



Archival dignity, colonial records and community narratives

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Abstract

The archival memory of the Caribbean is built on the documentary legacies of colonialism. From slave registers to plantation deeds, the shelves of Caribbean Archives are filled with the records of colonial conquest, enslavement and suppression. Yet within these former Caribbean colonies—now small independent nations—is the evidence of human triumph over adversity, pride in self-sufficiency and a fierce and persistence dedication to political and social independence. That evidence is manifest through political movements, oral narratives, heroic legends and through alternate, different readings of the colonial records. These alternate readings are among the issues considered in this essay as it addresses the rethinking of a history that foregrounds the marginalized and highlights a dignity that has been suppressed. A case study of a website from the small island-nation of St. Kitts and Nevis demonstrates how the web is proving its agility in responding to complex understandings of history by enabling the uniting of both tangible and intangible community knowledge and heritage as it also eases access to official archival collections.

Keywords Decolonial · Colonial · St. Kitts and Nevis · Intangible cultural heritage · Archives · Records · Websites

Introduction

Archivists cannot right the inhuman wrongs of the colonial past and archivists cannot rewrite the records of those wrongs. But archivists can bring perspectives that assess and place these colonial records in meaningful and useful relationships with the archival needs of their decolonized populations, while seeking and uncovering new records that more accurately and authentically reflect those

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populations. For although the shelves of national archives of former colonies are filled with the records of the colonizer, decolonized populations cannot easily find themselves in them and may dismiss archives as irrelevant to their lives. Yet at the same time, while finding it difficult, even abhorrent, to dwell on these records of their oppression, those former colonized also yearn to find the whispers in the records that will help them to better understand their own history and uncover an identity that validates their own lives. How to dignify those lives and celebrate the heroic collective struggles of the enslaved and the indentured, how to honor those memories, how to offer meaningful clues to the past and most importantly how to document the post-emancipation society going forward that both recognizes the legacies of colonialism and celebrates the achievements of an independent peoples is a primary concern for the archivists of former colonies and the subject of this essay.¹

While colonial records may seem to hold out the potential of uncovering and surfacing marginalized voices that offer variants to official narratives, that potential is limited both by the records creators and nature of the records themselves. The voices of the oppressed are seldom documented, genealogical data are scattered and obscured, colonial records cannot reveal knowledge that is not recorded. Archivists must seek other records if they wish to support those marginalized voices. Working in former colonized entities curating colonial records of slavery and oppression while at the same time, collecting, supporting and dignifying the records of those populations that grew out of that enslavement is both challenging and daunting. Is it possible for colonial records and the records of a free society to exist side by side in the archives and offer a historical continuum that tells the story of both oppression and survival, of degradation and honor, of suppression and achievement?

As it critiques the decolonizing potential of the colonial record and considers the inclusion of new records in the Archives, this essay draws upon a case study from the Caribbean, Historic St. Kitts (<https://www.historicstkitts.kn>), that demonstrates how both the colonial records and those of an independent nation can tell the stories of a freed and free people in ways that validate the struggles and support the aspirations of those communities that grew out of the colonial enterprise. Along the way, it explores questions of how and whether colonial records can be ‘read’ in ways that surface the oppressed rather than the oppressor as it also points the way toward an approach to documentation that moves past these colonial records to offer alternate ways of recording that celebrate decolonized communities and their unique expressions.

The colonial experience in the Caribbean was a “European social design of Atlantic modernity centered around notions of military conquests, slavery and cultural domination” (Shepherd and Beckles 2000, p.74). Unlike settler colonialism, where European populations established themselves in their colonial outposts, overrunning the indigenous populations already inhabiting these areas, the colonizing of the Caribbean involved “extracting resources from the colony for the benefit and enrichment of the home country.” Colonialism has been described as

¹ This essay is dedicated to the memory of Victoria Borg O’Flaherty, former archivist of St. Kitts and Nevis, good friend and treasured colleague.

“based on forced settler migration of enslaved people in order to extract resources for the benefit of colonizers and enslavers” (Jeurgans and Karabanos 2020, p. 207).

During the era of European conquest from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century, recordkeeping practices were critical tools of the colonizers, not only for claiming land and creating boundaries, but also for controlling populations. The archival memory of the Caribbean is built on the documentary legacies of that domination and control. From slave registers to plantation deeds, the shelves of Caribbean Archives are filled with the records of marginalization, victimization, environmental exploitation and colonial conquest, a conquest constructed on the dehumanization and removal of dignity from entire populations through enslavement and suppression. As Anne Gilliland tells us, “Vast bureaucracies were developed to administer colonies; manage the flow of information within colonial empires; support trade, slaving, and the extraction of other material assets; and enumerate, subjugate, civilize, convert, enslave, transport, and even eradicate those who were colonised” (Gilliland 2017, p. 38.).

