

**Jeannette A. Bastian, *Archiving Cultures: Heritage, Community, and the Making of Records and Memory*, ISBN: 978-0-367-54826-1, Routledge, New York 2023, pp. 118**

Jomo Kenyatta, the great Kenyan nationalist and anti-colonial activist, proclaimed to the West: “The African is conditioned, by the cultural and social institutions of centuries, to a freedom of which Europe has little conception. He realizes that he must fight unceasingly for his own complete emancipation, for without this he is doomed to remain the prey of rival imperialisms”<sup>1</sup>. In her introduction to *Archiving Cultures: Heritage, Community, and the Making of Records and Memory*, the trailblazing archival scholar Jeannette A. Bastian advocates for a similar liberation of the archive, recognizing that its structures and objectives no longer meet the needs of our global society (p. 6). Tacking a Kenyattaian course, her stated goal is to broaden and expand the concept of archives beyond the boundaries of currently accepted, primarily Western, archival tradition and to present a credible case for the equal inclusion of diverse record-making within the archives. Over the course of six skillfully written chapters, she develops a compelling theoretical framework that considers both traditional archival records and the numerous, non-traditional ways that communities all over the world document themselves and their cultural heritage (p. 8).

In chapter one, Bastian elaborates on the connections between cultural and archival heritage in the formation of a cultural archive. She explores these relationships by posing the following queries: In what ways is cultural heritage supported by archive theory? What role do cultural heritage values play in an archive model? In what ways have scholarly approaches to theorizing “the archive” impacted and expanded the prevailing comprehension of records while elevating the perspective of cultural heritage (p. 12)? Throughout her investigation, Bastian

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<sup>1</sup> J. Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya. The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* with an Introduction by Bronisław Malinowski, New York 1965, p. 306.

redefines cultural heritage by removing it from its Western roots. To illustrate, she cites the culture scholar Beverley Butler, who traces the “privileging of the »written text«” from ancient Alexandria to Europe, where Western traditions were universalized and valued over oral ones (p. 13). Concurring, Bastian adamantly advocates for a broader definition of heritage that is community- and society-driven, relates to the past, present, and future, and does not prioritize the written word (p. 19). Although nations, communities, and individuals express and record themselves in many ways, she believes that the human values that are being expressed and recorded are essentially similar. The foundation for these universal human ideals is manifested in the concept of the “archival turn”.

According to Bastian, the first “archival turn” arose in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when historians such as Leopold von Ranke connected professional historical studies with scholarship grounded in archival research, emphasizing the importance of the archival record as crucial evidence for confirming historical truth (p. 26). She then advances to the second “archival turn”, which came to be associated with academia in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as a reaction to postmodernism and the influence of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s writings. Over time, this movement developed to examine the concept of “the archive”. Bastian’s analysis of these “archival turns” provides a comprehensive view of the archive, constructing a theoretical and analytical space for discourse across the humanities and social sciences. Considered as archival heritage, she maintains that these different views of the archive have the potential to broaden our professional practice by envisioning a forward-looking tradition that acknowledges the potential existence of knowledge waiting to be discovered (p. 28). Bastian notes, however, that archivists have struggled to embrace this scholarly concept of “the archive”, preferring instead to concentrate on such core archival management concerns as preservation and accessibility (p. 28).

The fluidity of archives is examined in the second chapter, “The Anatomy of an Archival Record”, where Bastian makes the case that fundamental concepts and characteristics have endured despite adopting diverse shapes and taking distinct paths through various historical periods and cultural contexts. Drawing on the work of Geoffrey Yeo, she cautions against assuming similarities across time, stating that every society has its own way of keeping, safeguarding, preserving, and using records (p. 34)<sup>2</sup>. Bastian discusses the challenges of recovering pre-

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<sup>2</sup> See also G. Yeo, *Record-making and Record-keeping in Early Societies*, New York 2021, pp. 187–188.

colonial identities and record traditions in archival efforts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Echoing Kenyatta's assertion that an individual's human dignity is derived from their culture, moral and intellectual values, and a sense of worth gained in their fight for liberty, she argues that more revisions to "the record" are necessary in order to attain true social, cultural, and political justice (p. 48)<sup>3</sup>. These reforms must recognize the elasticity of the record and harmonize archival expressions within cultural archives (p. 48). In the last four chapters, Bastian presents these different cultural manifestations of the archive, including oral tradition, folktales, dance, and celebrations, to determine if they share the characteristics of records as defined in this chapter.

In the third chapter, "Oral Traditions and Memory Texts", Bastian explores how cultural expressions serve as historical records and verifiable evidence of real events. She employs folktales and memoryscapes (places that serve as sites of memory) as illustrations of the concept of "memory text". Bastian suggests that classifying a text as an "oral archive" simplifies evaluating oral and written cultures. She observes that oral communication and written records are present in all societies, with variations only in their usage. For example, the archivist and historian Edwina Ashie-Nikoi notes that even where written records exist, the oral record is still a central repository of history, tradition, and indigenous knowledge (p. 55).

