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Whose Archives? Conservation and Creation of Africanist Archives in the Post-colonial Era

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Abstract

This paper discusses the search for hidden post-colonial archives on Africanist research and ways of making these available to scholars and the general public. These are diverse sets of archives: the personal archives of the scholar that are often hidden in 'trunks' at home, and the institutional archives in libraries in Africa. Modern technologies have also increased the archiving problem by adding hidden digitalized archives, namely the electronic archives on African websites and other electronic storage systems. And finally there are the digital archives of scholars to add to the list too. How can these archives be saved and made accessible to the wider scholarly community? Archiving should be a concern of both librarians and researchers/scholars who are faced with increased data-gathering possibilities and the need to store them electronically. How can we ensure that data is and will remain available in an open way? The practice of archiving will be explored in this paper, using the African Studies Centre in Leiden as an example. It is calling for collaboration between librarians and researchers to create 'living' archives of scholarly research and also of digital material that are 'open access'.

Introduction

An important body of knowledge about Africa is hidden away in the personal archives of scholars. Only a few of these archives ever become a public archive (open access), often after the death of its celebrated creator. These 'trunk archives' offer valuable information, usually in condensed form, of a person's lifetime research in a few places in post-colonial Africa. It is a serious loss for knowledge production if such archives, often those of less famous scholars, are shredded or remain in trunks in a family member's attic. However today's libraries have no space to store these archives and many are refused a place even before their content is appreciated. The African Studies Centre in Leiden has researchers who have built up their own archives of material from post-colonial Africa. But what has been done to ensure that future generations will be able to access and enjoy them?

These observations should sound alarm bells for today's scholars concerning the future of their own archives. Archiving research data has become easier with the advances in digital techniques, although this has also led to the untamed gathering of data, the piling up of photographs, e-documents and the ever-increasing voice and film records that are difficult to analyze. The other side of this digital story is however that we can store our data easily, though not always very safely. Libraries are increasingly using digitalization as a way of gaining space and storing more. The difference with former generations of researchers is also the fluidity of the data itself. Communication is now more often in cyberspace and letters and/or written diaries are

disappearing to be replaced with text messages, Facebook accounts and email exchanges. These can hardly end up in a 'trunk'. Libraries and researchers need new technological knowledge to be able to create archives and subsequently conserve them. A research programme into mobile telephony and society in Africa has been facing these so far unresolved challenges.

There are two other aspects of African archiving that need to be considered. The first is that of conservation and the digitalization of paper archives in Africa. Many of these have been neglected for years though they contain interesting information concerning the continent's history. There are a few initiatives that pay attention to these archives: in Africa itself but also at various institutes such as the ZAB (Basel), the IISG (Amsterdam) and the British Library in London.

Another challenge for scholars and librarians is the quantity of information that is available on websites in Africa and how it should be preserved. Some of this information can only be accessed for a short period before it vanishes into oblivion. African government publications used to appear in paper form but are now regularly published online only. Who will safeguard this material except for a scholar who will certainly save some of it in his/her trunk? Should African constitutional documents be printed, bound and shipped to libraries all over the world? If not, who will make sure that a certified copy is maintained for posterity on a secure server?

These questions become even more relevant when one considers today's debates about 'open access'. The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research announced in October 2011 that all research data from the projects NWO finances should be shared with NWO, which will make it available as part of its open-access policy. This announcement has generated positive and negative reactions from the research community regarding data preservation. What should one preserve? The raw data, the interviews, the excel sheets, the papers? One of the objections is an ethical dilemma. However the most prominent issue is whether the researcher is the 'owner' of his/her data. Now is the time to investigate the possibility of creating good archives while doing research. With today's technological advances in digital recording and filming, it is relatively easy to archive material. Should libraries store these life stories, films and videos? But as these are always linked to real people and persona, one should also question the ethical issues involved too.