Similarly, scholars of colonialism point out that colonialism was archive-dependent from its earliest manifestations. Basu and de Jong note that, “the 19th-century imperial archive provided the conditions of possibility for the making of a global public sphere in which information circulated across the world” (Basu and DeJong 2016, p. 5). Detailed recordkeeping and the knowledge created through records became a matter of life or death to the early European colonizers (Bailkin 2015, p. 886). Ashie-Nikoi writes that the colonizers “produced a mass of documentation related to the colonial project and not to the lives of the people. Indeed, European colonizers often suppressed any indication that the indigenous population had a history or culture of their own” (Ashie-Nikoi 2021, p. 35). When the colonizers finally gave up their territories, they left their Eurocentric archival practices behind them along with many of the colonial records created by their administrations. For post-colonial record-keepers brought up with these practices it has been difficult to formulate and re-imagine alternative ways of archiving their communities. Jamaican archivist Stanley Griffin, tracing the Jamaican National Archives from its early colonial beginnings to the present day, concludes that, “Jamaican archival institutions struggle to break from colonial patterns and archive ‘records from below’” (Griffin and Timke 2022, p.6). In a similar vein, researchers in Latin American archives found that “the reading of colonial ethnonyms and geographical imaginations from local archival collections has resulted in the subordination or complete silencing of Native pasts” (Erbig and Latini 2019, p. 245).

Yet within these former Caribbean colonies—now small independent nation states and self-governing territories—is the evidence of human triumph over adversity, pride in self-sufficiency and a fierce and persistent dedication to political and social independence. That evidence is manifest through political movements, oral narratives, heroic legends as well as alternate, different readings of the colonial records. Reaffirming the dignity of Caribbean populations requires participation by the community in reconceptualizing and rebuilding the historic narrative, a rebuilding that draws from the collective memory and oral traditions of the community as well as from the official record. Through the case study of the

website Historic St. Kitts, this essay seeks to surface those variant narratives and to “de-Eurocentricise both our tools and our sources” (Das 2021, p.241) by affirming the pride of formerly colonized peoples in their history and by dignifying that history both through alternate perspectives on colonial records and by incorporating ‘non-traditional’ records (i.e., oral heritage, popular culture) into the historical narrative.

Historic St. Kitts demonstrates how narratives that focus on the records of the people rather than those of the former colonizers can restore the sense of identity and community to a previously exploited and oppressed peoples. Reading colonial records against and with the grain, considering the records of oral heritage, understanding popular culture as expressions of history and honoring collective memory all work together in offering documentation that accepts colonial records but also recognizes a new order of record making and keeping, one that does not decolonize the archives so much as relocate colonial records from the center to the periphery while moving forward to embrace the records of the current community.

Colonial records and their limitations

The placement of the colonial records of a brutal and oppressive past within the Archives of now free and independent nations remains both a challenge and a conundrum. Jeugens and Karabanos argue that, “there is something innately colonial in the recordkeeping systems that cannot, and should not, be removed, and, yet, must also be decolonized.” Defining decolonizing archives as, “seeking ways to dismantle the hegemony of the custodial institutions in archival knowledge production and acknowledging that archival infrastructures are the key to agency” (2020, p. 202), they suggest that since the colonial structure itself created the records and the systems, to tamper with these systems would misrepresent the past. But that nonetheless, in order for these colonial records to be transparently available to all they assert that, “the colonial archive must undergo some sort of transformation, something that many would describe as decolonization. The information must be more accessible, more open and used in such a way as to promote decoloniality” (2020, p. 202). Although this process from coloniality to independence may be called decolonization, the colonial structures embedded within the recordkeeping systems work against this transformation.

At the same time, colonial records have their own innate values and make their own statements which may be critical to understanding the colonial past and its reverberations into the present. Andrew Flinn notes that, “given the central role afforded to the archive in imperial administration, it is hard to overestimate the significance of the records contained within the archives to colonial and post-colonial peoples” (Flinn 2008, p. 59). Thomas Cunningham, a historian tasked with restoring and digitizing the archives of a church mission in Nairobi, similarly writes that, “These papers were themselves instruments in that history: they were artefacts.” He finds that, “Archives are not only important as repositories of information about the past,” but are “dynamic places where history is invented and re-invented, where past and present are governed and controlled. As such they are places that

tell us about the present as much as they do the past” (Cunningham 2017, p. 25). Contemplating the deteriorating condition of these archives, Cunningham questions whether preserving them is more destructive than useful to the current decolonized population and asks whether “resurrecting this colonial archive meant actively interrupting an on-going process of ruination, how our saving from destruction what we considered to be material of immense historical significance might entail a disruption of local historical memory” (Cunningham 2017, p. 33). He concludes that this resurrection and restoration of the colonial archive forces a confrontation with the past that can be useful in facilitating reflection and in challenging entrenched views of the past and their reverberations in the present.

