



Challenges in documenting South Africa's oral traditions and indigenous languages

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ABSTRACT

South Africa's cultural landscape is deeply intertwined with oral traditions that have long served as vital vehicles for the transmission of history, ethics, and societal values. However, the lack of written records creates significant challenges to preserving these traditions. This article examines secrecy as a form of gatekeeping in the preservation of South African oral knowledge and considers how Digital Humanities (DH) initiatives can navigate these dynamics. Using a conceptual, literature-based approach, this article reviewed scholarship on oral transmission, DH practices for intangible heritage preservation, and community-based participatory research, focusing on collaboration with knowledge holders. The discussion highlights key challenges, including the digital divide, language barriers, dialectical variations, and the absence of standardised orthographies, all of which complicate documentation and access. In response, the article advocates for African-led, community-driven digitisation strategies that prioritise inclusivity, transparency, and active participation of knowledge holders. This article provides a conceptual framework for the preservation of culturally sensitive DHs, offering guidance for future scholarship and policy aimed at safeguarding South Africa's oral heritage.

Keywords: Oral traditions, African Digital Humanities, Cultural heritage, African knowledge, Histories.

INTRODUCTION

Southern African Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences joined the data-informed humanities movement, Digital Humanities (DH), later than other regions; thus, it remains unclear how DH should be conceptualised from a Southern African perspective. Although African Digital Humanities (henceforth ADH) provides broad perspectives of DH in Africa, it is essential to consider Southern Africa in its own context to address specific regional factors that DH should engage with and respond to. Therefore, note that our reference to ADH is confined to Southern Africa to avoid representing Africa as a country.¹

The recorded history of Southern Africa has traditionally been framed through a Eurocentric lens, raising concerns about the accuracy of the recorded historical narratives. For instance, it is widely

¹ Wainaina Binyavanga, *How to Write about Africa*, vol. 92 (Penguin Books Limited, 2005).

acknowledged that Christian missionaries introduced modern writing in Southern African languages in the 19th century.² However, this perspective overlooks pre-existing writing systems that were disregarded by missionaries, either because they were unsuitable for Bible translation or not recognised by missionaries as legitimate forms of writing. This aligns with the functional nature of Southern African languages, which have historically been used more for communication than for literary production. Consequently, generally ‘recognised’ early written records in these languages consist largely of biblical texts, thus marginalising if not erasing the written histories of Southern Africans. From an African perspective, knowledge has historically been held by different social groups, each with its specific forms of access. Certain types of knowledge, for example, were restricted to those with spiritual gifts, while other forms of knowledge were distributed based on factors such as age, gender, or social status. Rites of passage also played a crucial role in determining access to these forms of knowledge, serving as gatekeeping mechanisms that could only be crossed through the successful completion of these cultural practices.

One significant trend in DH is the move towards digitisation, which promotes efforts to archive and preserve historical materials. In South Africa, for instance, institutions like the University of South Africa and the University of Cape Town, along with museums such as Amazwi in Grahamstown and the Gauteng Digital Archive in Pretoria, are digitising historical texts. However, these archives remain relatively underutilised for community involvement. While this study acknowledges the efforts of both government and academia, it also criticises their exclusion of local communities from these digitisation and preservation processes. Most of the records in these archives come from the apartheid era (1910–1994), a period marked by systemic oppression of non-white South Africans. Since these collections mainly reflect materials produced during this time, they inevitably perpetuate colonial perspectives. Thus, this article seeks to explore the histories of Africans without colonial bias, focusing instead on perspectives that more authentically represent African experiences. Accordingly, this article seeks to answer the following questions:

- What are the implications of gatekeeping in the digitalisation of African knowledge, traditionally passed down orally?
- How can digital humanities efforts respect the integrity of the secretive nature of African knowledge?

To answer these questions, the article first contextualises oral traditions in indigenous Southern African languages, addressing the role of selective transmission. It then examines the limitations of oral traditions, particularly in the face of language marginalisation, and how indigenous languages are increasingly being classified as heritage languages. The discussion also explores the role of digital archives and community-driven digitisation projects in preserving African knowledge systems while respecting cultural sensitivities. Additionally, it investigates aurature as a means of preserving the nuances of spoken records and highlights the significance of community-based participation in archival efforts. Finally, the conclusion calls for a data-informed humanities that aligns with Southern African contexts by integrating more inclusive and culturally responsive archival practices.

