

Tribe of colours - reclaiming identity via the Web.

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ABSTRACT

“...straight ahead

*the memory beckons from the future
you and I a tribe of colours
this song that dance
godlike rhythms to birth
footsteps of memory
the very soul aspires to.”*

(Keorapetse Kgositsile, “Origins”, 1969:3)

Now in the second year of its development, the Encyclopaedia of South African Arts, Culture and Heritage (ESAACH) is both traditional encyclopaedia and hypertext web. Published volumes will emerge from the collaborative writing space provided within the wiki database. “You and I a tribe of colours” - by tapping into the collaborative spirit of social networking, ESAACH is emerging as a communal knowledge base that is far more than the sum of its parts.

ESAACH is intended as a work of reclamation scholarship to address the dearth of reference material in South African arts, culture and heritage studies, and flights a number of concepts of importance in knowledge production for social transformation - notions that represent a fundamental shift in perspective: “panoramic, inclusive, democratic, and non-canonical”.

An encyclopaedia, by its very nature, can never be complete. An online encyclopaedia never needs to be complete. Users can continually add entries or edit existing ones while an open-source community, (e.g. Media wiki) is continually improving and developing the management framework. An active community that has bought into ownership of the encyclopaedia, and has an interest in maintaining and growing its content, ensures its sustainability.

This paper reports on work in progress, outlining the founding principles of the encyclopaedia and presenting the current state of the development and usage of the Verbal Arts section of the wiki. Later phases of the project include the Performing Arts, Visual Arts and Heritage.

Collaboratively writing our cultural history

Winston Churchill was alleged to have said “History is written by the victors.” Cultural history too can be said to be written by the victors, or at least by the dominant cultural group in any society. The danger of this as we have seen in South Africa’s past, is that certain writers and artists can be marginalised or even written out of history. The solution is an inclusive work of encyclopaedic scope that encourages input from all sectors of society. The *Encyclopaedia of South African Arts, Culture and Heritage* (ESAACH) wiki allows for this through its built-in functionality.

A wiki is a browser-based collaborative writing environment, in which a community can create and exchange information on particular topics, and to which anyone can contribute

without having web programming skills. In other words, a wiki is a piece of software that is used for collaborative content creation.

This definition comes from Wikipedia, currently the best-known example of a wiki. “The free encyclopaedia that anyone can edit” is the slogan of Wikipedia, and it is now the largest multilingual encyclopaedia available online - containing over two million articles - and still growing. Wikipedia is managed with the open-source Media wiki software, which is exactly the same software used to run the ESAACH wiki discussed in this paper.

Tribe of colours

While it was Nelson Mandela who most publicly bestowed the identity of “rainbow nation” on the newly-democratised South Africa, twenty years before, Keorapetse Kgositsile had already invoked the “rainbow tribe” image in his poem “Origins”. Since then, Kgositsile has himself become woven into the tapestry of post-apartheid South Africa, as Poet Laureate, from which vantage he articulates a profound challenge for an emerging nation: how to nurture an inclusive cultural identity where before there was only division and oppression.

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Kgositsile’s words combine transcendent vision with deeply-felt cultural rootedness, resonant with an encompassing spirit of arts and culture which is irresistible. In this light, it may seem presumptuous of the present authors to claim any similarity between the inert scaffolding of an electronic database, and the creative aspirations of a diverse people. Drawing the parallel takes us on a perilous path, but we will tread it, nonetheless. We justify this identification with Kgositsile’s imagery because the words speak to our own sense (and possibly many others of us in the creative arts) that what we produce is significantly more than the sum of its parts. While this may be more readily apparent in a painting than a wiki, we contend that within the myriad connections in a relational database of artistic references, there *is* a ghost in the machine. Kgositsile’s image of a creative collective unconscious, outside conventional space and time (“Time flows in all directions in your work” - Synder, 1995) maps easily to early notions of the Web as an essentially non-linear information-sharing virtual space. As Hypertext pioneer, Ted Nelson memorably states: “the structures of ideas are not sequential” (Nelson, 1974). A common thread in post-modern theory and hypermedia theory, is the notion of non-linearity. The non-sequential nature of hypertext is its most important distinguishing feature: “Hypertext is non-sequential; there is no single order that determines the sequence in which the text is to be read” (Nielsen 1995: 1). Hypertext theorists emphasise the democratic, non-teleological and relativistic character of their conceptual frameworks. Deleuze and Guattari offer a beguiling image of the interconnectedness of hypertext – the medium of the web, and of the wiki – as a rhizome, or the dispersed root system typical of grasses. A rhizomic structure is a chaotically distributed network rather than a regular hierarchy of trunk and branches. “Many people