The debate over decolonizing the archives has increased in intensity over the past several decades as historians and other scholars have come to recognize both the extreme imperial biases of colonial structures and colonial recordkeeping systems as well as the need for new approaches to these records if they wish to uncover the voices of the victims. The question of how and even whether colonial archives can be decolonized and if the voices of the oppressed can actually be recovered remains unresolved. In the 1980’s, Indian scholar and post-colonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s seminal essay, “The Rani of Simur: An Essay in Reading the Archives,” recognized that because the colonial archive is complicit with a particular point of view there is a limit to which other voices can ever fully be heard. Seeking to understand the outlawed custom of sati (widow-burning) from the viewpoint of the widow (the Rani in this instance), Spivak concluded that “as the historical record is made up... the Rani emerges only when she is needed in the space of historical production” (Spivak 1985, p. 270).

Similarly, in an influential twenty-first century essay, “Venus in Two Acts,” literary scholar Saidiya Hartman, seeking to recover the voices of enslaved women and specifically Venus, an enslaved woman murdered by a slave ship captain, finds that the archival records cannot help her, she has no way to recover these voices because the archive only documents actions against the enslaved. Hartman writes, “The archive of slavery rests upon a founding violence. This violence determines, regulates and organizes the kinds of statements that can be made about slavery and as well it creates subjects and objects of power.” She asks, “how does one recuperate lives entangled with and impossible to differentiate from the terrible utterances that condemned them to death, the account books that identified them as units of value, the invoices that claimed them as property, and the banal chronicles that stripped them of human features?” (Hartman 2008, pp. 10,3).

Despite the seemingly insurmountable obstacles to recovering voices that are not recorded, “in recent decades, scholars have reformulated their understanding of colonial archives (corpuses of documents and the institutions that house them) by demonstrating how archives frame and limit knowledge of the past” (Erbig and Latini 2019, p. 252), and have worked to devise various strategies to try to uncover the hidden voices of the oppressed. These strategies, including reading records both with and against the grain, reconceptualizing records as counternarratives and utilizing contextualized imaginings to fill the gaps in the record, all offer different opportunities for recovering the voices of the marginalized, the oppressed and the unrecorded.

Reading ‘against the grain’, a historical approach emerging in the late 1970’s proposed an interpretation of colonial history that rejected the master narratives of imperialism in favor of a history that emphasized more contextual examination of the modes of knowledge and representations among the colonized populations. It was essentially a search for the local ‘other’ that manifested itself in the reading of official colonial records, “by assessing the content of imperial sources (trial records, wills, commercial transactions, treaties, maps, logbooks,

etc.) in order to retrieve latent meanings or identify activities that authors sought to silence” (Erbig and Latini 2019, p. 243). Reading ‘with the grain’, an approach to colonial records promoted by anthropologist Laura Ann Stoler, focuses on archives as a process rather than archives as items. Stoler writes that archiving with the grain “looks to archives as condensed sites of epistemological and political anxiety rather than as skewed and biased sources” (Stoler 2009, p.20). She advocates reading colonial records by focusing on the methods and strategies of the production of archives within the context of the institutions that produced them. Essentially Stoler follows the records to wherever they may lead, always acutely aware of the natures of the creators, the contexts in which records were created and the actors within the records themselves.

Although marginalized voices within the colonial records may be uncovered to some extent by these alternate readings of the archive—by inference, by understanding the context or by seeking the gaps or silences in the records—the points made by Spivak and Hartman nonetheless demonstrate the ultimate limitations of these readings. As noted by Smallwood, “The colonial archive’s silences and disavowals are themselves an active epistemological gesture that leaves in its wake a trace of its own processes and maneuvers. Our task, then, is to tell the stories that bring the ghostly outline of that tracing fully into view.” She points out that even though a counter-history can never fully reveal the subaltern and the marginalized, “by its critique it reveals the otherwise naturalized and taken-for-granted structures of power that produce subaltern figures as such” (Smallwood 2016, p. 128).