METHODOLOGY

As indicated above, the aim of this article is to interrogate how secrecy functions as a form of gatekeeping in the digitalisation of African oral knowledge and to consider how Digital Humanities (DH) initiatives might respect these dynamics. To achieve this aim, a conceptual and literature-based approach was adopted. A critical review of literature was conducted on (i) oral transmission and cultural protocols, (ii) DH practices for preserving intangible heritage, and (iii) community-based participatory research emphasising collaboration with knowledge holders. Rather than presenting quantitative

² Jennifer Cooper, “The Invasion of Personal Religious Experiences: London Missionary Society Missionaries, Imperialism, and the Written Word in Early 19th-Century Southern Africa,” *Kleio* 34, no. 1 (January 2002): 49–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00232080285310031>.

findings, the researchers developed an interpretive argument that connects these literatures and proposes principles for culturally sensitive DH preservation.

Through this conceptual methodology, this paper can offer a normative and theoretical contribution, offering a framework for African-led, community-driven digitisation that recognises the legitimacy of knowledge gatekeeping while promoting sustainable preservation.

DISCUSSION

Oral Traditions

The domain of oral traditions and expressions encompasses a wide range of spoken forms, including wisdom-lore, legends, proverbs, riddles, folktales, nursery rhymes, myths, epic poems and songs, charms, prayers, chants, and performative arts such as dance and dramatic storytelling.³

These oral forms serve as vital vehicles for transmitting knowledge, cultural and social values, and collective memory across generations. They play a critical role in sustaining and revitalising cultural identity, ensuring that traditions remain alive and relevant within communities. In this article, we limit our definition of oral traditions to those that remain unrecorded and, as a result, are excluded from corpora intended for active integration within data-intensive humanities research and conservation, or the broader field of DH.

With the rise of pervasive digital technology and instant communication, traditional oral wisdom and practices are increasingly frowned upon and marginalised, if not actively dismissed. The presence, significance, and transmission of these cultural traditions in contemporary African societies are often undervalued, underestimated, and treated as obsolete. Furthermore, this rich body of African knowledge is rarely protected, legally or culturally, through mechanisms such as copyright, as it is frequently disconnected from both the original custodians and potential beneficiaries. This erosion is further compounded by generational shifts, particularly between Millennials and the South African born-frees, resulting in a growing disconnect from indigenous epistemologies. In this way, those who hold the oral histories are unable to communicate and transmit them to current and possibly future generations.

Histories viewed through a Christian missionary lens have contributed to the negative portrayal of practices, traditions, beliefs, and ways of life outside the Christian faith. This perspective has systematically undermined and devalued indigenous knowledge systems and oral traditions, leading to the erosion of African values, norms, identity, and the capacity for growth, sustainability, and self-determined development within indigenous communities.⁴ In particular, in the African context, oral traditions and histories have been dismissed as primitive or unreliable, despite their central role in preserving communal memory, transmitting cultural values and sustaining indigenous worldviews through generations.

There is evidence that, for some communities—such as the Vhavenda in South Africa—the onslaught on African indigenous knowledge and culture did not completely erode their Indigenous Knowledge Systems.⁵ For example, the Vhavenda maintained their customary laws even under the oppressive rule of colonial and apartheid governments. In this way, although state-imposed laws and regulations existed and were thus recorded, the Vhavenda continued to uphold their unrecorded traditional legal and cultural frameworks. The unrecorded nature of oral traditions proved advantageous at the time, as it ensured the absence of written documentation that could be used as evidence of transgression against the laws imposed by the governing authorities. Although this demonstrates the resilience and continuity of indigenous governance structures despite external pressures, its unrecorded nature makes it difficult to include it in the DH due to the lack of evidence.

³ Nomusa Biyela, Adetoun Oyelude, and Eric Haumba, “Digital Preservation of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) by Cultural Heritage Institutions: A Comparative Study of Nigeria, South Africa and Uganda,” in *The Proceedings of the Digital Transformation and the Changing Role of Libraries and Information Centres in the Sustainable Development of Africa at the 22nd Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern Africa Library and Information Associations*, 2016.

⁴ Stewart L. Kugara and Sekgothe Mokgoatšana, “Challenges Presented by Digitisation of VhaVenda Oral Tradition: An African Indigenous Knowledge Systems Perspective,” *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 78, no. 1 (September 21, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i3.7428>.

⁵ Kugara and Mokgoatšana, “Challenges Presented by Digitisation of VhaVenda Oral Tradition: An African Indigenous Knowledge Systems Perspective.”

