Public Archives and State Ideology: 
The South African Example

Harrison W. Inefuku

Introduction

SOUTH AFRICAN ARCHIVIST Verne Harris wrote, “Archivists, whether they realize it or not, are at once the objects and instruments of political pressure.”¹ Archives, by their very functions, are necessarily sites of power, shaped by the political contexts in which they operate. If one thinks of the potential missions toward which archival institutions may aspire (including ensuring government accountability, the protection of citizen’s rights and the formation of societal identity), each ideal bears the markings of politics and power.² On a more practical level, public archives, by virtue of its position within the governmental structure, its legislative mandate, source of funding and staffing, will necessarily mirror the ideologies of its sponsoring government.

The connection between public archives and government ideology is perhaps most evident in the relationship of the National Archives and Records

Service (and its predecessor, the South African State Archives Service) to the government of the Republic of South Africa. This paper seeks to understand how public archives reflect and participate in the juridical context in which it operates, using the transformation of the South African archives from apartheid to democracy as a model.

This paper will analyze the archival and recordkeeping practices in South Africa between 1962 and the present, placing the national archives within its broader juridical context to gain an understanding of how the archives participates in the formation and articulation of government ideology. It will begin with an expanded discussion of the political aspects of the archives, showing how archival practices can work to disempower marginalized communities. Second, it will discuss archival and recordkeeping practices during the apartheid regime, following the passage of the Archives Act, 1962. In addition to consideration of archival legislation and functions, it will place the State Archives Service within a broader range of government functions, including education and racial policies. It will then move into a discussion of the transitional period between 1990 and 1994, including recordkeeping practices in the final years of apartheid and the investigations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It will conclude with an analysis of contemporary archival and recordkeeping practices in South Africa. Through these analyses, this paper will show how public archives in South Africa have transformed to remain aligned with government ideology, reflecting the ideals embodied in the constitution.

**Archival Politics**

As an arm of government, public archives are in the first place meant to serve the interests of their sponsors. Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook write, “Archives are social constructs. Their origins lie in the information needs and
social values of the rules, governments, businesses, associations, and individuals who establish and maintain them.”

3 From the origins of archives, they served as tools of government. Throughout history, archives have played roles in the registration and control of citizens, served as the keeper of official state history, and as a tool of accountability and upholder of citizens’ rights. Public archives are intrinsically linked to government and their services, functions and mandates will necessarily mirror the views of those in charge. Archives, both in the broadest (in their missions) and narrowest (in terms of records) sense, are political.

Records, in the strictest sense, are the natural byproducts of action—their creation necessary to carry out the activities they document. Harris writes, “The record invites us to acknowledge that, far from being an innocent byproduct of activity, a reflection of reality, it is a construction of realities expressing dominant relations of power.”

4 The very concept of writing and record are laden with implications of power. Before we may consider which groups are privileged in having their records preserved, we must consider which groups are privileged to create records? The very notion of records creation implies education, literacy and technology, tools more readily to society’s elite and, often time, inaccessible for the marginalized.

Postmodernist thinking and development in social theories have expanded discussions of archival power and politics to include considerations of the narratives formed by the archival record. Through processes of appraisal, selection and records management, certain records are privileged as archival, ensuring their preservation as part of the national documentary heritage. Francis X. Blouin, Jr. writes:


Now this authority [of archival “truth”] is being questioned by scholars in many disciplines who find in the archives not a neutral party, but rather forces complicit with dominant cultural and political aims as defined by evolving attitudes within constructs of the nation-state. The representations in the archives and the absences in the archives, rather than being the result of random deposits in the life cycle of records, may be purposeful in selectivity and in the architecture of the evidentiary and informational content.5

These records found in government archives generally reflect the dominant societal groups—the political, economic and cultural elite. Narratives of marginalized groups, however, must be excavated from the gaps in the archival record. These narratives, however, are constructed by the dominant groups in society, denying the marginalized the agency to speak for themselves.