One cannot read something that is not there and while the silences of the colonial archives may speak loudly, these silences cannot be filled by the colonial archive itself. Other voices must be sought and listened to. It is these other voices that are emerging as former colonized peoples increasingly find their voices. As one Caribbean scholar has noted, while Caribbean academics of the late twentieth century tended to see ‘the people’ as a blank page for intellectuals to write on, this has been “replaced by an approach that recognizes that people construct their own forms of resistance to adversity including their own philosophical universe, through which they interpret and work through this resistance” (Meeks 2000, p. 23). It is through a variety of alternate records that this resistance is manifest. As noted by literary scholar Santanu Das, “in the colonial context when the archival knowledge is woefully asymmetrical, the histories difficult and painful, and the local actors largely non-literate and silent, it is important to go beyond official documents and consider a wider range of cultural material—objects, photographs, sketches, paintings, songs, gossip, rumour, alongside historical fiction” (Das 2021, p. 240).

Spoken and performed: their ‘undignified’ records

A dominant feature of colonialism is the denigration of the cultures of the colonized. The language, dress, food, religion, social mores and even ways of remembering and memorializing are deemed undignified and disdained, legally banned and socially devalued. This colonial cultural policy resulted in those colonized perceiving their own cultural norms and practices as subordinate and undignified expressions compared to those of the colonizer. Sadly, these cultural expressions were central to the ways in which colonized peoples communicated, documented, preserved and promoted their information and constructed their memories.

Restoring the appreciation for and the use of information-bearing cultural practices are fundamental to restoring archival dignity to formally subjugated peoples. For, as well-known Caribbean revolutionary Maurice Bishop, once declared, “Our culture is our dignity, the dignity the Revolution has brought us and the dignity it sustains in us. We are sovereigns of our dignity, of *our pride in being we* and we are proud of our consistent victory over the forces that try to make us their imitators, their mimics and their puppets... For our culture is how we live... and how we change the world, we are changed ourselves, into new men, new women, new Caribbean people” (Searle 1984, p. 179). From this perspective, meaningful memory, that is, records of enduring value, can be found all around us. From songs and stories, dress patterns and dance movements, melodies and rhythms, artwork and rituals, to plants and sculptures, these activities are bearers that impart information and retain memory. The calypso singer or storyteller is not simply singing a song or telling a tale, but more importantly, conveying a message or a lesson for the community. The dignity of the decolonized community is in the restoration and re/exultation of their information creating, bearing and promulgating praxis.

For twenty-first century archives, the decolonization of archival holdings must include digital technology to advance, promote, preserve and access these spoken and performed records in like manner as textual records. This is crucial to appreciating the work and worth of the Historic St. Kitts website. Restoring archival dignity in practical terms means creating places and spaces for non-textual records within traditional archival domains. Making intangible records as accessible—as is expected in contemporary archival/information services norms—adds yet another layer of dignity, gravitas and respect to the archival expression. As Griffin observes, “decolonized records and archives introduces to traditional repositories and programs new formats, new ways of arrangement and description as well as new modes of providing access... Decolonizing archives do not negate the use, value and purpose of traditional archival practice or theory, instead it seeks to recognize and include the values, practices and modes of considering other cultures and traditions whose expressions and forms of memory have hitherto gone unnoticed, and worse yet, unappreciated” (Griffin 2021, p. 8). Restoring archival dignity to a community is not a cerebral moot point, but should be a fundamental undercurrent to institutional archival policy and practice.

Ascribing archival dignity is possible in collection development, postcustodial agreements, participatory descriptions, culturally appropriate access and with the assistance of evolving digital technology, crafting dynamic and experiential “Living Archives”—as suggested by Jeannette Bastian—that offers equity to the archival memory of all within the society (Bastian 2023, p. 103).

St. Kitts: the mother ‘colony’ of the British West Indies

The island of Saint Christopher, popularly known as St. Kitts has been the site of a rich and complex cultural history. It was the sixteenth century cradle of British colonialism and spark for the nineteenth century colonial resistance in the Caribbean. St. Kitts is a tropical 176 square kilometer (68 square mile) island in the Leeward Islands of the Caribbean Sea. It is known for its rich volcanic soil and several lush mountain ranges in its center, where the highest peak of the country, Mount Liamuiga, 1156 m (3793 feet) can be found. There are also numerous rivers descending from the mountains, which provide fresh water to the local population (The World Factbook 2019). Historically referred to as the “Mother Colony of the (British) West Indies”, St. Kitts was the launching pad for British colonialism in the Caribbean and the site of much of the imperialist activity that marked the presence of the European expansion in the region (Simmonds 1987, p. 277). St. Kitts and its sister island Nevis is a federation of two islands, united by the Federal Act of 1882. However, Nevis has its own island Administration and Assembly. Although the National Archives in St. Kitts contain records with reference to both territories, Nevis has its own recordkeeping arrangements, with records dating back to the 1700s (British Library Endangered Archives Program 2015).

