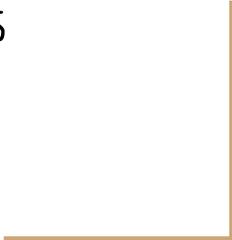




African Historiography (pt. 3): The Archive

Week Ten Lectures



Writing the Histories of Post-1960 Africa

- These first three papers come from a panel held at the 2014 USA African Studies Association meeting in Indiana, dealing with the difficulties and successes of writing the histories of post-colonial (or post-1960) Africa.
- According to one of the panelists, Gregory Mann, "Twenty, even ten, years ago, a roundtable on the writing the history of postcolonial Africa would almost certainly have been oriented towards, even obsessed with, oral history. . . . If oral history appears paradoxically trickier than ever, archives for the postcolonial period are as scattered, contingent and partial as the history they imperfectly capture."
- There is widespread belief (and often reality), that post-colonial national archives are often in very poor shape, a material reflection of post-colonial state decay and underdevelopment.
 - Mann, and some of the others note that, previously, historians would fill in the archival gap with Oral Histories. This is not always so now.

Bernaut: "Writing History from Disorderly Archives"

- Florence Bernault, a scholar of Gabon history, notes that while yes, national archives of independent African nations are sometimes disorderly and revealing little of history, we must be careful not to condemn them too much.
 - "Looking at post-1960 archives as diseased by meagerness and incoherence thus empowers colonial deposits with an integrity and legibility they never had" (270).
- In a way, Bernault believes that incomplete archives lend something to historical narrative. "Our talent [as historians] is to be able, from piecemeal traces, to narrate a fleshed-out elucidatory story. Our paradox is to use incomplete and fragmentary traces to understand broad patterns and timelines in a past that remains, by definition, unreachable" (272).
 - Sometimes, a "utopia" archive "presses on the creative mind as a straightjacket" (272).

Straussberger: "Fractures and Fragments"

- Straussberger, a historian of Guinea, notes that there were two different archival purges in the history of Guinea. One by the French just before independence, and one by the Dictator/President Sekou Toure. Each was intended to remove traces of their connections to Crimes against its citizens.
- Furthermore, Straussberger found that the Guinea archives were simply closed for months due to financial mismanagement and embezzlement. How is one to do research?
- He notes that visiting local, provincial, or regional archives forms a way around this. Historians of Africa often fetishize "national" archives as holding much more truth. Provincial archives, while they sometimes just hold duplicates of local dispatches, also give a different picture of the colonial and post-colonial state. This is a view from the margins.
 - We must also realize that local people do use the archives for day-to-day things.

White: "Hodgepodge Historiography"

- Luise White (who we previously read), now works in Zambia and Zimbabwe on late-colonial and post-colonial history.
 - She notes that some historians of colonial Africa, herself included, were quite smug about archives. "[We] boasted that we did not need the linguistic turn to interrogate archives: we'd been reading against the grain for years" (309-310).
 - But what do we do when there simply *is no archive at all*?
- White believes that we must clarify that an "archive" is not just a formal state institution with an archivist, but rather any sort of collection that contains information about our topic of interest. Quite often, materials that would have been in a "formal" archive can be found in Private Archives and donated papers.
- She notes that in the 20th Century, there is rarely ever only one copy of a file.
 - She found documents from ZANU and ZAPU donated by the movements to York Univ.
- "A Hodgepodge Historiography begins with understanding state and policies and plans as a bricolage. And a Hodgepodge Historiography requires sources found outside of archives" (314).

Ally: "The Archive of Bantustan Rule"

- What about South Africa & Namibia's bantustans? These were "semi-colonial" entities, but during the post-colonial period.
- Ally investigates the KaNgwane archive in Louieville, to find it in complete disrepair, files disorganized (or never organized) some even rotting.
 - In some ways, this incomplete nature of the archive is a reflection of the history of the bantustans themselves. They were incomplete entities. KaNgwane did not want independence, in fact, much of the leadership rejected the apartheid plan to begin with.
 - If independence is not desired, why would one make an archive?
- At the same time, this "false" state, KaNgwane, still had an archive and a bureaucratic presence. Perhaps their bureaucracy made the state and the authority, rather than the other way around?
- This is indeed an intriguing case into the study of "decolonization" and post-colonial Africa. How can we use these authors' lessons in our own work?