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The Preservation of the Audio Heritage of Namibia. Challenges and Opportunities

BAB Working Paper No 1: 2010

ISSN 1422-8769 © The author © Basler Afrika Bibliographien

**Presented at the Sound Archives Workshop, Windhoek, University of Namibia
4 December 2009**

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The Preservation of the Audio Heritage of Namibia. Challenges and Opportunities

Werner Hillebrecht
(National Archives of Namibia)

Summary

Namibia has a rich intangible cultural heritage. There is an urgent need to record more of it, but there is also a wealth of already recorded oral heritage and music that is in danger of being irretrievably lost if the opportunities of preserving it are not grasped. Decisive steps must be taken in the near future in terms of

- identifying,
- collecting,
- repatriating,
- cataloguing,
- storing,
- and migrating from obsolete formats and data carriers.

The necessary steps include

- legislative provisions,
- norms, standards and guidelines,
- institutional empowerment,
- institutional coordination,
- human resource capacity building,
- physical capacity building.

In the context of this presentation, I shall concentrate on sound recordings only, excluding sound recorded in connection with audiovisual sources. However, much of what is discussed here, applies to the audiovisual heritage as well.

Early recordings

In the Namibian context, I would use the term “early recordings” for any sound media recorded before the 1980s, when some efforts started to collect Namibian voices and music on an institutional basis – as incomplete and haphazard as these efforts may have been, they have created

a basis that one can build on. Unfortunately, up to now, all these efforts have remained incomplete and unsystematic, as will be shown later on.

The earliest known sound recordings from Namibia were done by the Finnish Mission during the German colonial period, and are preserved in Finland. They were recorded on wax cylinders, and contain religious voice recordings, as well as religious and traditional music. It is also known that the Austrian anthropologist Poech did some Namibian recordings, which are preserved in Vienna (Phonogrammarchiv). The only other known recordings from before World War II, those by Lichtenecker, were discovered only rather recently in Berlin, but it is well possible that more material has been recorded and has found its way into some institutional collections.

Such material might exist, especially in Germany and the USA, but also in South Africa. Most likely, these recordings would have been taken in the context of anthropological and linguistic research. Due to the ravages of two world wars and the generally poor funding of the repositories of audio material in Germany, they are likely to remain hidden unless conscious and sustained efforts to follow all possible leads are taken. The up to now fruitless efforts of Anette Hoffman even to visit the “Lautarchiv” in Berlin, let alone to research its collections, illustrate the difficulties of such research. Even if one gets access, the lack of comprehensive catalogues, and the uncertainty which keywords might have been used to describe Namibian items, make it a laborious task to find anything.¹ Nevertheless there is good reason to believe that the work of the eminent linguists Otto Dempwolff (1871–1938) and Carl Meinhof (1857–1944), both of whom took an active interest in Namibian languages, has generated sound recordings, which might still be preserved somewhere.

Within the boundaries of Namibia, no such early recordings are known at all.

German-based research

After the Second World War, the development of the magnetic tape technology made it much easier to record sound. This resulted in more widespread use, and in sometimes substantial accumulations of material. As from the early 1950s, various scholars have taped oral history, literature, and music in Namibia. Unfortunately there has been no central repository to take care of such recordings. To a considerable extent, their material tends to remain hidden in private collections. Two very substantial collections of speech are well known, those by the linguist Prof.

¹ Just one example: It takes substantial experience to recognize that Kwanyama, Kuanjama, Ovakuanjama, Cuanhama are different spellings of the same ethnic and language group; or worse, that Damara might be named as Bergdamara, Kaffern, Klippkaffern, or with the more specific name of a subgroup; while the term Damara might also have been used for Herero. Curators of foreign sound collections would most likely not have been able to put them in the right context. I have encountered the same problem with library collections, which are much easier to catalogue.

Ernst Dammann and his wife, and by the folklore researcher Dr. Sigrig Schmidt. Likewise, one can expect that such collections emanated from the work of ethnologists such as Oswin Köhler and Wilhelm Möhlig, and others connected to the Institute for African Studies in Cologne.²

Luckily the Dammann recordings have now found a home at the Basler Afrika Bibliographien, have been digitized, and repatriated to Namibia in digital format, two days ago. This could be a model for future undertakings of this nature.

