

# The User's Voice: An Evaluation of Client Feedbacks on the National Archive of Zimbabwe

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# Introduction

- The National Archives of Zimbabwe is a rich base of Zimbabwean history, particularly the colonial past.
- It attracts the interest of people of different disciplines and varied origins.
- Apart from the documents housed in the Archives, there are also pictures, statues, structures and artifacts from the past that also make the archives a mini tourist destination.
- The archive has also been used to connect some people with their roots in the past including search for genealogies, clarify in chieftaincy wrangles, among several other uses.

# Introduction (ctd)

- The documents have been a rich source of various topics of historical analysis.
- Thus many have marveled at the archives and what it has been able to reveal to them.
- However, some have had reservations with the National Archive expecting certain things to be done or presented in certain ways.
- It is within this context that this paper seeks to make a rigorous analysis of the feedbacks that clients make after visiting the Archive.

# Objectives

- In examining the feedback entries in the client book of the National Archives of Zimbabwe, I hope to achieve a mirage of objectives.
- First, I hope to assess the degree of relevance that the archive has had and also use this examination of feedbacks as a window to understanding the uses and importance (if any) of feedback platforms for clients of institutional archives.
- The research attempts to unfold part of the operations, pitfalls and successes of the National Archives of Zimbabwe as reflected by the client feedbacks.
- Trends in the feedback entries also help us to unveil some of the politics of research in the country which promote or act as obstacles to accessing the National Archives.

# Some important questions

- The paper thus seeks to answer questions like: Is a feedback platform really important?
- Do feedback platforms go beyond cosmetics?
- How has the National Archive responded to some of the feedbacks?
- What kind of feedbacks are there and what seems to influence them?

# Methodology

- The paper makes use of largely the client feedback book of the National Archives of Zimbabwe and looks at the period between 1996 where the book begins and 2014, a period of 18 years.
- Both qualitative and quantitative methods are employed. The qualitative methods included unstructured interviews with officials from the National Archives which allowed for flexible discussions of issues pertaining to the introduction, uses and limitations of the feedback system in place.
- The quantitative methods were employed in coming up with statistical analysis of entries of remarks under different categories.
- The major limitation of this method, however, lies in the fact that not every one that used the archives entered their remarks in the book and various factors influenced the number of entries per given period.

# Methodology (ctd)

- Permission was granted by relevant authorities to examine the feedback comments which indicate the client's name, address and remarks (see snippet from the book below).

G.P. & S. 59445-N.

| DATE         | NAME              | ADDRESS                                              | REMARKS                                                 |
|--------------|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| May 17, 1996 | Dr. L. Kay Walker | 501 St. Havasupai Road<br>Flagstaff, Az 86001 U.S.A. | Very informative display<br>in a very beautiful setting |
| 17-05-96     | Dr. L. M. Sheale  | Northon Arizona University<br>USA                    |                                                         |
| 10/5/96      | Ken Beensterboer  | 47 Enterprise Rd HRE                                 | Still very impressive. I always<br>enjoy being here.    |
| 18/1-196     | Dr. B. ...        | Europe<br>[unclear] ...                              | Why don't you start charging an en<br>[unclear] ...     |

# Methodology (ctd)

- The address helped to identify the countries of origin and it seems foreigners more than the locals tend to make use of the feedback book more.
- As the book indicates, the Archive has clearly been attracted clients from over the world.
- It is clear from the statistics that the greatest number of visitors came from the western world particularly England largely because of her links with Zimbabwe as the erstwhile coloniser of the latter.
- While this may not be very accurate in representing the nature of visitors because not everyone commented in the book, it still gives a generalised picture of trends over the years.

# Methodology

- From what appears in the book as reflected in the statistics in Table 1 below, the opinions covered seem to reflect more on those who came for short tours (**ST**) of the Archive's displays rather than by the researchers who came for research from the documents (**R**) in the Archive.
- An official interviewed acknowledged this scenario indicating that this was probably because less emphasis was put by the staff on encouraging the researchers to leave their comments.