The presence of gaps in the archival record enables users to gain and understanding of what (or whom) lacked value for archival institutions. Rodney G.S. Carter writes, “The power to exclude is a fundamental aspect of the archive. Inevitably, there are distortions, omissions, erasures, and silences in the archive. Not every story is told.”6 As the following section will illustrate, the apartheid regime utilized records destruction as a method of erasure.

**Apartheid: State Archives Service (1962–1990)**

The State Archives Service was established by the Archives Act, 1962. Under the act, the director of archives was given broad control over the management of government records. Section 3 of the Act gives the director, “custody, care and

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control of archives and accessions.” With this duty, powers of inspection, advising, publication and disposition were given to the director. The definition of “archives” provided by the act does not distinguish between current and non-current records, stating:

“archives” means any documents or records received or created in a government office or an office of a local authority during the conduct of affairs in such office and which are from their nature or in terms of any other law not required then to be dealt with otherwise than in accordance with or in terms of the provisions of this act.7

The definition of “government office” provided with the legislation with a large scope, stating “’government office’ means any office of the Government of the Republic, including the South African Railways and Harbours Administration, and of any provincial administration.”8 Thus, the Archives Act, 1962, provided the SAS with records management duties for all government agencies—it represented, in this aspect, one of the strongest pieces of archival legislation in the world.

Although the Archives Act, 1962, was recognized for the strength of its records management program, it was also recognized for the opacity of government records allowed within its ambit. Harris writes, “Interlocking legislation restricted access to, and the dissemination of, information on vast areas of public life. These restrictions were manipulated to secure an extraordinary degree of opacity in government, and the country’s formal information systems became grossly distorted in support of official propaganda.”9

8 Ibid, Section 1.
The lack of public access to government records was a problem identified by the African National Congress, which wrote, “Present legislation does not satisfactorily allow public access to official records.” Meanwhile, the Preamble of the current Promotion of Access to Information Act reads, “the system of government in South Africa before 27 April 1994, amongst others, resulted in a secretive and unresponsive culture in public and private bodies which often led to an abuse of power and human rights violations.” Legislation passed by the apartheid government made access to public records in archives difficult, imposing lengthy time restrictions before records were open to public access and imposing significant obstacles to the access of records still in the custody of government offices.

Indeed, The Archives Act, 1962, required the transfer of government records to archives depots after 30 years, upon which the records would be open to public access. This was later extended to 50 years. The restriction was strictly enforced and was applied at the file level, so a file would be closed if a single document was under 50 years old, no matter the age of the remaining documents.

Access to official records still in the custody of governmental offices was difficult, requiring the permission of the office in question. The Act reads:

Subject to the provisions of any other law, no person shall have access to any archives in a government office or an office of local authority: Provided that any person charged with the custody, care or control of any such archives may, upon application by any other person, in his discretion but subject to the provisions of this Act and

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10 Dominy, Graham.
13 Feinberg.
any other law, authorize that person to have access to those records.\textsuperscript{14}

The report of the Truth and Reconciliation reads, “Access was a privilege to be granted by bureaucracies, except where specific legislation recognized the right of access to specific categories of records.”\textsuperscript{15} More often than not, however, specific legislation restricted access to specific categories of records, rather than granting access. This is evidenced in J.M. de Jager’s discussion of access to defence records under the Defence Act, 1957. He writes, “The Act furthermore presumes that until it is proved to the contrary, any information relating to the defence of South Africa or military equipment is deemed to be secret or confidential.”\textsuperscript{16} The prohibitions enacted by the Defence Act are reflected in other acts relating to the records of South African defence, security, police, intelligence and nuclear programs.

The transfer of governmental records to archives depots did not necessarily mean that they were accessible to the public. A stipulation to access for governmental records in the Act reads, “The Minister may on the ground of public policy direct that access to any such archives or accessions be withheld.”\textsuperscript{17} H.M. Feinberg, recounting his experiences conducting research in South African archives in the 1980s, writes:

A number of the major collections are closed, and permission from archival and governmental officials is required to use such collections. [...] The process could take weeks or even two or three months. Associated with this problem is that the research must

\textsuperscript{15} TRC, 207.
\textsuperscript{17} Archives Act, 1962, Section 9.2.ii.
identify each and every file by number, date, and contents.