Archiving personal and institutional archives of the pre-digital era

People can be seen as living archives with stories and narratives that are the living memory of past events. It is for this reason that in regions where 'traditional' archives are not present, as is the case in many areas in Africa, that the only facts we have are people's memories and life histories. The construction of history on the basis of memories encounters problems of subjectivity and the constructing of the past. Nevertheless, when transcribed, these stories form archives. How can we make these accessible for future researchers? And what experiences have we had? One of the obvious problems that we will encounter is that stories may be very personal or contain information that it would be better not to share in public, in some cases nit may even endanger the person who told the story and his/her family. These ethical problems are highlighted in more qualitative approaches within African Studies.

The African Studies Centre in Leiden may serve as an example. The Centre has been in existence since about 1950 as an independent research and documentation centre. Its researchers produce different research data but most of it records African history in the post-independence era. These are stored by researchers in their own ways – on maps, in diaries, in databases and in picture form – but they are often not well archived. The risk is that such personal archives will simply get lost. Researchers make their own decisions as to where their data will go, frequently with no interference from the Centre. This is, for instance, what happened to the archives of the Dutch researcher Robert Buijtenhuijs who did research in Chad for many years on the rebellions there and their actors and stored much of his data in hand-written form (he never learnt to use a computer and seldom used a typewriter) in a trunk: the trunk archive of the individual researcher. After his death no record of these trunks could be found and there was no record of where they might have gone. He had decided himself where the valuable data he gathered over a period of three decades would go.

Another example is the archive of Gerti Hesselting, another Dutch researcher. She was someone who organized her data very carefully and methodically. Her boxes of data are now piled up in one of the offices at the Leiden institute where she worked. Eight document files were accepted by the library of the African Studies Centre in Leiden but it politely declined to take the remainder due to a lack of space. And her books were donated to an academic library in Senegal.

In the near future, private data archives and the personal archives of African scholars will probably be regarded as important sources of information about post-colonial Africa. These personal archives consist of layers: they are the personal observations of the researchers in his/her diaries, but they are also documents gathered in the field, for instance newspapers, that were rarely stored systematically in these African countries. Furthermore they often contain the personal archives of Africans who were part of the research project as informants. These are the hidden, non-digitalized archives in Africa: the diaries, the photo albums, the scattered photos and letters in the many houses of the African elite and the better educated. The loss of a scholar's archives may mean the loss of these personal archives as well. Of course these scholars will publish some parts of their data but many will often end up in the personal archives that are then destroyed or divided up between different people.

Possibilities for libraries

Part of the problem needs a technical solution. What can be done to preserve these archives? What alternatives can be used if space is lacking? And what about the confidentiality of these archives? Is it possible to digitize archives completely, and if not, which parts should be included? What about open access? And what about the ethical questions? Did the scholar who made his/her archive realize that this would be open to public scrutiny one day? How should any informants be protected?

These questions go beyond the scholar's archive and include a more general question of how far libraries can go with the digitalisation of (perishable) paper archives in Africa.

Africana archives at African Studies Centres

Several African Studies Centres have always stored archives. At **SOAS in London**, the archives of the London Missionary Society and other missionary archives have

found a home. SOAS is also home to other archives, such as colonial archives and scientific papers.

<http://www.soas.ac.uk/library/archives/collections/a-z/>

In the **Herskovits Library** at **Northwestern University** (US), the archives of several eminent scholars are housed in the Africana Archival Collections. The papers of Leo Kuper, Lorenzo D. Turner, Simon Ottenberg and Melville J. Herskovits (and others) have found a secure place in this wonderful library.

<http://www.library.northwestern.edu/libraries-collections/evanston-campus/africana-collection/collections/archival-collections>

Basel is the place to go if one is interested in the history of Namibia (Namibia Resource Centre at the **Basler Afrika Bibliographien**). There are also some very nice collections of Africana research in Basel: the scientific heritage of Hans W.

