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DOI: https://doi.org/10.38140/sjch.v48i2.8129

ISSN 2415-0509 (Online)
Southern Journal for Contemporary History
2023 48(2):i-vi

PUBLISHED:
29 December 2023

EDITORIAL

The *Southern Journal for Contemporary History* (SJCH) prides itself in publishing historical papers grounded in primary research. While it appreciates different methodological approaches, our journal has a particular penchant for research that uses archival material. The SJCH is also committed to foregrounding African historical research created by African-based scholars. Nevertheless, we are aware of the challenges associated with conducting archival research on the continent and the obstacles African scholars face in publishing quality research on the history of contemporary Africa.

The emergence of African History as an academic sub-discipline from the 1950s onwards was accompanied by a need to assess the use of archival research in studying Africa's past. Subsequent methodological debates about the inherited colonial archives were dominated by the lack of African voices in the archival record and the purpose of the colonial administrations and institutions that had created and managed these collections. A different set of methodological concerns emerged regarding archival material produced during the post-colonial period, especially concerning archival management and access problems. As a result, Stephen Ellis predicted that, "it is unlikely that historians seeking to write the history of Africa since independence will enjoy the same quality of documents as their colleagues studying the colonial period".[1] Ellis consequently urged historians of contemporary Africa to explore alternative material outside of state archives.

1 S Ellis, "Writing histories of contemporary Africa", *The Journal of African History* 43 (1), 2002, p. 12.

There are several unique obstacles that historians of Africa must take into consideration when conducting archival research on the continent. Most important is having access to well-preserved archival sources. The level of access determines, "what kind of history can be written […] and who can write this history".[2] Many researchers across the globe face this challenge, but it is particularly acute for scholars of contemporary Africa. Articulating the impact of the loss of archives in Zambia through the destruction and disappearance of records, Duncan Money and Miyanda Simabwachi explain that, "the historical records that remain best preserved are those of the institutions with sufficient resources and self-interest to accumulate and preserve documents, which in Zambia is the mining industry".[3] As a result, the dominant historiography that emerged in Zambia has been notably influenced by the availability and health of its archival collections.

Another dimension of accessing archival materials is the geographical location of archival material. Tycho van der Hoog highlighted how a significant chunk of Namibia's colonial and anti-colonial archive is housed outside the country, from South Africa to Europe and North America.[4] Namibian-based scholars, therefore, only have direct access to a limited amount of their historical archival records. This challenge is not peculiar to Namibian historians; it represents the experience of many African scholars based on the continent. In the lead-up to Kenya's independence, the British colonial government secretly and illegally removed thousands of archival documents, including most relating to the Mau Mau rebellion, as part of its wider "Operation Legacy". Countless files were destroyed, and many were clandestinely housed in the United Kingdom. In 2011, the British National Archives was forced to make these records available.[5] While currently in the public domain, these documents —essential to Kenyans' freely researching their colonial history— remain stored in London and not Nairobi.

These geographical obstacles expose the structural inequality inherent between scholars from Africa and those from the Global North. The latter usually have access to more significant research funding and possess more

2 D Money and M Simabwachi, "Archive history in Zambia as a history of loss", *Social Dynamics*, published on-line on 26 February 2024, DOI: 10.1080/02533952.2024.2320572, p. 1, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02533952.2024.2320572>, accessed 26 March 2024.

3 Money and Simabwachi, "Archive history in Zambia as a history of loss", p. 3.

4 T van der Hoog, "A new chapter in Namibian history: Reflections on archival research", *History in Africa* 49 (2022), 389-414; T van der Hoog, "Paper, pixels, or plane tickets? Multi-archival perspectives on the decolonisation of Namibia", *Journal of Namibian Studies: History Politics Culture* 32 (2022), pp. 77-106.

5 S Sato, "'Operation legacy': Britain's destruction and concealment of colonial records worldwide", *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 45 (4), 2017, pp. 697-719.