Comprehensive requests are not allowed.  

Feinberg goes on to state that the inventories required to obtain file numbers, dates and contents are only available at the archives depot in Pretoria. This places significant obstacles on researchers based outside of Pretoria—finding the records necessary for their research and obtaining the permissions required to access them could easily turn into a lengthy process.

Questions of access and representation within the archival record were especially significant for South Africa’s marginalized populations. Harris writes, “Systematic barriers—low educational standard, high rates of illiteracy, physical location from city centers, competency in languages other than official Afrikaans and English, and so on—ensured that most South Africans enjoyed only nominal access to public archives.” These barriers extended beyond archival and recordkeeping legislation—the entire apartheid system helped to create an archival atmosphere that made it difficult for South Africa’s marginalized communities to use and be represented in the archival record.

The persecution of anti-apartheid groups and individuals probably had the greatest impact on the representation of marginalized groups in the archival record. A large majority of the records destroyed by government divisions during apartheid were the records of, or relating to, anti-apartheid groups and individuals. As a result, the departments that carried out the majority of this destruction were related to security, defense and intelligence. By 1978, there was a government-wide policy in place allowing for the destruction of classified record without the consent of the director of archives. Regarding the policy, Harris writes, “How widespread or stringent was their implementation by state

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offices remains unclear. Certainly within the security establishment they were implemented rigorously.”

The fear of persecution by the apartheid government affected the records creation and recordkeeping practices of anti-apartheid organizations, further impacting their presence in the nation’s archival record. As the TRC report states, “many [anti-apartheid organizations] were reluctant to commit certain kinds of information to paper. Many also destroyed records rather than allow them to fall into the hands of state operatives.” When records were generated and maintained by these organizations, there was still risk of confiscation and destruction by government security operatives. The TRC goes on to state, “The apparent complete destruction of all records confiscated from individuals and organisations by the Security Branch of the SAP has removed from our heritage what may arguably have been the country’s richest accumulation of records documenting the struggle against apartheid.”

Gaps in the archival record relating to South Africa’s black population were also created through the apartheid government’s homelands policy. Beginning in the 1950s, a series of legislation was passed that enshrined segregation, including the Group Areas Act, 1950; Pass Laws Act, 1952; Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act, 1959; and the Black Homeland Citizenship Act, 1970. Through these laws, South Africa’s black population was largely confined to “homelands” or Bantustans, defined as, “rural areas ‘reserved’ for ‘occupation by Natives only.’” As a result of this policy, several homelands legislated and created their own archival functions.

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20 Verne Harris, “They Should Have Destroyed More,” 311.
21 TRC, 205.
22 Ibid, 236.
The homelands policy was an extreme form of segregation that dictated which regions of South Africa could be occupied by which races. The creation of, and subsequent “independence” of, homelands for South Africa’s black population enshrined racial segregation and inequality within the country’s governing structures. Harris writes, “In the context of apartheid homeland policy, in particular the inadequate professional and administrative assistance made available by central government, that the homelands either neglected public archives entirely or maintained only rudimentary services.”

Within the homelands, government records suffered from a lack of efficient management and preservation—Transkei was the only homeland that had an established archives service. Other homelands had rudimentary archival repositories or records management programs, while Kangwane and Kwa Ndebele had no archival or records management services at all. The archival and records management programs of all homelands were deemed inadequate by the Archives Sub-Committee of the Arts and Culture Task Group (ACTAG).

The difficulties homelands faced in establishing archival programs was documented in Kwazulu-Natal Project Task Group: Archival Services’ report, which stated, “In 1976 its Legislative Assembly passed an Archives Act (Number 4 of 1976), but it was never implemented. Attempts were made to get an archives service off the ground, but these foundered in the face of an inability to attract qualified archivists and an unwillingness on the part of the South

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24 Harris, “Redefining,” 175.
African State Archives Service to offer more than token assistance.”

Regarding the position of the SAS, Harris writes, “In its relationships with the bantustan archives services, SAS was placed in a classic apartheid dilemma: cutting them loose professionally would have meant reinforcing bantustan underdevelopment; providing comprehensive support would have meant buttressing grand apartheid policy.”