have a tree growing in their heads, but the brain itself is much more a grass than a tree.” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Rhizomic structures satisfy the seemingly contradictory elements in hypertext that on the one hand point towards chaotic randomness but on the other hand, to nodes of significance and meaning.

What better space, then, in which to store references to artistic work? Even before the advent of Web 2.0’s collaborative, social networking tools mid-way into the first decade of the 21st century, we were driven by a conviction that the growing web of references that constituted the Verbal Arts section of ESAACH manifested a uniquely valuable knowledge base, constructed by its contributors (writers of entries). Furthermore, the sweeping range of listed authors and works had the potential, by virtue of multiple associations and cross-linkages, to empower researchers and inspire fellow artists. One of the characteristics of the book-based library (as opposed to the virtual online library that has become increasingly familiar to us) was that as a consequence of its physical layout, it was conducive to serendipitous discovery. In other words, while we may have been earnestly searching for a text on post-structuralism, we may have come across a traveller’s account of Tibet, or a history of public transport. Alphabetical arrangement can in itself be used subversively (see the reference to Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* below). Such coincidental finds on the library shelf may prove to be entirely insignificant, but as the very coinage “serendipity” suggests, such discoveries may sometimes be inspirational and capable of launching a new line of thought, or provoking an unexpected conceptual leap that may otherwise never have been realised. To take up Kgositsile’s image again, the memory beckoning from the future may be summoned from the ESAACH wiki’s configuration of categories and summaries – cultural snippets and soundbites – that together constitute a cumulative platform from which to explore new work and to discover accidental but provocative correspondences between times, themes, names, tropes, colours and landscapes. They are, in effect

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In this sense, the wiki becomes the epicentre of powerful conversations between different cultures. Just as the advent of the photograph and the telegraph in the 19th century ushered in a “new epistemology” (Postman, 1985:48), the web has brought with it a new way of constructing knowledge. It is not surprising that the success of the World Wide Web coincided with the ubiquitous appearance of colour computer displays and audio capabilities. Social networking has now intensified these benefits, by adding community to the web’s audiovisual palette, and thereby offering new scope for the wiki database to develop. Web 2.0 has transformed the angular scaffolding of the old database into something more organic (see the discussion of Lessig’s Read-Write culture, below).

An encyclopaedia is an ambitious project and the pursuit has not gone uncontested. For instance, encyclopaedia-writing risks imposing new grand narratives that could either perpetuate outdated thinking about South African art and culture, or create new, equally stifling, politically-correct edifices inimical to fresh and unfettered discourse. With respect to the SALIT Web Database project that was the prototype for the Verbal Arts section of ESAACH, literary critic Leon de Kock (2005: 3) has questioned “... the very possibility, or

the desirability, of pursuing literary history as an encyclopaedic act in the first place, with all its attendant implications of coverage and completeness.”

