

Post-Independence Archives in Africa : A Summary

The task entrusted to me – to prepare a summary concluding note, after three days of intense exchanges on post-Independence archives in Africa – is both a great honour and a heavy responsibility. So I would like to thank the organisers of this seminar for the confidence they placed in me.

I would like to insist on the proliferation of examples provided here, which are characterised by a diversity of scales (national examples, bi-national comparisons, and transnational experiences with archives) but also a diversity of perspectives (case studies presented by researchers, archival holdings presented by specialists in the design or management of archives). One of the interests of this seminar was to make it possible to compare several different approaches and to establish communication between archives' managers and users, professionals working in the archives and research fields. Meaning, between people who do not hold the same position in the "archives chain" which goes from the production to the use of a document through multiple stages that have been described here (preservation, cataloguing, digitisation...).

Personally, I will express just one (let me specify minor), regret: no specific paper was presented on oral sources, while we would have expected many contributions on their collection and on the establishment of archives based on these sources. The researchers who use the collections of oral sources in Africa contribute to the production of documents (audio and/or written, when there is transcription), which are themselves liable to become archives if they are subsequently entrusted to a centre in order to be used by others. How these documents are developed, stored and processed? This question was dealt with in one or two contributions, but was not the subject of specific papers, and I must confess I was a bit disappointed on this.

However, the grounds for satisfaction outweigh – and by far – this regret, as the seminar effectively made it possible to deepen the reflection on the status of archives.

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I will first ponder over the status – and even the nature – of archives. Let us briefly recall the polysemy of the word which, in French at least, refers both to the services and the places devoted to their preservation.

Concerning post-independence Africa, it is salutary, even essential, to depart from the exclusive and reducing notion of archives as production of state power, intended for its own reproduction. Because this meaning suggests that the sole archives are national archives; however, in the post-independence African states, there are complex relations between postcolonial states and production or preservation of archives. Many papers thus evoked public indifference towards the storage of documents, as well as the frequent will of the state to destroy certain records.

It is therefore necessary to broaden the notion of archive, and the specialists of African history know it well: often faced with a more or less organised lack of public archives, we are compelled to invent new sources, to diversify our research places and methods. However, it seems to me counterproductive to use a very broad definition of the notion of archives. During those three days, the word was used with great flexibility, often as a casual synonymous with documents, sources, materials, traces, photographs, images, artefacts, monuments, work of art, places of memory, an expression of power and even of body language... This loose sense, however, risks a lot of ambiguity and misinterpretation. Indeed, that each of these terms has to do with the notion of archive seems to me quite doubtless; however, that everything can be considered as archive seems doubtful. I am working (among others) on the history of midwives in Ghana, and when I find, in a midwife's bag that has remained unopened for 50 years a pharmacy note

dating from 1946, my heart beats: I am in front of a treasure. For all that, am I in the presence of an archive? I am not convinced, because this isolated document, which survived relocations and other vagaries of personal or national history, was not preserved voluntarily but fortuitously. However, as I will expand on this later, the archive is established as such, while the document can be fortuitous.

Of course, for social scientists (historians but also art historians, sociologists, political scientists, demographers, town planners, anthropologists...), all is *material*, as social science research can feed on any substance. But it is not automatic that any material *can* become an archive. If I may be allowed this wink to a famous phrase,¹ I would say '*on ne naît pas archive: on le devient*', meaning that archives are not born such, but rather can become archives – sometimes. Hence the absolute need to clarify, to reflect both on our relations with the archive and what we mean by this word. For three days, we "juggled" various more or less broad meanings of the archives. Did we make progress in our definition of an archive? Collectively, this is not certain. But each of the contributions provided food for thought to each and every one of us on what he/she meant precisely by that – and if the seminar only served that purpose, it would already be a lot. This should be understood less as criticism – because once again, a broad definition is stimulating – than as a proposal of requirement for the intelligibility of what we talked about.

Second, I will consider the political dimension or rather dimensions of archives. Here, I take the political term in its broader meaning, i.e., the expression of power relations, but also in the dual English meaning of *politics* and *policy*.

Firstly, the links between archives and politics are readily apparent, as the call for papers reminded. Archives as state production (or production of governing bodies) are eminently political both in their nature and use: what is stored as well as what is destroyed obeys the *raison*

d'État and denotes the logic of power. Many interventions have thus insisted on the instrumentalisation of archives by the powers, whether for propaganda or to destroy them in order to reduce the expression of counter-powers. Others have addressed the use of documents of the past, or even, literally, archival documents, in a more or less openly militant meaning: by artists or curators, like the curator of the Slave House on Gorée Island, Joseph Ndiaye. Similarly, we could see that the failed states and their inability (or indifference) regarding the production of archives could paradoxically turn out to be a blessing, in allowing (under certain conditions) access to alternative archives that give *another* idea of the state... Besides, we can assume that power and counter-power are not necessarily diametrically opposed, as confirmed by the fate of the Slave House whose militant dimension eventually becomes the official history, with figures that are indeed fanciful, but nowadays resumed, stamped, in sum officialised by UNESCO.