Creating truly inclusive African universities that embrace indigenous knowledge must go beyond current academic structures.⁶ This involves taking the cosmologies and ontologies seriously, and the lived experiences of African peoples, to foster scholarship that is more relevant and grounded in African realities.⁷ This article is of the position that this need for groundedness justifies the differentiation of DH as ADH. However, as noted earlier, this approach, which seeks to include African knowledge production, is complicated by the predominantly unrecorded nature of oral tradition knowledge. As a result, researchers continue to adapt DH to the dominant global epistemic DH frameworks.

Oral traditions and knowledge suffer from epistemic injustice, which occurs when individuals are wronged in their capacity as knowers.⁸ Since much oral knowledge is often unrecorded, its validity is often questioned, resulting in its exclusion from dominant global frameworks that define what constitutes legitimate knowledge and evidence. In line with Nyamnjoh's vision of a more inclusive academy, preservation approaches for African oral traditions must ensure that this valuable epistemology is recognised, respected, and integrated on its own terms—rather than being forced to conform to Western paradigms of knowledge production.⁹ This, of course, is not a straightforward task, especially when such knowledge remains intentionally unrecorded—often as a means of gatekeeping or for other culturally significant reasons.

Overall, the oral nature of African histories poses significant challenges in the context of digitisation. A central difficulty lies in defining what it truly means to digitise these oral knowledges and cultures. Does digitisation require the creation of new narratives? If so, how can we ensure that these narratives remain authentic and truthful? Can they still faithfully represent the aspects of African history we seek to preserve? What happens to knowledge when it is taken out of its performative, communal, and embodied contexts and placed into digital archives? Is there a risk that the process of recording—whether in written, audio, or visual form—alters the meaning, authority, or intent of the original oral tradition? And ultimately, can digitisation capture not only the content but also the cultural logic and ethos that underpin oral knowledge systems? Finally, how are traditional gatekeeping mechanisms addressed? These questions are posed with no clear intent to answer them, but rather to help highlight the issues that hinder the documentation of these oral traditions.

Selective Transmission

A typical gatekeeping mechanism in knowledge transmission in Southern Africa is the African custom of hlonipha—a culturally embedded practice that governs respectful behaviour in both speech and action.¹⁰ Hlonipha is not only a marker of respect, but it also functions as a form of social regulation, determining who can speak, what may be said, and to whom.¹¹ Hlonipha demonstrates reverence through linguistic avoidance and behavioural codes, especially in intergenerational and hierarchical contexts.¹² In this way, hlonipha acts as a gatekeeping tool in oral knowledge transmission, restricting access to certain knowledge unless one is placed, prepared, or allowed to receive it. This makes the unrecorded and often esoteric nature of oral traditions both intentional and culturally meaningful, posing a challenge to their digitisation and inclusion in DH.

As indicated above, governments, through policies, regulations, bills of rights, constitutions, and related frameworks, cannot always guarantee compliance from the people. In certain contexts,

⁶ Francis B Nyamnjoh, “‘Potted Plants in Greenhouses’: A Critical Reflection on the Resilience of Colonial Education in Africa,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 47, no. 2 (April 15, 2012): 129–54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909611417240>.

⁷ Nyamnjoh, “‘Potted Plants in Greenhouses’: A Critical Reflection on the Resilience of Colonial Education in Africa”; Francis B. Nyamnjoh, “Decolonizing the University in Africa,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.717>.

⁸ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford university press, 2007).

⁹ Nyamnjoh, “‘Potted Plants in Greenhouses’: A Critical Reflection on the Resilience of Colonial Education in Africa”; Nyamnjoh, “Decolonizing the University in Africa.”

¹⁰ Stephanie Rudwick and Magcino Shange, “Hlonipha and the Rural Zulu Woman,” *Agenda* 23, no. 82 (2009): 66–75.

¹¹ Robert K. Herbert, “Hlonipha and the Ambiguous Woman,” *Anthropos*, 1990, 455–73; Judith Temkin Irvine and Liz Gunner, “With Respect to Zulu: Revisiting UkuHlonipha,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 91, no. 1 (2018): 173–207, <https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2018.0005>; Abigail H. Neely, “Hlonipha and Health: Ancestors, Taboos and Social Medicine in South Africa,” *Africa* 91, no. 3 (May 26, 2021): 473–92, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972021000279>.

¹² Neely, “Hlonipha and Health: Ancestors, Taboos and Social Medicine in South Africa.”

individuals and communities continue to practise their customs regardless of constitutional directives. Although some may interpret *hlonipha* as a form of oppression, this article does not attempt to analyse such practices through any psychological theory. Rather, it reflects on the continued observance of the *hlonipha* custom, which communities may consider as an exercise of cultural autonomy and the freedom to maintain self-defined boundaries.