While there is validity in de Kock’s observation that there is an inherent contradiction in the synchronous promise of a de-canonised listing of South Africa’s writers in the post-colonial nineties, amidst a prevailing suspicion of meta-narratives (including those with an encyclopaedic slant), we would argue that the Two point zero zeitgeist unsettles this assumption. Wiki technology resists the impetus from the rest of the Internet “universe” to flood the user with so much information that it actually obstructs clear thinking. Wikipedia itself is a notable compromise that filters information overload, thus serving to allay de Kock’s misgivings. As has been noted, Wikipedia has become a successful Internet reference, but remains controversial, attracting both adulation from open-Internet supporters, and opprobrium from the custodians of authoritative publications like Britannica, or scholarly presses like Elsevier. The debate over the reliability and provenance of Internet information notwithstanding (see Stewart, 2007, for more on this issue) Wikipedia technology nevertheless mitigates the excesses of the Internet while retaining the unique capacity of the medium to defy the privileging of one piece of information over the other. The Wikipedia model also subtly alters the connotation of encyclopaedia as a constraining Enlightenment meta-narrative by opening up the publication to unlimited participation. Grand narrative it may be, but it can be seen as a progressive grand narrative, like Feminism or Ecological Responsibility. Wikipedia founder, Jimmy Wales, and Diderot may have more in common than we might imagine. It is arguable that Diderot’s intention with his 18th century *Encyclopédie* was profoundly participatory – a tour de force of collaborative writing explicitly aimed at sharing objective knowledge as widely as possible and with as little organising authority as was feasible. While our 21st century familiarity with reference works may leave us unsurprised by the alphabetical arrangement of the *Encyclopédie* entries, to the contemporary reader it represented a radical levelling of the established epistemological playing fields by juxtaposing entries on, say, “bug” and “bishop”. Admittedly, the editorial policy of the new ESAACH wiki places various gatekeeping and limiting barriers in the way of infinitely wide participation, but it still challenges the conceptually imperialistic notion of “encyclopaedic” by inviting virtually infinite inclusivity – a chaotic aggregate of all information in which no meta level (or canon) may be arbitrarily imposed or remain unchallenged. As Borges has observed: “Obviously there is no classification of the universe that is not arbitrary and conjectural.” (Borges, 1964: 104).

Another of Deleuze and Guattari’s notions is helpful here: that of “smooth” and “striated” cultural spaces. They describe “striated space” as rational and rule-orientated and dominated by hierarchical structures. Smooth space, by contrast, is one in which “the points are subordinated to the trajectory” (Deleuze and Guattari in Moulthrop, 1994: 303). The open-ended ESAACH wiki can thus be seen as “smooth space” because it is designed to be dynamic, alive with possibility, and promote discursive creativity. As in Kgositsile’s poem “Origins”, memory can indeed “beckon from the future”.

From database to wiki

Fundamental to the web component of the ESAACH project is its evolution as a child of hypermedia. The Verbal Arts segment of the ESAACH wiki is built on the foundation of the SALIT Web, a project conceived in 1995 – heady days when the Internet was firing up – somewhere on that steep incline of the curve between the four net hosts of 1969 and the 60 million of 1999 (BBC, 1999). (By 2009 this figure had reached over 560 million – Photius,

2009). The SALIT Web project had a simple but ambitious set of goals: to collect and integrate information on South African literature in all its languages in one place, add the full texts of as many previously marginalised and suppressed books as possible, then make these more accessible by using the medium of the computer. The advent of free Internet browsers, easy navigation and the open-source coding of HTML made hypertext the inevitable choice for disseminating the material to as wide a readership as possible.

The mid-nineties promise of hypertext then, opened up an intriguing new environment for literature and for learning. As developers, we pondered the extent to which hypertext might be classed as a medium, like film or television. Unlike these older media, and unlike the printed book, hypertext is almost transparent, neither image nor word, but more of a dynamic mechanism that gives access to either or both. In contrast to established media, “technologies like hypertext are difficult, discontinuous, and inherently unsettling, less committed to sovereignty than discursive unfolding” (Moulthrop, 1997. 670). Vannevar Bush’s vision in the 1940s of the Memex (Bush, 1945) accurately forecast the now familiar hypermedia environment of the Internet. In particular Bush’s notion of the “associative trail”, foresaw the power of networked knowledge management as exhibited in wiki technology.

Two unrelated circumstances influenced the selection of a wiki as the online basis for the ESAACH project. Firstly, the social networking and collaborative writing features of the wiki signalled the possible resuscitation of the South African Literary Database - SALIT Web (Stewart and van Wyk, 2000) as an interactive online resource. Secondly, and most significantly, however, the opportunity arose to integrate the database into the newly established ESAACH project led by Mbulelo Mzamane. Online accessibility is a central principle of the ESAACH project.