In November 1493 during his first voyage, Christopher Columbus encountered thriving communities of indigenous Amerindian peoples, namely the Tainos and Kalinagos residing in the islands, Nevis and St. Kitts, respectively (Dyde 2005; Beckles 2008). The rock carvings found around the island are evidence of their presence. By the time British and French settlers landed in St. Kitts (1624, 1625, respectively), the Kalinagos were, according to Hilary Beckles, “inhabiting the islands long enough to perceive them as part of their natural, ancestral, survival environment” (Beckles 2008, p.78). Thus, the Kalinagos mounted a fierce and protracted resistance. The British and French united their efforts against the Kalinagos, who by then had established a “poison arrow curtain” that separated islands captured by the Spanish and those still in Kalinago possession (Beckles 2008, p.79). The Anglo-Franco colonizers, rather than trying to overthrow the already settled Spanish in the nearby Greater Antillean islands (Jamaica, Cuba, Hispaniola and Puerto Rico), chose to fight the Kalinagos, “partly because of the perception that Kalinagos were the weaker, but also because of the belief that Kalinagos were the ‘common enemy’ of all Europeans and that solidarity could be achieved for collective military operations against them” (Beckles 2008, p. 79). Once defeated, St. Kitts became the primary station for British and French expansion into the Caribbean.

Following numerous military battles between the British and French, with each colonizer occupying various parts of the island, the French surrendered to the British

in 1713. This allowed the British to fully engage in agricultural economy, starting with tobacco smallholding plots employing white (mostly Irish) indentured workers, and later transitioning to sugar plantation economy using imported enslaved African laborers. Given this history of Indigenous eviction, inter-European battles, importation of indentured and enslaved laborers and the transformation of the landscape for sugarcane production, a unique culture developed in St. Kitts. This includes a landscape dotted with bases, forts and windmills, including the Brimstone Hill Fortress, a registered UNESCO World Heritage Site (UNESCO World Heritage List (1999)). Place names also illustrate this cultural clash with villages and locations bearing both French and English names including the nation's capital, Basseterre—which is derived from French but is locally pronounced using English-based norms. The cultural mix can also be found in the island's Creole language, which includes traces of French as well as other African and English languages (Lewis 2009).

As a result of the trade in sugar, by the turn of the eighteenth century, St. Kitts was the richest colony in the British Caribbean per capita. Sugar cane cultivation was central to life in the colony which included the extensive slave laws, racism, classism and conservative Christianity that crafted the norms and values of present-day Kittitian society. All the natural resources were reengineered to support the work of the sugar estates and designed to reinforce the hegemony of slave society. Acts of resistance by the enslaved masses were an inevitable common occurrence in St. Kitts. These ranged from overt rebellions, such as the 1690 uprising (Craton 1982; Historic St. Kitts, n.d.), to instances of marronage² (Zacek 2007) to daily acts of defiance. More importantly, the resistance to the system of slavery took on cultural forms, for example, in the retention of rhythms, design of costumes, storytelling, singing calypsos and the ingredients and preparation of foods, which all later informed the island's signature cultural activity called 'Christmas Sport'³ (Mills & Jones-Hendrickson, 1984). For, as Karen Olwig Fog maintains, "many aspects of slave culture were not directly oppositional in nature, but rather worked within the institutional frameworks established and recognized by the colonial society" (Olwig 1993, p.55).

The enslaved population in St. Kitts was emancipated in 1838, as in other parts of the British West Indies, even though much did not change with that declaration of freedom. The drudgery of plantation life continued unabated right up until the 1930s with the labor rebellions, which triggered similar reactions around the Caribbean.⁴

² Marronage refers to enslaved persons escaping the structures of enslavement to establish communities usually in the hinterlands of the territory. In some smaller Caribbean territories, migration to other islands would also constitute marronage.

³ Christmas Sport is the name given to the festivities which took place traditionally in the two-week period in December, leading up to Christmas Day and Boxing Day (25 and 26 December, respectively). Sugar factories were customarily closed during this time period as plantation work ceased, allowing laborers their time to "leh go!" (i.e., dancing in the streets, singing calypsos and storytelling, in addition to preparing special foods that are linked to the festivities of Christmas). A key feature of the Christmas Sport is the Masquerade, which will be described later.