Hlonipha is practised by both males and females. To illustrate, women who practice the *hlonipha* tradition in Southern Africa are forbidden to speak in the presence of men¹³ to express respect through avoidance, particularly the avoidance of uttering certain words or addressing taboo topics.¹⁴ A concern for this article is: What happens when oral knowledge, shaped and regulated by such cultural practices, is successfully digitised? This article is of the view that the digitisation process would risk bypassing the social context in which such knowledge is meant to be shared, potentially exposing it in ways that contravene the very customs that protect and preserve it. Furthermore, it is expected to find specialised vocabulary that constitutes women's special language.¹⁵ Within the framework of culturally sanctioned respect, forms of communication classified as "women's talk" are traditionally reserved for women and are not meant to be accessed or interpreted by men or even females not identified as women. Unfortunately, such avoidance practices and the use of specialised vocabulary can also serve to limit the linguistic resources available to speakers, in this case, women.¹⁶ In this way, the awareness that the information may become accessible to men could further constrain the linguistic choices of participating women. The potential loss of control over who can access culturally sensitive knowledge may discourage full participation or result in the withholding of certain forms of expression, thus impacting the integrity and completeness of the digitised oral archive.

Unfortunately, the digitisation of these gendered forms of expression entails making them accessible, potentially violating the principles of *hlonipha* by eroding traditional custodianship and restrictions on access. This raises important ethical considerations regarding agency, consent, and the potential unintended consequences of well-intentioned digital preservation efforts. Therefore, while such boundary removal in communication and information sharing could be framed as emancipatory for women, there is little evidence to suggest that Southern African women are actively participating in or consenting to the digital exposure and preservation of these intimate dimensions of their cultural knowledge currently preserved through oral traditions.

Rudwick and Shange argue that the custom of *hlonipha* may be in contradiction to the values enshrined in South Africa's Bill of Rights, particularly those related to gender equality and freedom of expression.¹⁷ Although this article does not attempt to contribute to the human rights discourse due to a lack of expertise in the field, it does raise the question of whether it is not, in fact, the Bill of Rights—as a relatively recent framework with Western origins—that stands in contradiction to longstanding indigenous customs such as *hlonipha*. However, it remains important for ADH to explore culturally respectful methods to preserve this knowledge without compromising the values and principles held by its custodians.

The State of Indigenous Languages

Culture and Tradition are embedded in language. Consequently, it is essential to consider the language-specific challenges involved in the digitisation and documentation of oral traditions. In what follows, the potential shift of African languages toward exclusive use in heritage contexts is explored, and then a brief overview of orthographies is offered, which play a critical role in the written recording and transcription of oral traditions.

¹³ Lewis Nkosi, "Postmodernism and Black Writing in South Africa," in *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970–1995*, ed. Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 75–90.

¹⁴ Herbert, "Hlonipha and the Ambiguous Woman."

¹⁵ Ingrid Fandrych, "Between Tradition and the Requirements of Modern Life: Hlonipha in Southern Bantu Societies, with Special Reference to Lesotho," *Journal of Language and Culture* 3, no. 4 (2012): 67–73.

¹⁶ Fandrych, "Between Tradition and the Requirements of Modern Life: Hlonipha in Southern Bantu Societies, with Special Reference to Lesotho."

¹⁷ Rudwick and Shange, "Hlonipha and the Rural Zulu Woman."

Heritage Languages

Unlike the under-documented, non-standard, and possibly extinct writing systems in African languages, oral systems for transmitting information have played a fundamental role in preserving knowledge, culture, and history. Although oral systems are better than a complete erasure, the reliance on oral tradition poses a risk to these languages, as it limits their transmission in formal and literary domains. This marginalisation increases the likelihood that these languages are classified as heritage languages—a term originally used to describe the languages of immigrants,¹⁸ also referred to as immigrant minority languages, languages of origin,¹⁹ community languages,²⁰ or ancestral languages.²¹ The term primarily situates language within historical contexts, often disconnecting it from present and future sociolinguistic realities.²² Therefore, while there are efforts to preserve indigenous African languages, their move towards heritage language status is concerning, as it may mean that the languages stop being used and the histories, cultures, knowledge, and traditions embedded in the languages are lost.

According to Maseko and Nkomo, speakers of heritage languages often receive minimal support and attention to the preservation of their languages, particularly from governmental bodies.²³ In South Africa, there are indigenous African languages that have official status and are thus prioritised for preservation and continued use in government, law, research, social media, mainstream media, education, and other contexts. However, despite this recognition, there remains a myriad of other languages in the region that do not receive the same level of institutional or governmental support, placing them at risk of marginalisation or eventual extinction as Southern Africans are forced to move towards languages that receive support from the government and are recognised and used in education.