"powerful" passports, allowing them to more easily travel across the globe to consult relevant archives. The corollary of this imbalance is that the research outputs by Global North scholars will likely get greater acceptance in high-ranking international journals, which invariably view them as comprehensive and of higher quality. In contrast, the outputs of scholars from Africa may fail to find space in the same journals for its perceived inadequate and thin archival research.

Access to archival material also depends on the economic, political and social contexts of the countries that house them. Using the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) as an example, George Bishi and Livingstone Muchefa revealed how Zimbabwe's faltering economy had shaped the relationship between archivists and researchers in the country.[6] They argued that, "a positive working relationship between researchers and archives staff […] is critical to the efficient flow of research".[7] The scenario of archivists as gatekeepers of material that is supposed to be open to the public is common across Africa. What material researchers can access depends on the interpersonal relationships between the researcher and the archivists, directly impacting the nature and the quality of research one can carry out using these archives. Because of economic hardship in Zimbabwe, archivists' work ethic and morale have also declined, resulting in poor quality services. Furthermore, "as funding dwindled, the NAZ amassed an enormous number of unprocessed archives and manuscripts that it should have made accessible to researchers".[8] This scenario then limits and closes off researchers from other potentially important archives.

Changes in political regimes in post-colonial Africa have also impacted when and what archival material is available to researchers. Derek Peterson noted that the effect of this approach has been that the, "opening or withholding archival materials [becomes] a way of editing the public record. It makes some kinds of information state secrets and renders other aspects of the past into a legacy".[9] Because of this manner of managing the archives, it is challenging to produce nuanced histories.

At times, the unavailability of archival materials, however, has to do with the utter neglect of the supposed archivers. Peterson's experience in Uganda

6 G Bishi and L Muchefa, "Zimbabwe's economic decline: Archives access regimes, professionalism, and their impact on researcher-archivist relations at the National Archives of Zimbabwe", *History in Africa* 49 (2022), pp. 367–388.

7 Bishi and Muchefa, "Zimbabwe's economic decline", p. 368.

8 Bishi and Muchefa, "Zimbabwe's economic decline",p. 372.

9 D Peterson, "The politics of archives in Uganda", *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of African History*, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.982, accessed, 18 March 2024, p. 1.

testifies to this challenge. While visiting the local government archives in Kabarole District, Western Uganda, he, "found that the archive boxes were occupied by wasps. They had built their nests everywhere. On the flaps of the boxes, on the bottom of the wooden shelves, on the file covers themselves".[10] For the love of research and archives, he found himself, "standing back-to-back with a valiant records officer, cans of insecticide in both hands, spraying waves of angry bugs as they surged toward us".[11] Beyond this, he mobilised funds and recruited people to catalogue and digitise the collections, making them available for others to research. Other organisations, such as the Church of Uganda and Uganda Broadcasting Corporation, complemented Peterson's efforts by digitising their records. Peterson concludes that, "[a]ll of this is a great boon for scholars and citizens alike. It has enabled research on subjects that have hitherto been closed, and a group of enterprising scholars are pursuing research that takes advantage of these materials".[12]

Even though the above discussion of some of the obstacles concerning archival research on the continent warrants concern and has a real impact on African historical research, there are hopeful examples of how African archival research is being promoted and innovated. Various national archives across the continent are increasing efforts to advertise their collections, engage with the public, and project an image of transparency. The national archives of Botswana and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have active Facebook pages that are regularly updated.[13] Significant effort has also been made to preserve and digitise archival collections across the continent. This not only helps archives that are threatened but assists in widening access to valuable archival documents. The Angolan *Associação Tchiweka de Documentação* has recently digitised and made available various primary documents relating to Angola's liberation struggle.[14] In August 2024, The National University of Lesotho Library and the Endangered Archives Programme Africa Hub, together with the University of the Free State Library, the Moshoeshoe Leadership Institute and the British Library, are hosting a conference discussing how preservation of Lesotho's documentary heritage can advance historical research on Lesotho.[15] The digitisation of archives has already