⁴ It is noteworthy that the first wave of militant working-class protests that swept the entire British West Indies began in St. Kitts in January 1935. These riots across the Caribbean resulted in the convening of the Royal Commission of Inquiry to investigate the social and economic conditions in Barbados, British Guiana, British Honduras, Jamaica, the Leeward Islands, Trinidad and Tobago and the Windward Islands in 1938 chaired by Lord Moyne. The Moyne Commission Report led to sweeping social, economic and

The 1930s riots that swept across the former British West Indies had its genesis in St. Kitts. This labor uprising resulted in the political movements toward self-government and independence. Trade unions emerged out of these riots and trade unionism became central to renegotiating the economic, political and social structures of Kittitian society. Along with its sister island of Nevis, St. Kitts became an independent nation in 1983. The Federation of Saint Kitts and Nevis is a member of the Commonwealth, with the British monarch as its head of state.

A cradle of archival indignity

Undoubtedly, the colonial records relating to St. Kitts document the colonial and economic control of the territory. However, rock inscriptions created by the Indigenous, oral traditions, such as Masquerade,⁵ environmental markers, and personal testimonies, have as much historical, informational and memory value as the various records written in English and French. These expressions are both the cultural markers of the peoples who were met, and those who came thereafter. The colonial imposition of writing in English and French as the conduit of information led to the denigration of non-textual expressions as articulations of information and memory. It is these written records of the colonizers that have been stored in the archives and given the archival dignity of preservation and access, while the records of the other are inaccessible in this way. This informational divide formed part of the indignity meted out to those subjected by colonialism.

Thus, the primacy of written records in the archives has added this archival exclusion to the legacies of cultural, economic, racial and sociopolitical indignities for the descendants of those impacted by the textual word, and to the St. Kitts National Archives charged with archival retention. As Aarons et al. Stated in their Introduction to *Archiving Caribbean Memory*, “Focusing on the written word as the only possible mode for creating the archival record has reduced the potential of societal and memory institutions to value and preserve the narratives and representations of its constituents” (Aarons et. al 2022, p. 5). How then can a small archival institution for a small Caribbean island developing nation state appropriately expand its holdings to reflect the memory the population prefers to preserve in ways that meet conventional archival practice when the assets cannot be placed in boxes and shelves in sterile temperature-controlled strong rooms? For archival programs in low resourced contexts, such as the National Archives of St. Kitts and Nevis, the

Footnote 4 (continued)

political changes that advanced the cause for self-governance, regional federation and later independence across the English-speaking Caribbean.

⁵ Masquerade is a traditional group dance, with meaningful costumes, drum rhythms and fife melodies, that has been culturally linked to the Yoruba practice and developed during the era of enslavement. It was traditionally performed as part of “Christmas Sport”, during the break in plantation work activity for the Yuletide season. It is now a cultural marker for St. Kitts and Nevis, is performed especially during times of carnival, community festival and for the tourist gaze. Masquerade is also a marker for the Kittitian/Nevisian Diaspora and is found in Bermuda, the Dominican Republic and other parts where large descendants of St. Kitts and Nevis reside.

internet, especially websites, is a vital tool for increasing awareness of historical material, as well as engaging with non-conventional archival materials, in order to provide access to their bipartite holdings, i.e., textual and non-textual records.

The National Archives of St. Kitts

This question of ascribing archival dignity to formats, memory and practices, which the population favored, was a huge challenge for the leadership of the National Archives. The National Archives of St. Kitts and Nevis is a small department of the island's government generally staffed with a qualified archivist and an assistant as custodians of the documentary heritage. Reflecting on this dilemma, Victoria Borg O'Flaherty, St. Kitts' National Archivist from 1996 to 2019 and the first full-time archival professional, observed that, "over the three and half centuries of colonization [the island] acquired a valuable archive which has only rarely been explored, leading many locals to believe that it did not even exist. The archival collection owes its origins to the administrative and legal activities of the colonial period" (O'Flaherty 2018, p. 385).

The records in the Archives, dating from the early 1600's essentially mirror the slow transition from colonial governance to independence initially reflecting details that were of importance to the white planter class, with the enslaved being documented as subjugated assets of the white oligarchy. The Archives includes such records as sessional papers, blue books, government gazettes, registers of slaves, police and court records documenting over 300 years of colonial rule. Records were primarily stored in the Court House in Basseterre as well as individual government offices and it was not until 1966 that they were consolidated and moved to small vaults in the new government headquarters, the home of the Archives today. As O'Flaherty noted, "since power and the ability to create archives rested with the island's elite, the records naturally reflect the events they felt were important" (2009, p.222). As a consequence, "many natives of St. Kitts have claimed that they do not care about the past because there is nothing in it worth remembering," (2009, p. 221). The National Archives were initially perceived as the documented memory of the whites, and therefore irrelevant and useless to present-day Kittitian society.