However, oral communication and transmission are often underestimated in Western nations, particularly in governmental and legal matters. In this regard, the archivist Tonia Sutherland points out that the common African American practice in the southern United States of "heir property", where land is passed on orally to descendants without written wills, has had ruinous consequences for landowners in these communities (p. 56). Bastian suggests, in turn, that "text" is also being used as a metaphor in academic disciplines to explain the inscription of meaning onto non-textual phenomena. She claims that "a »text« is any human-involved formulation or phenomenon that can be read for its meaning" (p. 58). The historian Antoinette Burton, for example, points out that for centuries, scholars have been "reading" historical evidence of any number of different archival incarnations, such as the Rosetta stone, medieval tapestries, Victorian house museums, and African body tattoos (p. 58). Conversely, the characteristics of both oral heritage and memory texts indicate that these two intangible cultural

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<sup>3</sup> J. Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya...*, p. 304.

representations have values and attributes that are conventionally recognized as fundamental to archival records and belong in the cultural archive (p. 67).

In the fourth chapter, “Carnival in the Archives: Performance as Record”, Bastian centers her analysis of the cultural archives on the role of performative expressions and performances as archival records. She utilizes the work of the performance studies scholar Diana Taylor to assess cultural parity between the performative (records) and the scribal (archives) (p. 70). Taylor believes that performance is an authentic representation of non-Western cultural knowledge, offering alternative perspectives to written archives. Bastian emphasizes, however, how crucial it is to harmonize all forms of cultural expression. In response, Taylor argues that a true cultural archive requires a constant interaction between the performative and the archive (p. 71). Although Bastian states that the flexibility and energy of the cultural event itself constitute a fundamental component of a performance, no website, film, or sound recording can fully capture a cultural event (p. 82). Therefore, archivists must acknowledge the limitations of documenting the scribal and the performative (p. 81).

Bastian examines the role of memory and community in cultural archives in the fifth chapter, emphasizing the unity of tangible and intangible elements. She discusses memory theories, including the connections between communities, records, and memory, and how these factors influence cultural archives. Bastian cites Paul Connerton’s memory duality, which suggests that transitioning from an oral to a literate culture involves inscribing practices (p. 87). Aleida Assmann, in turn, frames cultural memory as a binary, distinguishing between active circulating memory (canon) and passive historical memory (archives). Assmann sees archives as the reference memory of society and a counterbalance to everyday working memory (p. 87).

In the final chapter, Bastian investigates the potential application of digital technology to unite seemingly incompatible binaries – the tangible and intangible, fluid and static, oral and scribal, performative and textual. She underscores the archivist’s role in marrying these binaries in order to foster archival equity (pp. 101–102). Bastian stresses that the critical challenge lies in an adjustment of the archival mindset. Archivists must be willing to reach beyond the silos of these dichotomies, tear them down, and create an archival equity that accepts all records (pp. 101–102). She asserts that the concept of the living archive will achieve this shift in perspective within the archival profession. A living archive is a dynamic, fluid presentation that connects institutional

memory with contemporary practices and environments, promoting creative, performative, and participatory processes (p. 104). Living archives also use digital technology to explore cultural heritage, document social justice issues, facilitate social change, promote cultural awareness, and foster collective collaboration (p. 105). In essence, living archives enable new archival material to be created through various continuous participatory activities and instantly add elements to historical records (p. 108).

In an address to the Kenyan people, Kenyatta delivered a daunting demand: “Our children may learn about the heroes of the past. Our task is to make ourselves architects of the future”<sup>4</sup>. Bastian has conveyed a comparable challenge to her fellow archivists to adopt an alternative approach to achieving archival equity: become builders of their own destiny. Through a clear and convincing analysis, she presents a method that takes into account the cultural manifestations of communities as their historical records. Kenyatta’s mentor, the Polish anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski, in turn, warned his peers that an ethnographer who chooses to focus solely on religion, technology, or social organization and ignores a legitimate field for intellectual inquiry will be seriously handicapped in their work<sup>5</sup>. Similarly, Bastian forewarns her colleagues that this new course will necessitate a broadening of their archival mindset beyond the textual and static to include the oral, the fluid, and the dynamic. She asserts that archives that adhere to traditional principles and acknowledge diverse formats and styles of expression, such as records of legacy, history, and identity, would serve as a mirror for all humankind (p. 110).

On its face, Bastian’s case for change seems simple and straightforward. Her ultimatum for a transformation in our archival attitude, however, goes much deeper. In my estimation, she is requiring much more of us—a genuine recognition of our common humanity. In fact, Bastian is declaring that this conversion must come from our hearts. She is asking archivists to not only modify their practices but to heal themselves, learn from their historical sages, and become the masters of their own fate by moving their profession from a rigid Western approach to

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<sup>4</sup> T. Mvulane Moloi, *Afrikan Contribution to International Relations Theory: An Afrocentric Philosophical Enquiry*, “Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies” 2016, vol. 9, no. 1, p. 445.

<sup>5</sup> B. Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* with a Preface by Sir James George Frazer, New York 1922, p. 11.

a more empathetic, inclusive, and multidisciplinary global paradigm. The time is indeed now for archivists to answer Bastian's clarion call and liberate the archive.

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