The previous (SALIT Web) database project was conceived in the mid-1990s as a set of research tools that would resist the legacy of apartheid and begin to address the absence of a unifying narrative of South African literary and cultural output. Accounts of South African literary history were firmly polarised into racial and language groupings, and were similarly divided into separate university departments. The SALIT Web database was founded on two equally important premises: that an electronic repository of literary data – a hypertext web of bibliographic entries, full-text articles and audio visuals - was the most suitable medium for the creation of an encyclopaedia in the late twentieth century; and that a new South African encyclopaedia of literature had to be inclusive and comprehensive, assuming a structure that deliberately subverted the racial divisions that had hitherto bedevilled local studies. It also had a reclamation role – actively seeking and re-publishing the banned, the marginalised and the ignored.

Even with its beta status and with no attempt to alert potential users to its existence, the ESAACH wiki has already started to attract users. Between January and October 2009, the website had over 9000 visits, primarily from South African users, but with a significant number from Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States. McNulty (2009) reported that amongst the search terms that had led visitors to the site were “South African culture”, “heritage for nation building”, “isiswati”, “1920s Afrikaans culture”, “19th century South African literature”, and “black protest 1910 – 1948”.

The ESAACH wiki is designed so that submissions are subject to moderation by a panel of editors responsible for the four major sub-divisions, and then within themes and specific authors and works within the themes. While it is acknowledged that the wiki will always be

in a fluid state of construction, with possible disputes about the reliability and authority of some entries, the editors have adopted Snyder's (2007:6) criteria for measuring reliability:

Accuracy of information provided within articles

Comprehensiveness, scope and coverage within articles and in the range of articles

Susceptibility to, and exclusion and removal of, false information

Susceptibility to editorial and systemic bias

Identification of reputable third-party sources as citations

Collective intelligence and the wiki

So what are the features of wiki software that make it so attractive to a project such as ESAACH?

Firstly, it is simple to create new pages and has a very intuitive editing environment. It allows authors with limited online experience to create content. Links can be created to other entries in the database or indeed to external websites providing further entry and exit points to subjects of interest. Also, it allows anyone to edit or add to an already established entry. The wiki requires no additional software from the user, only an Internet connection and a browser, freely available from most local libraries in South Africa. It also allows a number of people to work on a single entry and, crucially, keeps a history of all changes made to that entry.

The ESAACH wiki can display images, audio and video alongside text allowing the presentation of a number of different artworks, such as music, animation or photography.

The software provides an excellent set of management tools. There is a built-in user management system which allows the creation of user accounts with differing access levels and privileges so, for example, the panel of editors responsible for the four major sub-divisions can have more control over the content in their sections than a member of the public who is only editing a single entry, while spammers can be blocked completely from using the ESAACH wiki.

The ESAACH wiki also keeps a track of all activity in the database, including the creation of new entries and any changes to existing entries. Importantly, it also allows you to roll back to a previous version of an entry or compare the difference between two versions. What this means on a practical level is that all changes are saved and can be reviewed at any time, and if necessary, reverted to an earlier version of the entry.

Lastly, and this is vital in a multilingual society such as South Africa, the software allows entries to be published in many languages and allows the user interface to be set to a number of different languages, including isiZulu and Afrikaans. This means there are no language restrictions to participation and entries in previously marginalised languages are encouraged. An example of the success of this approach is in the large number of searches for information on literature in African languages. Search terms such as “xhosa drama”, “setswana poems” and “zulu literature” regularly send visitors to the ESAACH website.

The benefit of writing an encyclopaedia in this way is that the editors can tap into the collective intelligence of the country. For example, someone may have a personal interest in the writer Bessie Head and might have information that would not be freely available in academic circles. This information could be added to Bessie Head’s entry through the wiki and later substantiated by a researcher or ESAACH project member.

The Bessie Head entry is, in fact, a good one to look at in terms of what I have discussed above. The entry originally came from a KZN Literary Tourism author profile and, if we look at the page’s history section, has since been edited seventeen times by four different users. It now includes images, of the author and her work, as well as extracts, links to other sites with further information, a short bibliography and learning materials for download. Any

relevant audio or video clips that are submitted to ESAACH could also be added to this page.