A major challenge for the National Archives has been promoting the relevance of their holdings to a nation that is documenting itself in other ways. As O'Flaherty observed, "The concept of the maintenance and the archiving of records was not easily absorbed, especially in a culture where the oral transmission of information predominated. [Therefore,] by recognizing that the archive was an inherent part of the machinery of colonialism, one becomes conscious of its limitations in contributing to the history of the colonized in a post-colonial community and yet it is still a source of information about them" (2009, p. 225). O'Flaherty recognized that the 'archive of the masses' was in the living activities and cultural expressions outside the repository. These living materials were neither construed nor accessioned as archival. However, these intangible expressions carried community memory, informational details and markers of national identity. She notes, "With many being unable to shed resentments about the past, an effort had to be made to integrate the

harm that the slave trade had caused, with the triumphs experienced by the enslaved, whether small or insignificant, whether personal or societal, in a vocabulary that explained rather than inflamed” (2018, p. 390). This was the challenge facing the National Archives of St. Kitts and Nevis.

Using digital technology for archival dignity

The rising popularity of digital technology in St. Kitts and Nevis in the twenty-first century became a starting point for making the archives more accessible, as well as diversifying the holdings by including various records of community memory. The resulting project was the website *Historicbasseterre.com* which evolved into what is now *Historic St. Kitts* (<https://www.historicstkitts.kn/>). In describing the genesis, purpose and scope of this website, O’Flaherty stated that while the content came primarily from the archival records themselves, “the site would allow for the sharing of the numerous bits of information that the archives staff had gathered over the years on buildings and sites, personalities and events and provide secondary school children with local material that would launch them into their CXC⁶ school-based assignments in History...” as well as serving as a catalyst for greater political interest and investment in the National Archives (2018, 391). The initial target audience was school children and “the starting point was the heritage sites of Basseterre. Images, documents, events and personalities were then linked to the narrative...and a page called the ‘Scrapbook’ allowed people with stories to tell to upload written stories or audio...” (2018, p. 391).

The resulting *Historic St. Kitts* website is a tapestry of memory, weaving historical occurrence, personality and story, with colonial records. This website brings together a balanced archival product that is searchable, using a language that explains rather than inflames, and offers the historical experience, landscapes and personalities to both a local and an international audience as a starting point for consumption and research. The Home page of the website signals its local focus and its intended users. An image of a typical West Indian home with its young schoolgirl occupant sitting on the porch intently engaged in reading an electronic device is set against a background of a green and thriving yard. The colors, pinks and greens, are bright and vibrant. The message “discover us for yourself” is friendly, welcoming and clear and directly engages the population of St. Kitts, particularly students. The website, in its “About” description, with its stunning panorama of the Basseterre harbor and fortifications states the mission and the primary audience, “This on-line resource is an attempt to satisfy a growing demand for historical information of a local nature. It is also hoped that it will generate a sense of pride and achievement in young Kittitians as well as give nationals living abroad a chance to remain connected with their heritage. Many will enjoy seeing the changes or similarities in the images

⁶ CXC is the acronym for the Caribbean Examinations Council, the body that orchestrates the secondary education qualifications, which most public schools within the Commonwealth Caribbean participates and is used as the basis for matriculation in regional and international tertiary institutions. For more information, see <https://www.cxc.org/> accessed 11 May 2023.

we have uploaded” (Historic St. Kitts n.p.). Importantly, the National Archives as the source of this website is front and center as this section encourages visitors to critique the site, offer suggestions and share information and images with the Archives. Surveying the current website, with sections entitled, Timeline of History of St. Kitts, Our Places, Our People, Our Events and Other Items of Interest, visitors are given the opportunity to explore and experience both colonial and cultural forms of documentary heritage.

The critical section on the History of St. Kitts is short and to the point. It paints a fair and accurate picture of an island, isolated from Europe, the object of occupation by competing European powers. It tells the story of colonialism as one of exploitation by the planter class and of the struggle for survival by the enslaved. Emancipation in 1835 did not bring full hoped-for freedoms but the rise of a Black middle class gradually brought about social change and an end to plantocracy and independence. This section concludes with the positive message that, “The twentieth century is the remarkable story of social transformation and economic opportunity that changed the way of life of the majority of people on St. Kitts,” (Historic St. Kitts, n.p.) As such it points the way to the other sections that emphasize the stories and voices of the local heroes emerging from this difficult history.