Language forms the foundation for the intangible heritage of many communities, serving as the primary vehicle for the transmission of oral traditions and cultural expressions. As such, the protection and preservation of individual languages are crucial to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. However, the designation of a language as a "heritage language" does not guarantee its survival. In many cases, elements of cultural knowledge are transmitted orally only under specific conditions and through culturally aligned rituals. The cessation of these rituals and the erosion of enabling conditions often lead to the loss of both the language and the associated intangible heritage, and one's identity as language is a critical component of cultural identity.

Absence of standardised orthographies

There are over 2000 African languages, which form a rich tapestry of cultural identity and heritage.²⁴ Thus, making African linguistic diversity one of the highest globally. Even so, to this day, most indigenous African languages lack standardised orthographies. To make matters worse, many of these languages often have numerous dialects, sometimes numbering in the tens. Consequently, due to the absence of a standardised orthography, common written representation becomes difficult in the Indigenous languages.²⁵

¹⁸ Jim Cummins, "Mainstreaming Plurilingualism: Restructuring Heritage Language Provision in Schools," in *Rethinking Heritage Language Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1–19.

¹⁹ Elena Makarova, "Courses in the Language and Culture of Origin and Their Impact on Youth Development in Cultural Transition: A Study among Immigrant and Dual Heritage Youth in Switzerland," in *Rethinking Heritage Language Education*, ed. Themistoklis Aravossitas and Peter Pericles Trifonas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

²⁰ Terrence G. Wiley, "The Reemergence of Heritage and Community Language Policy in the US National Spotlight," *The Modern Language Journal* 89, no. 4 (2005): 594–601.

²¹ Patrick Eisenlohr, "Temporalities of Community: Ancestral Language, Pilgrimage, and Diasporic Belonging in Mauritius," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 14, no. 1 (June 28, 2004): 81–98, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jlin.2004.14.1.81>.

²² Busi Makoni, "Beyond Country of Birth," *Heritage Language Journal* 15, no. 1 (April 30, 2018): 71–94, <https://doi.org/10.46538/hlj.15.1.4>.

²³ B Maseko and Dion Nkomo, "Family Language Policy," in *Diasporan 1 Southern African Perspectives*, ed. Stephen Mutula, vol. 15 (CSSAL Publishers, 2024), 111–38, <https://doi.org/10.29086/978-0-9869937-5-6/2024/AASBS15/6>.

²⁴ Ayo Bamgbose, "African Language Development and Language Planning," *Social Dynamics* 25, no. 1 (January 1999): 13–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02533959908458659>.

²⁵ Kwesi Kwaa Prah, "Multilingualism in Urban Africa: Bane or Blessing," *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 5, no. 2 (July 2010): 169–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2010.491916>.

Around 30% of African children are estimated not to reach the fourth grade, with language being a major contributing factor.²⁶ Although the lack of standardised orthography for many Indigenous African languages is a significant issue on its own, its impact is particularly pronounced in the education sector. In Southern Africa, it is common for children to begin schooling in their presumed home language, provided that it is recognised as an official language. Unfortunately, for those whose mother tongues are not among the official languages, access to early education in a familiar language is severely limited. This mismatch between the language of instruction and the child's linguistic background contributes to poor literacy development. Consequently, the lack of support for non-official and marginalised languages not only threatens their survival but also deepens structural inequalities in education across the region. This marginalisation not only undermines the linguistic and cultural identities of the speakers but also contributes to the erosion of the languages themselves. That is, when learners are taught in languages that are linguistically distinct from their mother tongues, the unofficial languages risk becoming stigmatised or viewed as less valuable, both socially and academically. Over time, this lack of institutional support and intergenerational transmission may lead to language shift or loss, pushing these languages into endangered or heritage language status.

Several languages remain marginalised in Southern Africa. For instance, isiBhaca-speaking learners are taught in isiZulu as a supposedly home language, as isiBhaca is not an official language and is not offered in Southern African schools.²⁷ Similarly, Selobedu-speaking learners are forced to take Northern Sotho as a home language.²⁸ These examples illustrate how unofficial languages are disadvantaged within the formal education system. They are effectively pushed towards heritage language status due to a lack of official recognition and institutional support. This marginalisation not only erodes the linguistic and cultural identities of the speakers but also contributes to the gradual disappearance of these languages.