Secondly, more related to economic realities (which are themselves political realities), to North-South imbalances, to power relations between *the West and the Rest*, a number of papers dealt with the challenges of preservation, promotion or digitisation. Several participants presented, pictures to prove it, telling examples of challenges which are not necessarily peculiar to Africa, but are widespread on the continent. Some presentations considered digitisation as the solution to all problems was rather a technicist illusion, as technology progresses faster than our capacity to anticipate it, thus creating difficulties not only upstream (financing, machinery, personnel...) but also downstream. Finally, the examples showing that archivists also implement or follow specific policies for the creation or management of their collections were many. Thus, there are no archives without politics.

Thirdly and lastly, we had a lot of exchanges on the issue of the use or usage of archives, their users, their purposes, their methods... and of course, on the political dimension of these usages. Although there were many historians attending the seminar, I would like to note that they do not have the monopoly of their use: we know that artists, researchers of other disciplines, but also citizens in search of proofs, for

example for a judicial procedure, are also interested parties.

Regarding the political dimensions of the usage of archives, I would like to come back to the compared destinies of two museums in Gorée: the Slave House (*Maison des Esclaves*) and the Museum for Women (*Musée de la Femme*). In effect, these two museums, exactly facing each other but having different degrees of success in terms of visitors, perfectly bear witness to the political nature of the usage of a "built heritage" (indeed, a museum is not, strictly speaking, an archive). The anticipated disappearance of the Museum for Women cannot be understood as happening by accident, but rather, as the result of political dynamics: all pupils in Dakar make a visit or several visits in their lifetime to the Slave House; not the Museum for Women... (this is also true for tourists). African women and slaves: two subordinate categories, obviously. But clearly, some subordinates are "trendier" than others, as a consequence of political dynamics which make the market of the history of slavery more promising than that of the history of African women – and this regardless of their respective degree of staging, instrumentalisation and fetishization.

To conclude, I would like to say a few words on the impact of archives on our own research, on how the archives we use shape – sometimes insidiously – our questioning. The criticism of colonial archives, as well as the "colonial library", is not anymore to do. However, I would like to share one of my experiences and the lessons I drew from it. I have been working for long on motherhood in the colonial period in Ghana, and I have studied the archives of the colonial medical administration. In these documents, they only deal with the issue of replacing the harmful methods of African birth attendants with the modern and safe methods of European doctors. However, at some point, I realised that imperceptibly, I had (at least partly) embraced the ideological bias of these sources. Of course, I was concerned to complement or rather, to compare them with interviews and so, I had conducted thirty interviews with Ghanaian midwives trained during the colonial period, as well as twenty interviews with women whose children were born during the same period. Among the latter, I interviewed a

woman who, having many children, had given birth successively at home, in hospital and in a midwife's private clinic. Enthusiastic about this providential encounter, and convinced that I had the ideal witness who would give me information on her different experiences, I wanted to hear what she would say about the delivery position, the instruments, objects, people... However, I was quite surprised when she said basically: there was no difference. Somewhat destabilised, I reformulated my questions to make them clear: the position was the same, your family circle's behaviour was the same, their actions were the same? She said no, of course, all that was different; but in each case, mother and baby had survived – and that was the essential element. I understood then how deeply I was influenced by the thinking that shaped the documents to which I had access: like colonial doctors, I was obsessed by change, when my interlocutor could only see similarities; because I was thinking in terms of modalities, while she was reasoning in terms of results.

Thus, the need imposed on me, in our post-independence era, to decolonise the spirits, including mine – something I thought was already granted... But the archives have sometimes an unexpected power which, while contributing to the "*goût de l'archive*",² should encourage us to constant and careful detachment.

To conclude, I think that as far as archives are concerned, it is not improper to say that they are all about politics: from their making to their utilisation, through their conservation and promotion. This is probably what distinguishes archives from simple documents. But also what makes them interesting... and determines their limits?

Notes

1. Translator's note: Reference to the best-known sentence of Simone de Beauvoir in *Le Deuxième Sexe* (The Second Sex): *On ne naît pas femme: on le devient*—translated as "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman".
2. Translator's note: See *Le goût de l'archive*, a short book by Arlette Farge, a specialist of 18th century French social History. The book is a wonderful methodology lesson on how to treat archives.