Table 1

|                                                                             | 1996-2000 | 2001-2004 | 2005-2009 | 2010-2014 | TOTAL |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------|
| <b>PHOTOGRAPHY (ST)</b>                                                     | 56        | 16        | 18        | 17        | 107   |
| <b>RESEARCH (R)</b>                                                         | 11        |           | 1         | 1         | 13    |
| <b>HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION (ST)</b>                                       | 75        | 36        | 61        | 51        | 223   |
| <b>FIRST CHIMURENGA DISPLAY (ST)</b>                                        | 10        | 2         | 7         | 8         | 27    |
| <b>GENERAL COMPLIMENTS (interesting/fascinating/ excellent) (Mostly ST)</b> | 897       | 307       | 289       | 186       | 1 679 |
| <b>LITERATURE COLLECTION/ EDUCATIVE/INFORMATIVE (R)</b>                     | 148       | 41        | 74        | 77        | 340   |
| <b>Staff</b>                                                                |           |           |           |           |       |
| <b>TOTAL COMPLIMENTS</b>                                                    | 1197      | 402       | 450       | 340       | 2389  |

# Limitations

- The option to put one's address and name while it may help to identify the countries of origins may, however, act against getting the most from the feedbacks.
- This is because confidentiality is lost. Confirming the this problem of confidentiality with the current set up, Official 1 indicated that the book is placed in front of Archives Officials.
- This may as well explain the reluctance of locals to place their comments.

# Limitations (ctd)

- Another limitation might be the space available for commenting.
- Limited space means that clients are restricted to very basic comments that may not very useful. Such comments could just read “Very interesting” or “very interesting, nice exhibition”.
- With the wave of technological changes sweeping through feedback systems, more flexible options and spaces are possible.
- E-feedbacks can also allow for greater confidentiality.

# Strengths

- Notwithstanding its limitations, the current feedback book in the NAZ is still a very valid source for evaluating the opinions of clients and reflecting on the importance of getting feedbacks.
- The NAZ book begins its entry on feedbacks in 1996 which makes possible to draw a historical overview of some of the sentiments held by certain quarters on the clients that visited NAZ.
- Despite being relatively small, the space offered for remarks remains informative to a certain degree as opposed to a yes/no feedback format.
- Below is Table 1 indicating statistics of the total entries per year and for the whole period under study

| YEAR               | TOTAL NUMBER OF REMARKS |
|--------------------|-------------------------|
| 1996               | 340                     |
| 1997               | 269                     |
| 1998               | 312                     |
| 1999               | 185                     |
| 2000               | 125                     |
| 2001               | 132                     |
| 2002               | 83                      |
| 2003               | 84                      |
| 2004               | 116                     |
| 2005               | 67                      |
| 2006               | 55                      |
| 2007               | 143                     |
| 2008               | 107                     |
| 2009               | 89                      |
| 2010               | 123                     |
| 2011               | 78                      |
| 2012               | 46                      |
| 2013               | 52                      |
| 2014               | 53                      |
| <b>GRAND TOTAL</b> | 2459                    |

# The Feedbacks and the Broader Zimbabwean Context

- The above statistics in Table 1 indicate a number of things on the broader socio-economic context of the country.
- Clearly the numbers of entries in the book have declined over the years hitting their lowest 2012 which is a decline of 86% from the highest mark reached in 1996.
- The heaviest drops are witnessed between 1998 and 1999, 2001 and 2002; 2008 and 2009; and between 2010 and 2011 and these were 41%, 37%, 42%, 37% respectively.