Especially important for our argument here, and for the official languages being taught in schools, is the fact that without a standardised orthography, teaching materials remain limited and often inconsistent.²⁹ For example, Sesotho as taught in South African schools differs in written form from Sesotho used in schools in Lesotho. Similarly, there are variations in isiXhosa orthographies, often depending on the publishing house responsible for the educational materials. Similarly, languages such as Hausa and Kiswahili used in Southern Africa, although subject to some standardisation owing to their influence on a wide area, consist of numerous unstandardized varieties.³⁰ Unstandardised orthography may lead to a disconnect among speakers and a deficiency in pride over their linguistic identity.³¹

Some of the recent activities have been directed towards standardising certain African languages, typically by institutions such as the PanAfrican Linguistics Association and national language commissions.³² For example, eleven official written languages are acknowledged by the South African government, each with its own normative institutions involved in standardisation. However, these efforts face political resistance, resource poverty, and differential community acceptance.³³ Thus, although there are efforts to standardise orthographies for at least the official languages, the impact of these efforts has not been proven.

²⁶ Zehlia Babaci-Wilite, "Local Languages of Instruction as a Right in Education for Sustainable Development in Africa," *Sustainability* 5, no. 5 (May 6, 2013): 1994–2017, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su5051994>.

²⁷ Yanga Lusanda Praiseworthy Majola, "Language, Identity and Culture: A Study of Language Maintenance and Shift among Amabhaca Raised in Umzimkhulu, KwaZulu Natal" (2021).

²⁸ Tsebo Ramothwala et al., "Exploring Grade 8 Khelobedu-Speaking Learners' Writing Challenges in Sepedi Home Language in Mopani District, South Africa," *Literator* 42, no. 1 (April 12, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v42i1.1744>.

²⁹ Angelina N Kioko et al., "Mother Tongue and Education in Africa: Publicising the Reality," *Multilingual Education* 4, no. 1 (December 31, 2014): 18, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13616-014-0018-x>.

³⁰ David Mutasa, "The Problems of Standardizing Spoken Dialects: The Shona Experience," *Language Matters* 27, no. 1 (January 1996): 79–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10228199608566104>.

³¹ Lydia Kananu Kiramba, "Translanguaging in the Writing of Emergent Multilinguals," *International Multilingual Research Journal* 11, no. 2 (April 3, 2017): 115–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19313152.2016.1239457>.

³² Blessing Nemaadziwa, Catherine Cole, and Steven Sexton, "Using Science Communication Strategies to Close the Resource Gap in Under-Resourced Schools: A Design-Based Study Focusing on Rural Schools in South Africa," *Research in Science Education* 55, no. 6 (December 20, 2025): 1643–63, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11165-025-10243-3>.

³³ Pia Lane, "Minority Language Standardisation and the Role of Users," *Language Policy* 14, no. 3 (August 4, 2015): 263–83, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-014-9342-y>.

Although orthography may not directly hinder digitisation processes, it significantly affects the extent to which digitised data can be reused for research and accepted by language users as authentic representations of their linguistic identity. When different writing systems are employed, it creates an "us and them" dynamic, where speakers may distance themselves from the written histories, knowledge, and cultural expressions, perceiving them as misaligned with their lived linguistic experience.

Possible Solutions

Among the possible solutions to documenting South Africa's oral traditions and indigenous African languages, we briefly highlight two key approaches: the use of auriture and the adoption of community-based participatory research.

Auriture as a solution

To contextualise understanding of auriture, it is important to first distinguish between two closely related and often overlapping terms: preservation and archiving. Digital preservation is regarded as a series of intentional and ongoing management activities aimed at ensuring continued access to digitised materials for as long as necessary, typically governed by specific agreements or policies. On the contrary, digital archiving primarily involves the process of creating backups and does not necessarily include long-term strategies to ensure access or use over time.³⁴ Although both practices are essential to the protection of digital materials, preservation is more concerned with the sustained legibility, relevance, and cultural integrity of materials over time.

Oral literature, particularly in the African context, plays a crucial role in the politics of knowledge.³⁵ It shapes how knowledge is created, shared, controlled, and legitimised—or delegitimised—within communities. In light of this, technauriture has been proposed as a conceptual paradigm that acknowledges the dynamic interplay between orality, the written word, and technology, and their contextualisation.³⁶ This approach provides a framework for understanding how traditional oral knowledge can be preserved, transformed, and mediated through modern technological platforms without stripping it of its cultural specificity and epistemological grounding. In terms of its etymological roots, technauriture combines three elements: techn, referring to technology; auri, derived from auriture; and ture, which signifies literature in the conventional sense. The term auriture, as used by Coplan, implies a sensory engagement with the oral word—one that involves hearing, speaking, and a more abstract, aesthetic appreciation.³⁷ This concept highlights the multidimensional nature of oral knowledge transmission and reception, suggesting that any effort to digitise oral traditions must be attuned not only to the content of the speech but also to the sensory and performative elements that define it.

