

Archiving an Icon: GALA's Simon Nkoli Collection

Introduction

Good morning my name is Linda Chernis and I am the archivist at Gay & Lesbian Memory in Action, known as GALA. We are currently the only LGBTI archive in Africa. GALA was started by Graeme Reid in 1997 as part of the South African History Archives, then based at Wits Historical Papers, and although we are still based on campus, we now function as an independent non-profit organisation. GALA celebrates its 20th anniversary next year.

Today I just want to share some thoughts, ideas and musings about GALA and how our collections are used, using the lens of our most accessed collection, that of activist Simon Nkoli.

When writers and researchers include a paragraph, page or chapter on South Africa's LGBTI history, it is usually the Simon Nkoli story that is told.

The Simon Nkoli Collection has become GALA's default 'flagship collection' and it seems that this can raise some interesting questions. I thought it would be useful to try and understand *why* this collection holds such interest, and what we can learn from this, and also to ask whether there are any problems associated with a single collection receiving such intensive attention, in contributing to a single (and possibly over-used) narrative to tell the story of a marginalised group.

About 20% of the archival researchers to GALA in 2015 used the Simon Nkoli collection. And all three long-term researchers came to South Africa **specifically** to look at the Nkoli collection. Two of these were Fulbright scholars and the third researcher, Z'etoile Imma, is writing a book looking at the increasingly iconic status of Nkoli, titled: *"Our Queer Mandela: Simon Nkoli, the Archive, and the Uses of an African Queer Icon"*.

But who was Simon Nkoli? I'm just going to give you a brief overview.

Simon Tseko Nkoli was born in Soweto in 1957 and later moved to the township of Sebokeng south of Johannesburg where he became involved in youth politics, becoming active in the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) and the United Democratic Front (UDF) in the fight against apartheid. At the same time, Nkoli was a member of the mostly white Gay Association of South Africa (GASA) and in 1983 he formed the Saturday Group, a sub-group of GASA aimed mostly at its few black members.

In 1984 Nkoli, along with twenty-one other political leaders, was charged and tried for treason against the apartheid state in what became known as the prolonged Delmas Treason Trial. Although openly gay at the time of his arrest, his sexuality was not necessarily known to all of his fellow accused. Nkoli's openness about his sexuality, and the international attention and support he received, created some opposition amongst his fellow trialists, and ultimately put pressure on the African National Congress (ANC) to put sexual rights on their agenda, and later included in South Africa's new constitution.

Nkoli's imprisonment also had a direct influence on South Africa's white dominated gay rights movement. GASA, claiming to be apolitical, refused to support Nkoli during his trial and imprisonment. This led to GASA's expulsion from the International Lesbian & Gay Association (ILGA), isolating them even further from the international gay and lesbian struggle.

It was, in fact, the international community who rallied in support of Nkoli, attracting media attention and a letter writing campaign. These letters, along with those to and from his then lover, Roy Shepherd, form a large part of Nkoli's archive collection at GALA.

Following his acquittal and release from prison in 1988, Nkoli founded the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand, known as GLOW. GLOW organised South Africa's first pride march in 1990 in Johannesburg. And as part of the National Coalition for Gay & Lesbian Equality (NCGLE) Nkoli helped in the campaign to retain the sexual equality clause in South Africa's new constitution.

Nkoli also helped establish Soweto's Township AIDS Project in 1990, and after becoming one of the first publicly HIV-positive African gay men, he initiated the Positive African Men group based in central Johannesburg. He died in Johannesburg in November 1998 of AIDS-related causes.

Why such an interest?

Reasons why the collection is so popular are fairly plain. Nkoli was a charismatic figure, an anti-apartheid activist as well as a gay-rights and AIDS activist. And he died young – in the hey-day of post-apartheid South African transformation, activism and international good-will. And as the above brief narrative only skims, he played an incredibly important role in the fight for gay and political rights in the 1980s and 1990s.

In the words of his Delmas Trial lawyer (now a judge) Caroline Heaton Nicolls: "My view is that Si did more for gay rights in South Africa than any other individual. He made the struggle for gay people part of the broader struggle in South Africa, and I think only he could have done that."