Being open to a large contributor base and drawing on a number of editors from diverse backgrounds allow projects like this to significantly reduce regional and cultural influence found in many other publications, and makes it very difficult for any group to censor or impose bias. If we look at the Google Analytics map, we can see that ESAACH attracts visitors from across South Africa, from the major metropolitan areas to small towns and rural villages. Each of these visitors will have their own idea of what South African culture is and which writers and artists to feature in the encyclopaedia. Getting this input is vital to ESAACH's success. A large, diverse editor base also provides access and breadth on subject matter that is otherwise inaccessible or little documented.

We are also using the website to generate discussion and comment on individual entries, and the collection process as a whole. An important aspect to a project like this, which aims to create an authoritative reference, is to get comment from as many different stakeholders as possible. The wiki facilitates this through the discussion section of each entry's page. Here users can query changes made to a particular entry or the validity of information given as fact. The ESAACH section editor can keep track of these discussions and use them to formulate the most correct version of an entry.

While the published volumes will constitute complete editions in themselves, the wiki database will continue to grow and adapt to the changing cultural landscape of South Africa, and potentially could feed into the creation of a more vibrant creative industry in this country.

The Read-Write Society

Notably, wikis are also products of the open-source software movement, built and maintained by a network of volunteer programmers and made freely available to the general public with relaxed or non-existent copyright restrictions. Other examples of widely used open-source applications are the blogging platform WordPress and the operating system Linux. By using open-source software ESAACH aligns itself with a movement that shares similar ideals to those they hope to foster through the project. Ideally, ESAACH would also want a group of volunteers – working independently but also collaborating on certain entries – submitting content through the ESAACH wiki. ESAACH would also want the information collected to be as widely available for use as possible.

Along the same line as volunteer contributions would be the sharing of data between cultural organisations. Since its inception, ESAACH has relied on donations of content from other projects, most significantly the SALIT Web database but also KZN Literary Tourism's author profiles. Both these resources were available digitally, allowing a relatively seamless importation of the data into the wiki. Other South African cultural and heritage resources are also currently available online – many hosted in universities across Europe and America – which, if permission is obtained, could be incorporated into the ESAACH wiki. The South African Rock Art Digital Archive (SARADA) is one such project. The Rock Art Research Institute has a substantial collection of historical documents, photographs, re-drawings and slides in addition to its large working collection of slides, tracings and re-drawings. In the past few years, these have been digitised by SARADA, along with images from collections from across Southern Africa, with the archive now containing 9685 digital images of South African rock art. These images would form a valuable component of an encyclopaedia on

Arts, Culture and Heritage in South Africa and would complement the extensive entries on Khoisan Oral Literature already part of the encyclopaedia. For example, images could be selected to illustrate a certain story or a linked gallery could be created which would give users a broader understanding of the Khoisan people's creative legacy.

However, this sharing of resources – particularly in an online environment – raises the thorny issue of copyright. One way to combat this is to use the increasingly popular Creative Commons license. Creative Commons is a nonprofit organisation whose aim is to facilitate the sharing of creative work online. They provide free licenses to mark creative work according to the wishes of the creator, so others can share it, remix it, use it commercially, or any combination thereof.

The South African chapter of Creative Commons takes it further, linking the idea of free use of cultural content to the philosophy of ubuntu:

Although new to the western world, the idea that collective knowledge should form the starting point of a fluid, continuously-evolving creation process is not new to South Africans.

Living by the philosophy of “ubuntu”, South Africans have always created in collaborative groups. “Ubuntu” is most effectively encapsulated in the phrase: “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu”, which can be roughly translated as: “a person is a person through other people” or “I am what I am because of you”. This philosophy engenders itself in song, dance and music, where all individuals in the community participate in the creation process.

The philosophy of Ubuntu is perfectly linked to the philosophies of open source and open content development – embracing a process where creation is acknowledged as evolving out of the community, and recognising that at least some of the value coming out of that creation process needs to be given back to the community in order to strengthen future contributions. (Creativecommons.org.za, 2009)

These licences are being used on websites across the world including Wikipedia, Flickr, Al Jazeera, Whitehouse.gov and MIT OpenCourseWare amongst others, and to a lesser extent, in South Africa.