Indeed, KwaZulu did not begin to receive the support from the SAS until the transitional period, establishing a fledgling archival program in 1991. The inability of the homelands to establish and sustain archival operations meant the loss of many records relating to the South Africa’s black population, as the regional archival depots did not concern themselves with records generated within the homelands.

In order to legitimize their minority rule, the apartheid regime created a narrative that maintained the arrival of South Africa’s Afrikaans population occurred contemporaneously with the Bantu population. Bhekizizwe Peterson writes, “Colonial and apartheid authorities consistently denies the existence of any legacy among Africans worth preserving, an attitude borne out in their insistence that Africans had no history.”

The SAS was an active participant in the formation of this revisionist history, through its acquisition strategies and in the publication of articles with an Afrikaans-privileged view. “The fact that most of the Service’s appraisers were taught as undergraduates by establishment-aligned Afrikaner historians was an important contributing factor.”

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29 Ibid.


31 Harris, “Redefining,” 177.
apartheid, the SAS developed an archival record that privileged the white population. As a result, the gaps in the nation’s public archival record silenced not only the voices of the Black, Coloured and Asian communities, it silenced women, sexual minorities, and anti-apartheid individuals and groups as well. Harris writes, “The heart of the issue was a collecting policy that quite deliberately directed archivists away from grassroots experience toward society’s pinnacles.” In 1996, the KwaZulu-Natal Project Task Group: Archival Services reported:

Its large and diverse collection of private archives reflects poorly the struggles against colonialism, segregation and apartheid. Black experience is poorly documented, and in most cases is seen through white eyes. Similarly, the voices of other marginalised sections of society are seldom heard. And the collection is devoid of oral sources. Its official holdings (public archives) have not escaped the influence of apartheid on State Archives Service appraisal policies.

The lack of a representative archival record represented a significant legacy of apartheid-era legislation and archival practices and remains a problem today.

In sum, the failure of anti-apartheid organizations to create or preserve records in fear of prosecution, in addition to the destruction of records relating to anti-apartheid groups and human rights abuses by government security agencies, creating major gaps in the archival record relating to the anti-apartheid movement. As Carter writes, “If records are destroyed, manipulated, or excluded, the narratives of the groups cannot be transmitted across time. Their stories will not be heard and they may ultimately disappear from

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32 Harris, “Redefining,” 178.
history.”³⁴ In combination with the acquisition policies of the State Archives Service and the lack of support for homelands archives, South Africa emerged from apartheid with an archival record that effectively silenced the nation’s majority population. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission wrote, “While there is evidence that SAS attempted to secure a degree of professional autonomy, it is highly improbable that apartheid imperatives did not mould selection decisions.”³⁵ Although Harris points out the necessity of considering the views of individual archivists when discussing the political nature of governmental archives—in the public and international mind, the SAS and the apartheid regime were integrally linked.


As South Africa transitioned from apartheid to democracy, two major trends occurred that heavily shaped the present archival discourse. On the one hand, the outgoing apartheid regime instituted a large-scale destruction of records to cover human rights violations. On the other, the incoming ANC government worked to ensure that archives and recordkeeping practices in a democratic South Africa would work to protect citizen’s right. As part of this process, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) investigated the illegal destruction of records carried out by the apartheid regime.

Like many authoritarian governments, the apartheid regime generated a huge volume of records concerning the lives of its citizens. Harris writes:

Apartheid’s huge bureaucracy, which reached into almost every aspect of citizens’ lives, generated a formidable memory resource. Control over racial classification, employment, movement, association, purchase of property, recreation and so on, all were

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³⁴ Carter, 217.
³⁵ Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
documented by thousands of government offices. This was supplemented by the record of surveillance activities by the security police and numerous other state intelligence bodies, as well as by large quantities of records confiscated from individuals and organisations opposed to apartheid. Obscenely, registries and record strongrooms converted the abnormal into the normal.36