By considering the interconnectedness of oral performance, literary practices, and digital tools, technauriture enables more culturally sensitive and contextually rooted strategies for the digitisation of African oral traditions. As has been continually demonstrated throughout this article, such documentation and preservation are only possible when information is willingly volunteered. Consequently, when gatekeeping mechanisms are enforced, even creative preservation strategies such as auriture or technauriture become limited in their impact.

Masenya and Ngulube declare that academic institutions risk losing vital digital information if urgent measures are not taken to safeguard digital resources and to allow for long-term access.³⁸ Therefore, new systems and technologies are needed to address the digital preservation challenges, especially around oral histories and traditions that are prone to disappearing. The rapidly evolving digital

³⁴ Biyela, Oyelude, and Haumba, "Digital Preservation of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) by Cultural Heritage Institutions: A Comparative Study of Nigeria, South Africa and Uganda."

³⁵ Rémi Armand Tchokothe, "Archiving Collective Memories and (Dis)Owning," *Afrika Focus* 32, no. 1 (February 27, 2019): 171–81, <https://doi.org/10.1163/2031356X-03201012>.

³⁶ Daniela Merolla, "Introduction: Orality and Technauriture of African Literatures," *Tydskrif Vir Letterkunde* 51, no. 1 (March 3, 2017): 80–90, <https://doi.org/10.4314/tv1.v51i1.8>.

³⁷ David B. Coplan, "History Is Eaten Whole: Consuming Tropes in Sesotho Auriture," *History and Theory* 32, no. 4 (December 1993): 80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2505633>.

³⁸ Tlou M. Masenya and Patrick Ngulube, "Digital Preservation Systems and Technologies in South African Academic Libraries," *SA Journal of Information Management* 23, no. 1 (April 26, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajim.v23i1.1249>.

technologies have led to the creation of digital resources within academic institutions the world over. With the advent of these technologies, digital preservation is thus becoming a necessity to ensure that digital resources are accessible over the long term. Digital preservation involves the application of preservation methods, technologies and strategies to ensure access to reformatted and born digital content regardless of the challenges of technological changes.³⁹ Digital preservation in practice means provisioning secure storage systems, refreshing ageing media, fixity checks and replication in multiple systems or locations, format migration, emulation and other techniques to keep information safe and accessible over time.⁴⁰

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)

Community-Based Participatory Research is a framework within the Community Engagement model to create long-term, goal-oriented partnerships to address problems.⁴¹ It is underpinned by the involvement of the community as co-researchers and by reciprocal knowledge transfer,⁴² recognising that each partner in the research project brings certain strengths,⁴³ knowledge, skills, and perspectives,⁴⁴ all of which are essential for a more equitable and contextually grounded research process. As such, CBPR has the potential to foster collaboration among diverse groups, which makes it especially useful for investigating inequalities in life opportunities caused by systemic marginalisation.⁴⁵ Its success relies heavily on clear, effective communication and a deep respect for the cultural context of the community involved.⁴⁶

The framework assumes and has demonstrated that community members can contribute meaningfully to the formulation of research questions, the design of the study, the collection of data, the analysis of findings and the dissemination of results.⁴⁷ To harness the participatory nature of the process and empower both the investigator and the community,⁴⁸ qualitative methods are typically employed. These include commonly used approaches such as interviews, focus groups, photovoice, observations, and qualitative questionnaires.⁴⁹

This article explores the CBPR framework because we are cognisant of the reluctance among community members to share knowledge. Since long-term trust is built through CBPR, it allows us to address reluctance stemming from historical exploitation, marginalisation, and misrepresentation through sustained, respectful engagement and transparent collaboration.

Positioning community members as co-researchers affords them significant control over the research process, including decisions about what knowledge is shared, how it is interpreted, and the manner of dissemination. Coupled with transparency and trust, this aspect of the framework enhances the impact of such control on the preservation process. The community is also empowered to decide what benefits they want to receive from the reciprocal nature of the project and how they want to receive them. Furthermore, community awareness of sensitive cultural protocols and local knowledge systems means that their involvement as co-researchers will help guide the process and assist in finding ways to

³⁹ Masenya and Ngulube, "Digital Preservation Systems and Technologies in South African Academic Libraries."