Many open questions: the USA

During the 1940ies and the 1950ies, there was a considerable US-American research activity in Namibia. Apart from the audiovisual archives of the Marshall family, which was deposited at the Smithsonian Institution and recently listed on Unesco's "Memory of the World" list (the second Namibian item after the Hendrik Witbooi Papers, unfortunately not held in Namibia), no sound recordings from these activities have been identified, but might well be hidden away somewhere. The research collections of anthropologist Edwin Meyer Loeb, for example, are scattered over several Californian institutions, none of which lists any sound recordings in their web-accessible finding aids, but this might just be a result of the frequent inability of traditional librarians, archivists and museum curators to recognize the importance, to catalogue and store the one or other odd tape coming together with paper-based research collections and artefacts.

From a later period, the Archives of Traditional Music at Indiana University holds Namibian recordings by Megan Biesele, Gordon Gibson, Bernhard Clauss, Richard Katz, Thomas Larson, Marjorie Shostak, and several others, including closely related material from Botswana.

More open questions: South Africa

Likewise, we know very little about possible collections in South Africa. The only institution where we have already identified Namibian sound is the Hugh Tracey Collection, the International Library of African Music in Grahamstown. However, the substantial linguistic research based in South Africa, starting with E.O.J. Westphal, is likely to have left a trail of sound recordings which still has to be traced – copies of some Westphal recordings can be found in the USA.

² The "Institut für Afrikanistik" at the University of Cologne has a long tradition of linguistic and ethnographic studies in Namibia, with a special focus on the Kavango and Kunene regions.

Political and social history: The liberation struggle

The fate of many important recordings from the Namibian liberation struggle is still not known. Nobody could so far tell us whether and where the famous tape recorded by Andimba Toivo ya Toivo, recorded in Cape Town and smuggled to the United Nations in a hollowed copy of “Treasure Island”, has been preserved. Attempts to trace the interview tapes, which were the basis of the earliest two autobiographical books by SWAPO activists, namely Vinnia Ndadi and John ya-Otto, have been unsuccessful. We do not know whether any recordings of the “Voice of Namibia”, SWAPO’s broadcasting service from several African countries, have survived. Recordings of Namibia-related proceedings at the United Nations exist, and some have been copied for the National Archives, but much more systematic work has to be done about this. Recordings of several international conferences relating to Namibia exist, and some have been transferred to the National Archives – most likely, much more is existing somewhere.

Recordings from the famous “Terrorism Trial” of 1967/1968, where Andimba Toivo ya Toivo and 36 others were sentenced to Robben Island, have been made on “dictabelts”, an obsolete format for which not a single replay machine survived in Southern Africa. The belts are kept at the National Archives of South Africa.

It is still an open question whether cassettes of political trials from the 1980s survived at the High Court in Windhoek. Taped and transcribed court recordings used to be routinely destroyed, but the National Archives has stopped this practice until the existing recordings can be appraised.

Occasionally, real treasures turn up, such as a recording of Bishop Auala’s visit to the SWAPO camp in Nyango, Zambia, which the National Archives received from a private source. And the most exciting find of the past few years was the discovery of the recordings which the American Allard Lowenstein secretly made in 1959, preserving us the voices of Hosea Kutako, Samuel Witbooi, and Markus Kooper. They were deposited in an American university library, and we now have the digitized copies. A fascinating collection of freedom songs and children’s songs was made by the East German kindergarten teacher Sabine Zinke at SWAPO’s Kwanza Sul Camp in Angola – the National Archives has a copy, but unfortunately on the obsolete DAT cassette format.

Since independence – Oral history

Since independence, there have been substantial efforts to record oral history, oral traditions, and music. Unfortunately, there was little coordination and little success in depositing the collected resources at a public repository.

Let me begin with the successes. MSORP (Michael Scott Oral Records Project), an effort by an NGO of concerned individuals, namely Brigitte Lau and Annemarie Heywood, involving Alexander Kaputu from the NBC and financed from the Estate of Reverend Michael Scott, started already before independence and managed to secure extremely important oral traditions dating back to precolonial history, which were transcribed, translated, and partly published. This collection was deposited at the National Archives, and augmented by Dag Henrichsen, who deposited a copy of the extensive research recordings for his PhD. Also deposited at the National Archives were Brigitte Lau's recordings of the reminiscences of German settler women, focusing on the internment of German Namibians during World War II. These were the beginnings of an orature collection at the National Archives, which continued to grow during the 1990s, without much attention, mostly by donations from academic researchers who donated copies of their primary oral sources. Some particularly large collections should be mentioned: Niels Erlank's collection of children's music in Namibia; Anita Pfouts' research on historical linguistics; Joas Santos' oral history on the community schools of the 1980s; and Emmanuel Kreike's massive documentation on environmental history in Northern Namibia and Southern Angola.