During the transitional period, the outgoing apartheid government carried out a mass records destruction program aimed at denying the new democratic government access to its records. Harris writes, “The apartheid state was determined […] to sanitise its image and protect its intelligence sources. It was also apparently intent on eliminating evidence of serious human rights violations. In this regard, the security establishment had most cause to destroy records.”37 The Cabinet authorized the destruction of “state-sensitive” and classified records during the transitional period, without knowledge or authorization from the SAS. The illegal destruction of records carried out during the transitional period, along with the opacity of public recordkeeping and the destruction of records of anti-apartheid individuals and groups during apartheid, led incoming policymakers to strengthen controls against records destruction. At a workshop hosted by the Commission for Museums, Monuments and Heraldry (CMMH) of the ANC, “Grave concern was expressed at the destruction of state records dealing with the anti-apartheid struggle and at the fate of records seized by state agencies from resistance organisations over many years.”38 As a result, the ANC imposed a moratorium on the destruction of state records until the

37 TRC, 229.
Truth and Reconciliation Commissions’ report on the destruction of records was completed.\textsuperscript{39}

At the same workshop hosted by the CMMH, the following policy consideration was affirmed:

The ANC’s policy towards museums, monuments, memorials, national archives and national symbols of South Africa rests on the premise that these institutions and cultural structures should foster national unity, reconciliation and democratic values and be accessible to and preserved for the education and benefit of all South Africans.\textsuperscript{40}

The discourse surrounding the development of new archival legislation centered largely around two themes: the role of archives in ensuring the rights of citizens and the necessity of preserving an archival record representative of society as a whole. This discourse has been described as:

advocat[ing] a Derridean theoretical approach to the core function of a state archive. They all saw archives essentially as institutions or repositories of knowledge rooted, particular in the South African case, ‘in the traces of phylogenetic memory’ (\textit{phylo} meaning race or tribe), i.e. the place where the ‘traces’ of particular objects of our nation’s past is kept in the form of historical documents.\textsuperscript{41}

Harris writes, “The legislation is being generated by the transformation discourse in archives which has blossomed since 1990. This discourse can be

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  \item \textsuperscript{39} TRC.
  \item \textsuperscript{40} Graham Dominy, “Archives in a Democratic South Africa: The Proposals of the ANC: An Evaluation,” \textit{South African Archives Journal} 25 (June 1993): 63, \textit{EBSCOhost}.
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defined as one informed by the assumption that archives require redefinition, more precisely reinvention, for a democratic South Africa.”

In contrast to the opacity and biased nature of the previous system, there was an impetus to create a public archives that was open, accessible and representative. Reflecting a change in tone and outlook, Marie Olivier wrote, “As far as possible, the formulation and terminology of the Act should be positive rather than prohibitive.” The National Archives was looked to as an important tool in the restitution of social justice and individual rights. In drafting new archival legislation, issues regarding public access to records, archival staff demographics, record preservation and outreach were stressed.

**Democracy: National Archives and Records Service (1996–present)**

Bredekamp notes, “The first colonial and apartheid-inherited institution at which transformation was legislatively directed in 1996, was the state archives.” The National Archives and Records Service of South Africa was established by the National Archives and Records Service Act of 1996, enshrining many of the ideals espoused during the transitional period. The mission of the National Archives is to, “foster national identity and ensure the protection of rights,” reflecting the principles to be enshrined in South Africa’s 1996 Constitution. The Preamble of the Constitution emphasizes democratic values, social justice and human rights, unity, openness and equal protection, while also recognizing past

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44 Graham.
45 Bredekamp, 5.
injustices. These principles are woven into the public archival system in South Africa, through mission statements, legislation and activities.

In light of the opacity of the apartheid government, in an effort to protect the rights of South Africans, much emphasis has been placed on Freedom of Information initiatives. Indeed, access to information is listed in the Constitution’s Bill of Rights, reading:

(1) Everyone has the right of access to— (a) any information held by the state; and (b) any information that is held by another person and that is required for the exercise or protection of any rights. (2) National legislation must be enacted to give effect to this right, and may provide for reasonable measures to alleviate the administrative and financial burden on the state.\textsuperscript{47}

Under the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa Act, the amount of time required for public archives to be available for public access has been reduced from 50 years to 20, with access to records newer than 20 years requiring the permission of the National Archivist.\textsuperscript{48}