The remaining sections tell that remarkable story in a series of photographs and vignettes. ‘Our Places’ is a collage of landscapes and historic monuments. Clicking on any photo leads to an extensive narrative on the particular place, its history and its importance to the community. Similarly the tab ‘People’ features the photos and stories of local Kittitians instrumental in the political struggles for equality and independence but also those who were involved in promoting the arts and culture of the community. ‘Our Events’ chronicles both the cultural happenings and the important political turning points that define this nation, while the section on ‘Other Items of Interest’ is a mix of seminal events, both colonial, such as the Stamp Act Riots of 1765, and post-emancipation, such as the first steel band performance in a church. Each event includes not only visual images but lengthy well-researched narratives. Particularly impressive in this section is ‘A Carnival Journey’ which details an extensive history of carnival complete with the dates of each annual parade and photographs.

This St. Kitts website, with its detailed research and extensive descriptions, serves as both a history textbook for its citizens and a wealth of information for visitors. The sources of the information are the Archives itself, the oral traditions of the island, the landscape and the people. Kittians see themselves, their culture and their identity as part of their National Archives. There are few written histories about St. Kitts and those that do exist tend to focus on its colonial past. Historic St. Kitts tells a different history, one that highlights the local population, a decolonized narrative of this emerging nation.

The website also serves as a resource to access intangible memory that would otherwise be dependent on practitioners performing their craft at the appropriate seasonal occasion. Through these webpages, visitors are able to engage with these expressions in tandem with colonial documentation. Community members are able to view their expressions held in the same esteem as colonial paper documents. By automating, digitizing and narrating visual materials, performances, stories

and testimonials, the National Archives becomes a full reflection of a nation that emerged out of colonialism into a post-independent identity.

Conclusion: the archival dignity of (e-)access

There is an empowerment in sharing and retelling the evidences of one's own existence, struggles and triumphs. The growing interest in communities creating and maintaining their particular forms of archives illustrate the re/dignification of their elders and of their cultural heritage. This has become relatively easier with digital access to collections, exhibits or even extracts. Digital technology, especially social media and websites, has provided communities with opportunities to re/configure and tell their narratives with their own voice. As curator Konrad Ng maintains, "Racial subjects and communities, such as Asian Americans, are producing online cultures that are as compelling and important as life in the offline world, the critical potency of these phenomena is how online life can be edifying elements of the American experience" (Ng 2014, pp. 270–271).

Web 3.0 has amplified the ability to reconstruct, if not outrightly rewrite, history by placing two record formats—paper/textual records and intangible cultural expressions—into one seamless format, and on equal placement. The colonial word meets the colonized voice in one web/space for explanation rather than inflammation of past colonial ideologies or indignities. In these 'living archives,' many different forms of records can converge. Bastian describes how this can work using the context of an online circus performance, "what makes these archives living archives is not just the repurposing of videos of old performances and the digitizing of images and records, but the digital fitting together and positioning of all the pieces of a circus in such a way that makes it seem like the user is witnessing a performance in real time. The archives come alive, not only as a dynamic simulation of a circus, but as a performance of its textual artifacts" (Bastian 2023, pp. 106–107). The growing proliferation of artificial intelligence could be foreseen as adding broader ranges and deeper levels of engagement in historically-blended and culturally representative access.

For small Caribbean developing states like St. Kitts and Nevis, access to archives, especially in digital modes, is crucial for the appreciation and survival of institutional archival work as well as the understanding of the nation's historical experiences. Victoria Borg O'Flaherty's life's work moved from securing the archival documentation already within the repository to collating the memory outside in the community and using both formats/series to make historical and intellectual connections while showing the relevance of this bipartite archival memory to its constituents. Projects like Historic St. Kitts which essentially present and rewrite history from the perspective of the formerly colonized are important steps toward decolonizing the archives as they restore the archival dignity to the cultural and oral traditions that are imbedded in Kittian and Nevisian cultural and national identities. These strands of identities are tied to particular family histories, village and geographical locations, transnational connections and even political affiliations. The 'Timeline of the History of St. Kitts', for example, captures recorded

experiences based on these diverse memory sources. The distant and stoic nineteenth century reading room—based on providing access to paper-based formats—can now be translated to the twenty-first century access point on a handheld device, with all the dynamism the current technology could allow. This e-access further illustrates the saying ascribed to Bill Gates in the 1990s with the initial rise of the internet, “If your business is not on the Internet, then your business will be out of business” (Tomorrow City 2021).

As Historic St. Kitts illustrates, digital technology is an increasingly helpful tool in leveling the power dynamic that created information hegemonies. By making the expressions of intangible cultural heritage accessible, it offers a path toward empowering the voices of the communities and nations still on their quest for full decolonization and freedom.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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