However, under the circumstances of unconsolidated institutions in transition, unclear competencies, and competing claims, some promising initiatives of the early 1990ies ended up in limbo. For example, all efforts to trace the recordings of the Bricks Oral History Project have been in vain, as Bricks no longer exists, its documentation centre has been destroyed, and former members followed very diverse careers.

There was also a rather short-lived effort to establish a Namibian Orature Network to connect the various initiatives, spearheaded by the UNAM History Department. It succeeded in designing a standard data form for oral recordings, and started an electronic database of orature, which was meant as a networked tool to give access to scattered resources. Although it did not achieve this goal, this formed the basis for the National Archives' orature database, ORAL, as previously there had only been a rough handwritten list of the National Archives' sound recordings.

The recent years have also seen other oral history projects, including those of the Ondonga Oral Tradition project, the SWAPO Women's Council, the Hashim Mbita project, as well as a Damara oral history initiative. Sadly, none of the outcomes of these projects has yet been deposited at a professional archives ensuring their preservation.

The new millennium and AACRLS

In 2001, the “**Archives of Anti-Colonial Resistance and the Liberation Struggle Project**” (AACRLS) embarked upon collecting grassroots evidence of those aspects and viewpoints of Namibian history, which are neglected and unbalanced in the colonial government records.

This entailed a rapid growth of oral sources in the National Archives, as the project sponsored private initiatives to conduct interviews and made it mandatory to deposit the results in the Archives. The project could also convince more academic researchers to deposit their material, including a collection of undergraduate student assignments from the UNAM History Department, and recordings made by a project at the UNAM Northern Campus. Thus the orature collection rapidly grew to over 1300 cassettes (without counting the radio archives, and digital audio). Meanwhile, many interviews are already recorded and delivered in digital format.

Other repositories in Namibia³

The most voluminous sound collections in Namibia are the **radio archives of the NBC**, and the **NBC music library**. The older NBC radio material (including its predecessor, SWABC) is archived on sound cassettes, and catalogued in a CDS/ISIS database. A substantial portion between 1981–1995 has been copied on cassette to the National Archives.

It has proven rather difficult to find further information on archived sound in Namibia, thus proving that little attention has been given to the subject.

The **National Museum of Namibia** maintains a substantial collection of bird sounds in the Ornithology division. (Interestingly, an internet search on the British Library's sound archives revealed that the vast majority of their Namibian items are animal sounds, mostly birds!). The Ethnology division has a small collection of traditional music and oral history, mostly of Herero/Mbanderu origin; some of it has been digitised through the AACRLS project. The Cultural History division had recorded interviews, mostly with Afrikaans-speaking settlers around 1980; as the division no longer exists, these were transferred to the National Archives in 2007.

Contrary to expectation, the two **scientific societies** have practically no record of sound recordings, although some scattered items might surface after a closer search. While 60 audio tapes were reported for the Sam Cohen Library in 1983,⁴ they can currently not be found, and most likely have perished in the library's 1999 fire disaster.

It is however well possible that some of the several small private museums in Namibia, which are affiliated to the scientific societies, have sound recordings, which in all likelihood will not be catalogued, and without functional replay equipment, and are therefore acutely endangered.

Due to the exam period, it was not possible at short notice to get reliable information about sound collections at the **University of Namibia**. It is known that researchers at the African Languages Department and the Music division of the Arts Department have collected recordings;

³ To ensure that the recorded sound heritage is saved from obliteration, a national stocktaking is needed. Possible repositories which could not be contacted in time, apart from those mentioned elsewhere in this paper, are e.g. the SWAPO Archives, and various church archives, as well as a number of government institutions.

⁴ Directory of Southern African Libraries, Pretoria: State Library. 1983 edition.

however, it is currently not clear whether they are kept privately or in institutional collections. Likewise, it is likely that recordings with relevance to social conditions and history have been created at the research unit which ran under the various names of NISER, SSD, and MRC.

The **College of the Arts** under the Directorate of Arts and Culture Programmes at the Ministry of Youth, National Service, Sport and Culture has collected traditional music, which is apparently not yet organized into a formal collection.

WIMSA has a substantial archives of recordings from various San communities.