10 Peterson, "The politics of archives in Uganda".
11 Peterson, "The politics of archives in Uganda", p. 2.
12 Peterson, "The politics of Aarchives in Uganda", p. 6.
13 "INACO, Institut National des Archives du Congo", <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100079776630664>, accessed 15 March 2024; "National Archives and Records Services Botswana", <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100093323566352>, accessed 15 March 2024.
14 <https://www.tchiweka.org/>, accessed 17 March 2024.
15 "Conference announcement and call for abstract", <https://library.nul.ls/bi-centenary-conference/>, accessed 14 March 2024.

proven fruitful for historians of Africa who, despite lacking financial resources to travel overseas archives, could access collections of Australian archives that proved invaluable for their research.[16]

Going forward, a new challenge of archival access is looming, considering what Ravinder Kaur calls "archives of the future".[17] Kaur argues that, "it seems the usual paper trail that the present leaves behind for the historians might be thinning out, or at least jostling for attention and space in competition with its digital form".[18] The pertinent questions she poses are important for the future of history writing,

> what will be left behind of the contemporary present in lieu of paper for the future historians? The larger question relates to the project of history writing, or how we might rethink the notion of the past itself in an accelerated digital era of fast-moving social media.[19]

We believe that this inevitable development will have multiple impacts on historical research on the continent. First, the growth of social media as a "new archive" has been accompanied by the phenomenon of fake news which undermines and complicates the veracity of information available on these digital archives. Secondly, for African-based scholars, accessing and relying on digital archives may take longer because of the slow uptake of these technological developments by governments and institutions on the continent. Many institutions still prefer "paper knowledge", which remains subjected to orthodox archival access regimes and closure periods. Lastly and perhaps encouraging is that these new digital archives will further address the geographical divide that scholars face in accessing collections outside their borders. In this respect, there is hope that more comprehensive research will be possible.

To further promote archival research, the SJCH encourages African scholars to use the archives that are available to them, explore the possibility of non-traditional archival collections, and devise innovative ways to incorporate such material into their research. Home-grown research that relies on various local archives and a growing list of digitised material from across the continent and beyond can push current historical understandings

16 See, for instance, G Bishi, V Gwande, K Manamere, D Money, A Stevenson, R Swartz & SJ Walton, "A trove for historians of Africa: reflections from the International Studies Group and research associates", *History Australia* 18 (4), 2021, pp. 858-863.

17 R Kaur, "Writing history in a paperless world: Archives of the future", *History Workshop Journal* 79,2015, pp. 243-253.

18 Kaur, "Writing history in a paperless world", p. 243.

19 Kaur, "Writing history in a paperless world", p. 243.

of contemporary Africa into exciting new avenues. Finally, the SJCH also invites scholars working on contemporary African history to publish archival reports in our journal, especially on archival collections housed in Africa. Such reports can provide invaluable up-to-date perspectives on conducting archival research across the continent, expose researchers to new archival resources, and buttress the value of archival research for contemporary African history.

While we must always remain cognisant of the limitations and pitfalls of archival sources and promote diverse methodological approaches to study contemporary Africa's past, archival research remains an essential instrument in the African historian's toolkit.

Our current issue includes two articles about Ghana's history. The first one, by Matteo Landricina, an independent researcher from Italy, sheds new light on British-Ghanian relations during Kwame Nkrumah's government. The second one, by Adum-Kyeremeh of the University of Ghana, provides new information about the history of insurance in Ghana. The issue includes one important exploration of the concept of "xenophobia" throughout Zimbabwe's history by Emeritus Professor Alois Mlambo of the University of Pretoria. One paper by Boga Manatsha, University of Botswana, deals with the present and past of the land question in Botswana. The last three contributions deal all with gender issues and the role of women in African history and society. Robyn Murning and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen of the Erasmus University of Rotterdam (Netherlands) describe and analyse South Africa's self-narrative in relation to gender-based violence. The other two articles, one by Justus Nzemeka, Anchor University (Nigeria), and the other by Sibongile Mauye, University of Zimbabwe, both deal with the late colonial period and shed light on important issues related to women within Nigerian and Zimbabwean societies, respectively. Both contributions can help scholars better understand the more contemporary period.