Debrunner, Ernst Damman, Christine Lienemann-Perrin and many others.

<http://www.baslerafrika.ch/d/28teil-29nachlaesse.php>

Archives have also been kept in **Dakar** since 1816. Since 1977 they have been housed officially in the **Archives Nationales du Sénégal** and, importantly, the Direction des Archives du Sénégal has published inventories of its collections.

<http://www.archivesdusenegal.gouv.sn/>

Of historical importance are the 28 inventories of the Mission Archives Series that have been published by **Leipzig University** and contain reports, personal files and photographs from the period from 1840 to 1970. http://www.uni-leipzig.de/~afrika/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=91&Itemid=1

Most of the Leipzig inventories are available in electronic form at http://www.uni-leipzig.de/~afrika/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=84&Itemid=78&lang=de

The **Royal Museum for Central Africa** in **Tervuren** holds over 350 archives of private individuals, among them those of Henry Morton Stanley and researcher Benoit Verhagen.

http://www.africamuseum.be/collections/archives/index_html?set_language=en&cl=en

In **Paris**, **La Laboratoire d'ethnologie et de sociologie comparative** (Université Paris X, Nanterre) has the interesting scientific collections of Eric Dampierre and many others researchers.

<http://www.mae.u-paris10.fr/dbtw-wpd/arch/ar.aspx?archive=lesc>

The **African Studies Centre** in **Leiden** makes its scientific output available via a repository in which 1500 publications by staff can be accessed. Leiden stores no personal paper archives of researchers but is planning a trial to archive 'raw' research data in an electronic archive, probably in cooperation with DANS (Data Archiving and Networked Services) in The Hague.

Researchers and students alike nowadays tend to prefer publications that are available online. Some of these electronic documents (government publications, reports from African institutes and NGOs) are available on the Internet but they have a habit of

disappearing after a limited period of time. For this reason, the ASC Library has decided to preserve electronic documents on a web server with a link to the original document, and to use the reserve copy when the original electronic document disappears. In this way, access is guaranteed and so is archival storage.

An interesting development on archives in Africa is being offered by the **International Institute of Social History (IISG) in Amsterdam**. By opening an office in Addis Ababa, IISG is planning to make digital copies of archives of social movements and political parties available in Africa. The paper copy in the archives will stay in Africa, while a digital copy will be on a web server both in Amsterdam and Africa, allowing the content to be available worldwide.

This list is incomplete. There are many other interesting Africana archives in the world that are hosting the personal archives of researchers. One of the best examples of an online presentation of a personal paper archive is probably the website dedicated to the archives of the archaeologist and historian of Africa, Raymond Mauny (1912-1994). His papers are preserved in the **Bibliothèque de Recherches Africaines in Paris** where there are 18 notebooks and manuscripts enhanced with photos, maps and sketches that he made between 1937 and 1960. They relate the day-to-day activities of various field missions conducted by the researcher at some of the major archaeological sites in West Africa. The optimization project conducted by the library aims to make all of Mauny's notebooks available online, accompanied by photographs, maps, tags and interesting links. <http://mauny.hypotheses.org/>

Archiving hidden digital archives: The 'living archive'

The digital era in which much documentation is being created in cyberspace poses new challenges for research. It not only multiplies the documents in archives as producing text has become so much easier but it also questions the researcher's own possibilities for creating an archive. In fact, we are observing a period that could be labelled that of the 'living archive', with the creation of archives in institutions as a continuous process, and the scholarly archive as part of research practice. What are the roles of scholars and librarians in the conservation and creation of the living archive?