⁴⁰ Masenya and Ngulube, "Digital Preservation Systems and Technologies in South African Academic Libraries."

⁴¹ Maria Teresa Riccardi et al., "Community-Based Participatory Research to Engage Disadvantaged Communities: Levels of Engagement Reached and How to Increase It. A Systematic Review," *Health Policy* 137 (November 2023): 104905, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthpol.2023.104905>.

⁴² Elena Wilson, Amanda Kenny, and Virginia Dickson-Swift, "Ethical Challenges in Community-Based Participatory Research: A Scoping Review," *Qualitative Health Research* 28, no. 2 (January 21, 2018): 189–99, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732317690721>.

⁴³ Carol R. Horowitz, Mimsie Robinson, and Sarena Seifer, "Community-Based Participatory Research From the Margin to the Mainstream," *Circulation* 119, no. 19 (May 19, 2009): 2633–42, <https://doi.org/10.1161/CIRCULATIONAHA.107.729863>.

⁴⁴ Alfiee Breland-Noble, Frederick J. Streets, and Ayana Jordan, "Community-Based Participatory Research with Black People and Black Scientists: The Power and the Promise," *The Lancet Psychiatry* 11, no. 1 (2024): 75–80.

⁴⁵ Wilson, Kenny, and Dickson-Swift, "Ethical Challenges in Community-Based Participatory Research: A Scoping Review."

⁴⁶ Yahya Salimi et al., "Is Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) Useful? A Systematic Review on Papers in a Decade," *International Journal of Preventive Medicine* 3, no. 6 (2012): 386.

⁴⁷ Breland-Noble, Streets, and Jordan, "Community-Based Participatory Research with Black People and Black Scientists: The Power and the Promise."

⁴⁸ Salimi et al., "Is Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) Useful? A Systematic Review on Papers in a Decade."

⁴⁹ Wilson, Kenny, and Dickson-Swift, "Ethical Challenges in Community-Based Participatory Research: A Scoping Review."

preserve information that requires gatekeeping, thereby facilitating culturally appropriate documentation.

Currently, there is a lack of knowledge about how different communities, tribes, language groups, and clans in Southern Africa wish their oral traditions, knowledge, cultures, and special languages to be documented and digitised for preservation, as well as how they believe gatekeeping should be implemented. Therefore, the flexible and iterative methodology of this framework enables preservation researchers to respond to and adapt preservation methods based on insights from co-researching communities. For example, if resistance to participation arises, the framework supports adjusting data collection approaches, such as using oral-only engagements or small group dialogues, ensuring that the research remains respectful and contextually grounded.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This article set out to (i) examine the implications of gatekeeping in the digitalisation of African knowledge traditionally transmitted through oral traditions, and (ii) explore how digital humanities initiatives can uphold and respect the integrity and secretive nature of African knowledge during digitisation and preservation efforts. While the focus has primarily been on the challenges encountered in documenting African knowledge in South Africa, future research should address the questions that have been raised in this article. It is recommended that digital humanities initiatives adopt approaches that respect the selective sharing nature of African knowledge by involving indigenous knowledge holders as active co-researchers throughout the documentation and preservation process. In this regard, libraries—potential custodians of preserved knowledge—should be integral partners.

CONCLUSION

The digitalisation of African knowledge, particularly that passed down orally, carries significant implications related to gatekeeping. As has been emphasised, there is an urgent need to digitise and preserve oral traditions to ensure their long-term accessibility. However, this process must navigate the cultural sensitivities surrounding Indigenous Knowledge (IK), where gatekeeping plays a crucial role in maintaining the secrecy, selective sharing, and integrity of such knowledge.

Despite digitisation's potential to enhance visibility and global access to orally transmitted knowledge, challenges persist, including limited funding, complex ownership protocols, and risks of misappropriation. Academic institutions, in particular, face pressures to safeguard digital resources from technological obsolescence through robust preservation strategies such as format migration and replication, roles well-suited for librarians. Sustainable and respectful digitisation of South Africa's oral traditions and Indigenous languages requires a culturally sensitive multi-stakeholder approach that recognises gatekeeping as a necessary form of knowledge protection rather than a barrier. Only through such efforts can digital humanities effectively help preserve Africa's rich oral heritage for future generations. Against this background, this paper cautions against "African" Digital Humanities that superficially represent Africanness without engaging with truly African-centred DH. Although knowledge gatekeeping is not unique to Africa, approaches to preserving this knowledge should be African-led rather than imposed by global or external frameworks that may disadvantage African societies, and in our case, South Africans.

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