# Broader Context (ctd)

- It is tempting to suggest that these drops in the entries also imply a drop in the visits to the archives and the country at large by foreign nationals.
- But again it is also possible that there were other factors shaping these trends.
- The general downward trends in the number of entries, and by extension the number of visits to the Archives, since 1999 however, are no coincidence.
- The country experienced economic challenges whose roots can also be traced to challenges faced in the 1990s reaching their peak in 2008 when Zimbabwe experiences an extreme hyper inflationary environment.
- The years where the largest fall in entries was witnessed are no coincidences either.
- Some scholars have described 1998 as the year when the inflationary trends in the economy picked momentum largely as a result of DRC war and the war veterans pay outs.

# Broader Context

- The year 2001 to 2002 also witnessed the heightening of the Fast Track Land Resettlement Programme (FTLRP) which became unpopular with most of the Western countries who were also the largest constituent visiting the national archive and other destinations in the country (see table above on the countries of origins of those who made entries).
- 2008 to 2009 became the height of economic instability with the country having the largest inflation in the world ever attained by a nation outside the war zones.
- Despite the dollarization in 2009, the years 2010 and 2011 did not seem to offer better prospects and mounting political tensions in the country only served to inculcate a wait and see attitude to those abroad.
- This has been the trend since and the statistics have hit their all-time low in the 18 years under review.
- Admittedly, stringent measures towards access to archival material by foreign nationals may also explain the decrease in number of entries.

# Significance of client feedback in archival institutions

- Like in any institution, archives need feedback from their clients.
- Client feedbacks are important in creating client-centred institutions which is essential if relevance is to be maintained.
- Feedback systems allow for client participation in which contributions are made towards the betterment of the organisation.

# Significance of feedback (ctd)

- The need for client feedback is even more for non-profit making public enterprise such as archival institutions like the National Archives of Zimbabwe.
- This is so because here the profit motive is absent as an incentive for efficacy. Tools like client feedback can help the organisation reflect on its mandate and its ability to effectively deliver it.
- For a private organisation, huge profits, for example can easily be interpreted to mean growing efficiency but this is not possible for non-profit making enterprise hence the need for such tools as client feedbacks.

# Significance (ctd)

- Commenting on client participation in nonprofit social service organizations, Kelly LeRoux makes an observation that can be applied to public institutions such as NAZ.
- Kelly writes, “Perhaps the most compelling argument in favor of client participation is that it leads to more responsive service delivery.” This means institutions are able to deliver more appropriate services when they know the expectations of their clients.
- Adjustments can also be made to suite the expectations of the clients. A feedback system can also help institutions remodel and refine the roles and functions in society.
- From the feedbacks in the NAZ, it is clear that the institution must do more to play the role of representing the value systems, history and aspirations of the Zimbabwe.
- It can also do more to enhance its image as a destination for tourism particularly culture tourism.
- The latter could involve partnering with travel and tourist agencies.

# Client's Perceptions of the Archives:

## What do we learn?

- Table 1 already shown indicates that a number of facilities offered to their clients are quite popular.
- These were largely from the category of short tours (**ST**) as opposed to research facilities (**R**).
- The most popular of in these short tours included the historical representations (which also included the show casing of the First Chimurenga) and the photograph section that chronicles historical figures and developments.
- What this suggests is that the archives should work on maximizing on the popular areas and improving those that are not.
- The feedbacks thus helps in making informed intervention in improving what is being offered to the clients.
- In the following discussions the paper examines some of the major areas reflected upon by the clients.
- These reflections help us understand the perceptions of the clients vis-à-vis their expectations of the role that the National Archive should play.