'Living archives' as practice in on-going qualitative research

Experiences with the building of an archive for qualitative research have been little documented. This is a new practice copied from the examples of quantitative research. Debate surrounding the accessibility of such data started recently and has now become an issue of public debate in the Netherlands and elsewhere. However the related issues of ethics and ownership are not new. We need now to reconsider them in the digital era. In addition to these ethical questions, there is also a practical question: how should it be done? In today's research programmes where the practice is increasingly collaboration between researchers working in teams of professors, post-doc researchers and PhD and MA students, the archiving exercise becomes much more complicated than when an individual researcher could control his/her own data. The possibilities of accessing and storing data, as discussed above, complicate the practice of archiving even further. Increasingly, qualitative research also relates to complicated programs that process the data. These are the tools that allow researchers to store and organize qualitative data in a semi-quantitative way in the digital era.

On-going practice

Gathering recent historical data in a research programme at the African Studies Centre (ASC) on communication technology in Africa was a struggle. The ASC in Leiden embarked on a programme aimed at understanding the present-day changes in Africa related to the introduction of new ICTs in 2008. The research has developed around the desire to understand social and economic change in marginal regions where mobile telephony has been a recent phenomenon and case studies are being investigated in marginal areas in central Chad, Anglophone Cameroon, South Africa and southwestern Angola and north and central Mali. The ASC is in the middle of this project and is trying to figure out how to work in the new media environment that in this case is both part of its field research practice (cf. Pelckmans 2009) and the main topic of research. One of the conclusions is that this world of communication is very fluid and that the location of data is difficult to define. On the other hand, with the possibilities for collecting data through digital recordings, scanning and photography (of archives) and the large amount of data, it is vital to turn these into archives for the future.

New media as part of the research problem

‘New mobility patterns and dynamics of social interaction between migrants and their home communities result from the introduction of ICT, just as old logics are mobilised to shape the new ICTs.’ (Castells 1996/2000). Amongst ICT, the Internet and mobile phone have been the most striking in their global impact, and demonstrate the possibilities and limitations of marginal regions and social categories. In Africa, the mobile phone is not only complementary to the Internet. Its flexible mobility makes it especially well adapted to the connection of remote regions amongst themselves and with physically mobile ‘Others’ in the urban spaces of the same country or with distant places on the continent and globally. Its user-friendliness, even for the most illiterate in the most remote corners of Africa, makes the mobile phone the technology *par excellence* for monitoring the impact of ICTs socially in an African context. For this reason, the mobile phone forms an important entry point in this study. Recent technological innovation, however exciting, cannot be wholly understood in historical isolation. Hence our interest in the history of ICTs in Africa in general, and in the various countries and regions selected in particular.

The research questions that have been formulated are:

- ❖ How are new ICTs, notably the mobile phone, (re)shaping social and economic relations between people *in* and *from* the mobile margins?
- ❖ How are people in these margins interpreting and evaluating the impact of ICTs in view of the histories of centrality/marginality, contact/isolation and inclusion/exclusion?
- ❖ To what extent and with what outcomes are Africans in marginal communities and within marginal social categories socially shaping ICTs, the mobile phone in particular?
- ❖ What lessons can be drawn from the experiences of the mobile margins in and from Africa on the introduction and appropriation of ICTs towards informing scholarship and policy on development, poverty alleviation, citizenship and global relations?

As is often the case in research proposals, the methodological paragraph is obvious and the research very 'doable'.

'The methodology of a project on 'mobile margins' should be flexible revolving around strings of people and not necessarily geographical spaces. 'Marginal communities' and their worldwide diasporic connections will be part of the research. Mobility, or real and virtual presence and absence, must dictate research methods in which the very ICTs studied play a central role. Doing surveys, tracing people for interviewing (either face-to-face or via email and mobile phone) and studying documents in written, audio and electronic archives in various places (as opposed to being located in particular geographical spaces for fieldwork in the conventional sense) may not only lead to interesting new findings, but also provide new and potentially enriching methodological alleys to explore. While there is some information about the methodological implications of family histories (...), we look forward to combining these insights with current explorations in the field of migrant cultures and trans-national studies (...). We intend to draw on source material on how new ICTs such as the mobile phone and e-mail messaging may transgress the traditional divisions of oral sources and written documents, and suggest new methodologies for interpreting 'virtual' sources (...).'