With an archive such as GALA's, with a history such as South Africa's, much of the archival record is dominated by white, gay males. Although this is probably true of other queer archives and history, in South Africa this bias is much more evident and demographically problematic. Early queer rights groups were mostly white, and better documented for obvious social, political and economic reasons. To combat this imbalance, GALA has actively sought out the stories of black activists, as well as the everyday lives and experiences of queer black South Africans, mostly through a number of oral history projects.

Simon Nkoli and GLOW are among the exception. Nkoli's is one of the few personal collections in the archive representing a black, gay activist. He is the exception in that we have a 'traditional' archival record for researchers to access, appealing to academic researchers and theorists (mostly from abroad).

It is for all these reasons, among others, that researchers and historians zero in on his remarkable story.

But is there a downside to the attention received by the Nkoli collection?

Nkoli's role and story is frequently the one that dominates in the telling of South Africa's history of LGBTI rights. With no wish to diminish Nkoli's remarkable life and influence, his story is perhaps sometimes told at the expense of others. For example, it was Alfred Machela who started the first independent black, gay group in Johannesburg in 1987, known as the Rand Gay Organisation (RGO), a first that is often attributed to Nkoli and GLOW. Although the RGO was short lived it laid important groundwork for the formation of GLOW. Furthermore, black lesbian activists such as Beverley Ditsie

and Phumi Mtetwa worked alongside Nkoli in pushing gay and lesbian issues to the forefront of a South Africa in transition and retaining the sexual equality clause in our new constitution, yet their roles are rarely focused on. This points to a more widespread concern that lesbian activism receives little attention in South Africa, and when researchers do look into lesbian related topics at GALA their focus is often on hate crimes and violence, and not the roles of female struggle leaders.

However, this is not the platform to try and give a complete picture of the history of that time period and its key players, but the suggested point is that Nkoli's role perhaps dominates at the expense of others. And I thought it was perhaps something worth noting – that there are large amounts of archival records and collections at GALA that are not being accessed, or accessed only through the very narrow lens of searching for links to Nkoli.

There are also positive consequences to the attention received by the Nkoli collection

The amount of attention being received by Nkoli brings researchers to GALA, and this increases GALA's visibility in the academic and research sector internationally. And it is hoped that these, mostly foreign, researchers will take their research home with them and perhaps include South African LGBTI history in their teaching programs. This is something I am attempting to find out and better track in the future.

It also brings access to collections associated with Nkoli, such as those of Beverley Ditsie, GLOW and GASA.

From a local perspective, the interest in Nkoli helps to ensure that LGBTI history is sometimes included in the greater political history of South Africa, mostly thanks to his dual roles as both LGBTI and political activist.

Long term researchers using the collection also add to it in a significant way. As mentioned previously, one is currently working on her book about Nkoli, *Our Queer Mandela*, and our most recent Fulbright Researcher conducted a series of interviews with some of Nkoli's fellow trialists and legal team, which she has donated to the archive, giving a much clearer picture of Nkoli in the 1980s.

So what does all this interest tell us?

If we use the Nkoli collection as a lens into the archive, what does it tell us?

- For starters there is little interest in queer history prior to the 1980s
- Secondly, the roles of female activists are not often looked at
- Thirdly, almost half of those that access the GALA archives are foreign academics, mostly young
- It also seems that people like to have an iconic figure, to borrow Imma's title, *A Queer Mandela*
- And, tying in the LGBTI struggle in South Africa with the anti-apartheid fight is of particular interest, particularly for international researchers.
- Researching LGBTI in terms of race is important to researchers - queer history in South Africa is still highly racialized and gendered
- And lastly, there is a lot of material in the archive not being accessed

Some concluding thoughts

Simon Nkoli played a tremendously important role in various struggles in South Africa. One of the reasons his story and image are so often used, why his life continues to be researched, written about and remembered, is that he DID play such a major role and cut across so many different spaces and causes. Though it is hoped that in the future researchers may look beneath this deserving poster child of the LGBTI rights campaign in South Africa, to the rich depth of activists and organizations that make up GALA's almost 200 collections.

It is also clear that GALA needs to do more work to showcase and highlight the diverse and large amount of material we have available.

Thank you.

Paper given at the LGBTQ Archives, Libraries, Museums and Special Collections (ALMS) conference which took place from 21-24 June 2016 in London, UK.