The most lenient license that Creative Commons offers, but possibly the most interesting for cultural practitioners, is that of Attribution. This license lets others distribute, remix and build upon an artist's work as long as due credit is given for the original creation. A key word in this statement for me is “remix”, a concept that Lawrence Lessig, founding board member of Creative Commons and Stanford law professor, has used as subject for his book *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (Lessig, 2008).

As Lessig sees it, if intellectual-property law is left as it is an entire generation will be criminalised. The concept of copyright itself is outdated in today's digital world while the ways in which young people break copyright laws, by sharing, editing and re-using data, helps them to become the sort of people society wants them to be – creative, collaborative and independent.

Lessig further defines a difference between Read-Only and Read-Write cultures. Read Only culture is the current standard in today's world whereby creative works can only be used in specific ways as defined by copyright law and enforced by government treaties, i.e. it can be read, viewed or watched. Read-Write culture is, however, a participatory medium where users can change, improve and distribute creative works, which could be derivatives or remixed versions of existing work. This, he argues, has been around for as long as humans have communicated with each other and connects back to Creative Commons South Africa's link to the philosophy of Ubuntu and collaborative creation. Culture, Lessig argues, develops and grows when we build on the creativity of our ancestors.

This free culture movement, of which Lessig is a major proponent, promotes the freedom to distribute and modify creative works by using the Internet, with its ultimate aim, as defined in its unofficial manifesto, "to build a bottom-up, participatory structure to society and culture, rather than a top-down, closed, proprietary structure" (Freeculture.org, 2010).

What does this then mean for the cultural industries in South Africa and the possible direction in which ESAACH could evolve? Under this model, works of art are no longer mere reference materials but the building block of new artworks. ESAACH then becomes an encyclopaedia, a gallery and publishing platform in one, with new work uploaded and added to the ESAACH wiki, referenced back to the work that inspired it, and sitting alongside "reclaimed" artworks, all forming part of an inclusive cultural record of South Africa. A resource such as this, offering the opportunity for the creation of new and remixed artwork, could potentially stimulate and energise the cultural industries in South Africa for generations to come.

Conclusion: "Under Africa's Moon"

The ESAACH project has been described as "reclamation scholarship" (Pallo Jordan, 2009) encouraging a new mix of culture, languages, history and heritage by re-connecting South Africans with previously banned, ignored or marginalised creative work. By opening up a new discursive space, protected from the imposition of grand narratives of the past, and with the promise of inclusiveness and free expression, the ESAACH wiki aspires to provide a rich base for research and a shared sense of cultural identity.

Although this paper foregrounds the Verbal Arts wiki, the project represents only a sliver of a much more ambitious attempt to revitalise studies across the full spectrum of Southern African culture, languages, literature, music, performance and the visual arts. The ESAACH project as a whole aspires to the ideals of the historic Asmara Declaration (2000) which although it addressed itself specifically to literature, may be extended to include all creative output. Amongst the Asmara statements are: "African languages are essential for the decolonization of African minds and for the African Renaissance" and "Promoting research on African languages is vital for their development, while the advancement of African research and documentation will be best served by the use of African languages." To this end, the wiki's unparalleled coverage of South African authors across all languages creates an invaluable foundation on which to build such research. In common with another local initiative promoting Asmara-like ideals - the re-printing of South African classics - the word "writers" in the following statement of intent may be replaced *mutatis mutandis* with "artists" or "musicians". The re-printing project aims to:

Instil love and respect for South African writers and their works; expose learners, the youth and aspirant writers to the richness of South African literary heritage. (Mzamane, 2009).

In this paper, we have invoked Kgositsile's verse not only to find an imaginative correlative for the wiki space, but also to invoke his numinous sense of the participants in this new social network (ideally all of us) and our relationship within a shared cultural landscape. "You and I a tribe of colours" are invited to share "this song that dance".

Lines by another South African poet evoke a similar imaginative landscape:

Under Africa's moon there dreams a strand
older than old the ancient poets keep.
We both walk it under Africa's sun.
There a glad profusion of brow and hand
- struck from one Mind - strikes deeper than the one
hundred or so microns which spell skin-deep;
where we could wake those old ones from their sleep
with such poems we have not yet begun
to sing: the love which Africa has fanned,
to hymn the earth perhaps, something as grand.

(Douglas Livingstone, "The Waste Land at Station 14")

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