There is reason to believe that there is a substantial heritage of recordings in private hands. There was even a sound taping club (Tonbandklub) existing in Namibia. What did they put on tape? If it was only pirated music, they would not have formed a club. The imminent danger is that any surviving tapes might be thrown in the dustbin, because the owners have no functional replay equipment anymore. Probably a public appeal might help to unearth such tapes. Together with an offer to digitize them, one might find some unexpected treasures.

Popular music

Let me now come to the possibly most neglected aspect of sound collections in Namibia – that is popular music.

Before independence, there was very little popular music being recorded in Namibia, although there was a lively music culture in the townships, which has to some extent been researched by the film-maker Nghidipo Nangolo. There also was a strong tradition of church music in the form of brass bands and choirs. A few recordings of both genres have been made, but are extremely rare and difficult to come by, and not covered by any discography.

During the 1990s, there was a slow upswing of recorded music, partly fuelled by the return of seasoned internationally-exposed musicians like Jackson Kaujewa, Ras Sheehama, Willie Mbuende from exile. Probably all Namibians will remember the phenomenal earworm success of the music video “Don’t look back” (Siwelewele) from Gobabis, which I would argue paved the way for a wider recognition of home-grown talent. The 21st century then saw an unprecedented explosion of musical production; barely a week is passing without the launch of one or two or three Namibian CDs. This success has made NASCAM, the Namibian music copyright protection body, a self-sustaining entity – while the corresponding paper copyright body NAMRRO is still in its infancy.

Now, even if we maybe don’t like all the various styles and expressions used, or maybe sometimes consider some of them as poor copies of South African or American prototypes, we have to ask ourselves: what do we do to keep this enormous outburst of creativity? Is there anybody out there collecting and cataloguing and keeping and preserving? Sadly, the answer is, no.

The most comprehensive collection of Namibian contemporary music is certainly with the NBC, and also with the private radio stations. But these collections are meant for active use, not for preservation and permanent curation.

The Libray and Information Service Act of 2000 tasked the National Library of Namibia with the legal deposit of all Namibian publishing output in all media, that is, including music. Does it fulfill this task? The answer is a plain no.

- Firstly, although the legal deposit of publications, including cassettes and CDs, is mandatory, the deposit actually relies on voluntary cooperation. It is an illusion that a publisher can be forced to deposit his publications by the threat of a court case. He or she must be convinced that there is some value in having the CD in a public collection.
- Secondly, the Library Act prescribes the delivery of five copies. This is seen as a heavy burden by small self-publishers with very limited sales.
- Thirdly, in the music industry, which is highly decentralised with many small players and self-publication activities, it needs a lot of expertise, active interest and follow-up to inform and remind the publishers to deliver their goods. The chronically understaffed National Library can barely cope with the printed publishing output, let alone with music and electronic media. When the Library Act in 2000 expanded the scope of legal deposit from print to all media, it simply overlooked the need to create the adequate staffing levels.
- Lastly, dealing with a specialised medium such as music requires specialised expertise which is at the moment simply not available - not at the National Library, and not elsewhere in Namibia. As a result, the few cassettes and CDs which were actually delivered to the National Library have not been catalogued and are therefore, for all practical purposes, inaccessible.

While this issue is not being addressed, the gap of uncollected and unrecorded music is becoming wider and wider, and we are losing our future musical heritage as fast as it is being created.

I consider that this dilemma asks for a serious brainstorming and consultation with all stakeholders – musicians and composers, music publishers and distributors, heritage keepers, culture officials, broadcasters, copyright bodies, music lovers, and even the Ministry of Trade and Industry.

Digitisation

Finally, I want to briefly touch upon the well-known fact which has hardly been tackled in Namibia: that magnetic sound recordings (and videos) not only deteriorate slowly but surely, but that they also face the problem of obsolescence: the replay equipment is no longer manufac-

tured, spare parts are becoming unobtainable, and therefore the process of listening, copying, and digitisation becomes more and more difficult. Speedy digitisation becomes urgent. As a first step in ensuring that we will be able to transfer from analogue to digital, the National Archives has purchased several professional cassette replay machines before they go out of stock, and a mass storage server for the digital product. But we still have to master the process of digital transfer in archival quality, and need assistance in doing the right thing. If the NBC archives and all still-to-discover collections in Namibia and abroad are counted in, this is a massive task and will require more resources (human resources, digital storage capacity, and digital management capacity) than the National Archives can currently offer.

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