



# Mandela and the relevance of archives

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The celebration of former president Nelson Mandela's birthday on 18 July once again marked a joyous occasion for South Africans from all walks of life. His legacy of reconciliation and bringing people from different backgrounds and beliefs together is regarded as a miracle in the history of South Africa. His determined striving for peace, tolerance and goodwill, which earned both him and former president FW de Klerk the Nobel Peace Prize for 1993, will be remembered forever. Mandela is seen worldwide as an inspirational leader; setting an example for the conduct of peaceful negotiations.

At the Western Cape Archives and Records Service in Cape Town the staff members, like so many others in the country, paid their respects and showed their gratitude on this day by singing 'Happy birthday, Tata Madiba'.

As an archivist and historian I felt it necessary to elaborate on a subject which is all too often overlooked or even disregarded by the State and public alike, namely the role of archives. Without the existence of archives, the repositories for containing historical records, there can be no fundamental basis for the conducting of research and the writing of trustworthy history.

As to the relevance of archives in the interest of the general public, Mandela in particular has made mention of the unique importance of archives in the long process of reconciliation. In an extensive study by Randall C Jimerson about archives being perceived as powerful storehouses for documents, as well as potential political instruments, he expanded on the statements made by Mandela regarding the role of archives in relation to social justice. During the opening ceremony of the Centre of Memory and Commemoration Project

in September 2004, Mandela stated the following: 'In our view the work of the archives in the South Africa of today is potentially one of the most critical contributions to restoration and reconciliation. All of us have a powerful moral obligation to the many voices and stories either marginalised or suppressed during the apartheid era'.<sup>1</sup> According to Mandela archives represent an important institution or backbone of information, which could be managed and directed for the benefit of social upliftment, education, justice and especially our understanding of the past.

As a consequence of the apartheid policy the state archives were mostly inaccessible to non-white researchers seeking information for genealogical or historical study purposes. This inaccessibility in the long run not merely contributed to a lack of understanding of the colonial period, for example the Dutch East India Company rule, the British colonial administration and the period after unification in 1910; it also led to forgetting. The issue of forgetting is especially noticeable among the younger generation because of the declining status of the teaching of history as a subject in schools. As a response to this issue, Mandela warned that 'The history of our country is characterised by too much forgetting. A forgetting which serves the powerful and dispossesses the weak'.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, in order to avoid the loss of documentation, it is of the utmost importance that documents be properly

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On a personal level, Mandela was very concerned about the history of his experiences during his imprisonment. Unfortunately most of his political correspondence and letters were destroyed and burned at his home by arsonists. With a deep sense of sadness he conveyed that 'I had always thought that someday when I left pris-

on I would be able to recapture the past when looking over those pictures and letters and now they are gone'. Furthermore, most of Mandela's prison records as well as other censored material had been depleted due to the fact that most documents were confiscated from National Intelligence and the Security Service between 1990 and 1994 and systematically destroyed.

Mandela emphasised the underlying importance of archives and concluded with the following statement: 'One of our challenges as we build and extend democracy is the need to ensure that our youth know where we come from, what we have done to break the shackles of oppression, and how we have pursued the journey to freedom and dignity for all. ... This is what archives are about.'<sup>3</sup>

As the doors of the archives were opened to every legal citizen residing in South Africa in 1994, the challenge became to bring the archives to the public.

Initially it seemed to be a daunting task as the imposition of a newly formulated constitution and archives acts, together with the establishment of decentralised archival repositories in the various provinces as well as staff problems invariably impinged on service delivery. Nevertheless, constant and definite strides are being made towards the betterment and improvement of archival services. Initiatives such as Archives Week, during which the functioning and intrinsic role of the archives are being demonstrated to the general public, contribute to the public's understanding of archives.

It is worth mentioning that the Western Cape Archives and Records Service possesses a variety of archival records concerning the history of Nelson Mandela. Although various prominent research institutions, such as the Centre of Memory, primarily concentrate on 'struggle history' and especially

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Mandela's central position therein, the abovementioned repository nonetheless contains valuable documents on the subject. Documents regarding literature which had been banned by the organs of censorship during the apartheid era reveal much information of historical value. Document material or literature, which had been regarded as objectionable, was evaluated by these organs and the motivations of their findings were reported in detail. These archival records were classified as 'objectionable literature', of which some selected examples can be mentioned, namely *Nelson Mandela speaks to the world*; ANC, *Nelson Mandela, an appeal to the people* and *The struggle is my life*.<sup>4</sup>

As a former head of state and world-renowned political icon, Nelson Mandela has also shed light on the necessity of the preservation of documents and the significance of archives for both the understanding of the past and the future of a progressive, democratic South Africa.

#### References

<sup>1</sup>Address by former president Nelson Mandela at the launch of the Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory and Commemoration Project (September 2004).

<sup>2</sup>Mandela, N. *Long walk to freedom: the autobiography of Nelson Mandela*.- Little, Brown and Company, 1994, p. 470.

<sup>3</sup>Address by former president Nelson Mandela.

<sup>4</sup>Western Cape Archives and Records Service(WCARS). See IDP 3/134, P83/4/45. *Nelson Mandela speaks to the world*. 1983; IDP 3/94, P80/9/25. ANC, *Nelson Mandela, an appeal to the people*. 1980; IDP 3/188, P86/10/52. *The struggle is my life*. 1986.

