tea, coffee and hot chocolate, milk and sugar, glasses and mugs: all for free (you are requested to wash your own mug). A vending machine with biscuits and crisps at cost price would save at least fifteen minutes – and a fruit bowl (the GUSR offered chocolate cake on the day I was there). Archivists usually know in advance how many researchers have reserved seats on a day and can plan accordingly. The relative value of pound sterling against other currencies means that academic visitors from South Africa do not purchase proper food, irrespective of their level of seniority. I furthermore propose meals for researchers from Africa with this UNESCO scholarship. A £15 meal is around R300; three such meals per day costs R1000/day, and four days R4000: this is a full month's rent to many researchers. But research is hungry work best done on a full stomach. I would like this for conferences too. I have deliberately given away my meals at conferences to colleagues because they are hungry but paying for conference food with their currencies is prohibitively expensive.

I also propose a subsidy for clothing which would enable researchers in the UK to access the archives. This would include a proper jacket, purchased in the UK; boots, gloves, scarves and hats. We may uselessly purchase these

items in our home countries with no clue of how cold it is going to be. It is virtually impossible to work with frozen toes, or fingers. I also propose subsidised accommodation, which should be as cheap as possible, with facilities for self-catering so that people can prepare cheaper and more nutritious meals. Of course, such structural support is subject to abuse. But I firmly believe that after all the prior research people have done and the lengths to which they have gone to get to the UK to do this research, it seems unlikely. We would put in place mechanisms to track the authenticity of the expenditures. The alternative is that researchers are insular, isolated and research is not good. These documents are all over the world — we should promote access and allow researchers to travel, research and flourish. Promoting access would bring rewards, not the least of which is good scholarship, close networks and links, deep gratitude, and legacy enrichment and maybe even endowments if we ever become rich and famous... endowments — of boxes of tea and short-bread biscuits...

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## Notes

- 1 Davis, Joanne. (2018). *Tiyo Soga: A Literary History* Pretoria: Unisa Press. This book was based on my thesis, completed in 2012: "Tiyo Soga: Man of Four Names" submitted for the Degree of Doctorate of Literature and Philosophy, Department of English Language and Literature, University of South Africa (UNISA), South Africa.
- 2 Eastern and Central African Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives.
- 3 The Eastern and Southern African Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives.
- 4 For example, at the Bodleian Library, I discovered that Dingaan's name was not Dingaan but Ti'Qaan – original sources refer to this Zulu warrior chief as 'Ti'Qaan' with a 'Q' – truly.
- 5 I was reading the Minutes of the Foreign Committee of the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland in Glasgow, and its *Missionary Record*; the British and Foreign Bible Society has archives at the University of Cambridge; the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society and London Missionary Society archives are at SOAS in London, and the British Library held newspapers from nineteenth century South Africa.