In a final paragraph of the proposal, we 'promise' that, in order to make this project into a success for future research too, we will develop a project archive that could serve as an archive for the future. By this we mean that each of the researchers should make a selection of their interviews available for a future generation of researchers.

In this research, there are several problems regarding data gathering and archiving but there are also challenges with regard to new media and archiving as such. In fact what the programme does is 'thick description' as proposed by Geertz (cf. Benedikter & Giordano 2011).

In the research projects that form our programme, the solution for this has been the intensive engagement of the researchers with their informants and societies. The proposal was to travel with them, to understand their conversations and to see the in-between in practice.

Building the 'living archive'

The programme is challenged by its own topic of research that introduces the new techniques of communication/new media but at the same time makes it impossible to deny the existence of these new techniques for the dissemination of the research findings and for the storing of data as all the researchers have their own computers with many gigabytes of data.

To build the living archive, the first thing we did was set up a website where we are trying to keep a record of the research reports, films, pictures and events used. The other element is the closed chat box where exchanges between team members are a way of recording the on-going process of research. The most important aspect of this living archive is, however, the documentation of the data of the separate projects. Although it was the intention to turn this into a similar endeavour for each of the projects, it soon emerged that each researcher had their own way of gathering qualitative data. Most of the interviews are typed out and a lot of data have been

digitalized. The next step in the project is to make the ‘trunks’ and these have to remain closed as long as the PhD and post-doc students are publishing articles related to the work. The discussions surrounding ownership have been quite intense. In fact, it is only after the finalization of all the PhD work that the data can be accessible. Efforts to make an accessible archive with the consent of all the informants are as time-consuming as the writing of a PhD thesis itself. We hope to be able to give more insight into this process when we present our findings in relation to the living archive in Dakar in June.

Film as an exchange medium and as a ‘living archive’

Film has been deliberately included in the ASC’s project not only as a way to make a documentary/report to disseminate the research results but also as a means of documenting and archiving the research findings. Film and photography can be stored integrally as material to be explored by others. For this part of the project, we have been working with a professional film maker who has been able to follow the researchers in Cameroon. They have shared their experiences with him and given interviews that are now on record. Film material has been stored on hard disks and is available for future reference. It has also been used to make short documentaries to discuss developments observed by the researchers and a longer film that helps disseminate the results of the research.

The disadvantage of this type of ‘live archiving’ is that it is rather expensive and in this project we have chosen therefore only to film in Cameroon. Evaluation of this part of the project should show its relevance and, ultimately, its cost effectiveness. (cf. www.mobileafrica-revisited.wordpress.com).

Libraries in the digital era

Is there a new task ahead for libraries in the digital era? It would be good if libraries could start a systematic effort to store these private and research project archives. With the increased possibilities for digitalizing data, it should be possible to develop skills and space for this new challenge so that archives are not lost for future generations. These new possibilities demand new codes for academic trust and behaviour.

Conclusion: Whose archives? Technicalities, open access and ownership

This paper has emphasized the technical questions that we are facing as librarians and as scholars in the changing research practices in today’s digital era. It is clear that we are at a turning point. We have proposed the building of ‘living archives’ as a possible new direction in discussions about the post-colonial archives of Africa. This contribution aims only to raise the issues and to generate some initial discussion. This paper is seen as a first step towards a better conceptualization of our ideas and the opening up of a debate that we hope to pursue in Dakar in June.

Changing research practices, changing institutional practices. There are new ways for researchers to go and new archives are part of this picture. We are at a turning point but in the end everything that is conserved in whatever way will define the knowledge production of the future, and thus define power relations in the world. It is for this reason that the questions raised in this paper are important. The technical possibilities that are at our disposal today are creating opportunities to reformulate the knowledge landscape. Is the ‘living archive’ a good concept to elaborate on?

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