South Africa also features one of the world’s most progressive pieces of Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation. Unlike most nations’ FOI laws, South Africa’s Promotion of Access to Information Act applies to both public and non-public records of any age.\textsuperscript{49} The language utilized in the Act, as is common with the other pieces of post-apartheid legislation discussed in this paper, places emphasis on social justice and human rights. The Act lists some of its objects as, “To give effect to the constitutional obligations of the State of promoting a human rights culture and social justice […] generally, to promote transparency, accountability and effective governance of all public and private bodies.”\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{48} Republic of South Africa, “National Archives and Records Service of South Africa Act.”
\textsuperscript{49} Republic of South Africa, “Promotion of Access to Information Act,” Section 3.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid, Section 9.
Recognizing the role the opacity of the apartheid government in human rights abuses, the Promotion of Access to Information Act sees itself as a tool for the protection of individual rights. As part of the requirements legislated by the Act, the Human Rights Commission was required to publish a guide on the use of the Act in each of South Africa’s 10 official languages.

An important aspect of the National Archives and Records Service is its mission to atone for past injustices. This mission manifests in several of the Archives’ functions and activities. Regarding archival legislation, its website states, “One of its foremost functions and objects that the National Archives and Records Service fills these apartheid-shaped gaps in the country’s social memory by actively collecting non-public records of national significance with enduring value.”\(^{51}\) The filling of these gaps occurs not only through the collection on non-public records, but through the creation of oral histories, through the National Oral History Programme. The National Archives also maintains a register of non-public records found in archival repositories across the country, both public and non-public.

The National Archives and Records Service of South Africa Act reads, “The National Archivist shall— [...] (c) with special emphasis on activities designed to reach out to less privileged sectors of society, make known information concerning records by means such as publications, exhibitions and the lending of records.”\(^{52}\) The Archives’ website lists its primary outreach activities, which encompass, “guided visits that target various social groups, exhibitions, publications, open days, public lectures and services to the public which includes an introduction to genealogical research, or advising on

\(^{51}\) National Archives of South Africa. “About the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa.”

\(^{52}\) Republic of South Africa, “Archives Act, 1996,” Section 5(c)
establishing a private archives.” The public programming initiatives undertaken by the National Archives brings the Archives to the community, educating community members on the value and importance of archives and the roles archival documents can have in the establishment of individual rights and in the formation of societal memory.

Conclusion
As South Africa prepares to enter its third decade of democratic rule, its archivists have generally embraced the social functions of archives—its role in the formation of societal memory and protection of citizens’ rights. Outside of South Africa, these roles have been strongly advocated for by archivists and scholars like Randall Jimerson. During his Presidential Address to the Society of American Archivists, he spoke of the importance of the social functions of archives, arguing, “Paying attention to the need for accountability and documentation serves the cause of human rights and social justice.”

Over the past two decades, South Africa has undergone profound changes. The government has shifted from minority, authoritarian rule to majority, democratic rule. Following the changes witnessed in governmental structure and dominant ideology, the public archival system in South Africa has transformed itself to reflect the ideals proclaimed in the Constitution.

Despite the progressive nature of the Archives Act and the mission of the National Archives, public archives in South Africa still bear the imprint of decades under apartheid governance. The records generated by the homelands still suffer from inadequate management and storage conditions, while the integration of these records with those housed in former SAS repositories has

53 National Archives of South Africa, “About the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa.”
been slow. This has hampered the progress of the devolution of archival functions to the provincial level. Morrow and Wetshela write, “On the whole, this follows predictable lines, in that records of the more privileged areas are relatively well-resourced and preserved, and those which contained ex-homelands are least so.”55 Meanwhile, the education system is poor, with high pupil-to-teacher ratios and poverty levels in the country are high—social and economic inequalities have yet to be overcome. The National Archives and Records Service suffers from a lack of staffing. These too, affect access to archives. Although the legislation, missions, functions and activities are progressive, reflecting the ideals of the Constitution, much work still needs to be done to bring reality to the level of conception.

55 Morrow and Wotshela, 318.