# *The Archive as a Custodian of the country's History and Values*

- A number of feedbacks suggest that the Archive plays a very crucial role as the custodian country's history. When people visit the Archive, they expect to have some understanding if not appreciation of the history of the country. One visitor, R Cavert, in his entry commented "Very historic and well presented", another, B Senberg, remarked in the same year, 1996, "Fascinating history of a nice country" and one Noeleen Edwards also noted, "Shows how rich our history is." Another entry read, "Extremely informative. Very useful to explain the national heritage" Throughout the period under study, several entries were made that reflected on the Archive as a mirror to the history the country. This make is imperative that the Archive as an institution for the collective memory of Zimbabweans, their history and being, care must be made to establish a representative display of the country's history. Currently most archives of in Africa have had the greatest weakness of being a product of colonial regimes. The documents deposited were manufactured, selected and deposited by regimes that sort to advance the colonial agenda at the expense of the indigenous populations. Given the potential role that the archives can play in telling the history of our country, it is important that conscious efforts be made to rectify the imbalances, misrepresentations, stereotypes that dominant in the colonial generated archive. There is also need to establish more representative archives that reflect on the many different groups of people in the country and their history. All this is born from the realisation that the archive is taken seriously by its clients as a repository of the country's history.
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# Registration of Discontent/Areas of Improvement

| ASPECT NEEDING IMPROVEMENT       | 1996-2000 | 2001-2004 | 2005-2009 | 2010-2014 | TOTAL |
|----------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------|
| TIME (limited time)              | 7         | 5         | 4         | 8         | 24    |
| STAFF                            | 4         | 3         | 2         |           | 9     |
| PEN (used for entering comments) | 1         |           |           |           | 1     |
| ELECTRICITY                      | 5         | 7         | 9         | 11        | 32    |
| OLD UNNECESSARY DOCUMENTS        |           | 4         |           |           | 4     |
| TOTAL NUMBER OF COMPLAINTS       | 17        | 19        | 15        | 19        | 70    |
| Infrastructure                   |           |           |           |           |       |

- Visitors to the Archives registered a number of complaints of different issues that included electricity, time, the staff and the nature of available documents.
- Negative comments should be seen in positive light as these help to improve the organisation and help it to grow by improving on its limitations.
- This subsection will examine the nature of these complaints and assess the responses of the authorities.

# Registration of discontent (ctd)

- Human resources are the face of an organisation and the manner in which staff interacts with clients can make and destroy an institution. The feedback platform is also important as it can be used by clients to comment on the staff of the archive and by extension highlight areas of incompetence or competence. Admittedly, making negative comments on staff can be very sensitive and this is not improved by the fact that the feedback is not entirely confidential. One can easily peep on the comments as soon as an entry is made. Notwithstanding these limitations, there were some clients who did make complaints about the staff at the Archives. Between 1996 and 2014 they were a total of 9 complaints against the staff. Some of the complaints included ..... The staff at the Archives did get compliments. One Eryl Worton entered, “Greatly Impressed by the assistance of your staff.



# Discontent (ctd)

- Another area of complaint was that of time accorded to the visitors on their tours of various areas of the archives. Table 3 above indicates that the second highest number of complaints was on the time given for the tours on the archives. One Anne Patrick from Ireland wrote in 1996, “Not enough time to absorb information.” Complaints over time have continued to as late as the past 5 years as indicated in the table above.
- Another area of discontent was that electricity. As noted the period after 2000 reaching the peak in 2008 was characterised by deepening crisis in the country’s economy. The shortage of foreign currency which was part of this crisis compromised the capacity of institutions to import. The Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA), the sole provider of electricity in the country, was one of the institutions that was hit hard by the crisis. Since that period, the company has not been able to provide consistent supply of electricity to its clients. This saw emergence of load shading regimes that could see electricity being disrupted for the greater parts of the day and even night. This obviously impacted negatively on a number of activities at the Archives. One of such activities included the storeroom for the documents which would be totally dark without electricity. This meant that retrieval of documents would be impossible when electricity was down and clients would travel huge distances to access the Archives.

# Conclusion

- By way of conclusion the paper will make reference to some of the outstanding remarks in the feedbacks.
- On Jason Owens from Namibia was impressed by the Archives and remarked that it was “A model for other countries” another was impressed by the fact that “the pieces aren’t for sale”.
- One G. Wright from England even used the platform to look for employment. He wrote, “Back tomorrow, Any Jobs?”