

From Oral Traditions to Written Records: The Loss of African Entitlement to Self-Rule and Wealth

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Abstract

The establishment of written records and archives in Africa has somehow eclipsed and even replaced oral traditions which were the norm on the continent. Prior to colonisation, entitlements to wealth, land and succession, among other things, were all transmitted orally. Thus the establishment of written records and/or archives, which deliberately excluded African people's entitlements and rights, established the settlers and their governments as the rightful and legitimate owners and custodians of wealth, land and rule in Africa. This article postulates that archives and records were used by settlers to dismantle traditional African governance systems and also establish and legitimise settler rule. In conducting the relevant study, which was an opinion piece, the author reviewed literature to buttress the arguments put forward.

Keywords: oral traditions; documentation; archives; colonialism; rights; land ownership

Introduction

Oral traditions preceded written records or documentation. Duranti (1993, 30) noted that most ancient forms of memory were oral and the most ancient keepers of records were the remembrances; that is, individuals entrusted with the task of memorising rules, contracts and sentences, transmitted them by reciting them to their juniors. Important messages were orally transmitted from rulers to their subjects, from parents to their children, and from one generation to another. Lihoma (2012) stated that the pre-colonial culture in Africa was predominantly oral, and for this reason the traditional administrative machinery transacted and captured societal business orally. Mosweu (2011) noted that, traditionally, histories were passed from one generation to another through word of mouth among African societies as the art of writing was very limited. What failed to survive in an individual's memory or in the spoken transmitted culture, died forever. People's memories, the internal



records of their own experiences, must have been their most treasured but most fragile possession (Hedstrom 2002).

Oral traditions were the form of transmitting precolonial African communication regarding even the most sensitive and important issues such as governance, succession and inheritance. The prevalence of the oral tradition in precolonial Africa is evidenced by Phiri (1975) who pointed out that successors to chiefly or ritual titles and senior advisors to chiefs were given formal instructions orally about their duties and responsibilities by their retiring predecessors. Such high-level communication would have needed documentation in present-day bureaucratic political systems. Lihoma (2012, 95) confirmed that the handing and taking over of briefs between retiring and incoming officials were unwritten and oral and memorised by the incoming officials. In this way, information about various public offices was preserved in the minds of serving public officials and passed on to succeeding officials. As communication took place orally, there was a need for people who could function as custodians of such information. Hartwig (1974) highlighted that a system for preserving such important information was devised by identifying reliable people whose memories were often sharper than those of most people and designating them as official custodians of government information.

The culture of documenting or recording transactions was not instilled into the African communities. McEwan (2003, 743) indicated that the oral tradition did not lay a firm foundation for the importance of the written word, and the deliberate underdevelopment of black people by means of the introduction of the Bantu education system discouraged the emergence of written expression and recording. Tough (2009) added that the culture of African societies is overwhelmingly oral and, as such, after independence it took time for the African administrative officers to appreciate fully the value of written records. Even nowadays, the culture of orality in conducting business in some countries in Africa is still prevalent. Dicks (2007) highlighted this in his report on the Yao people in Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania who, to this day, make a great deal of money with only oral bargains and not a trace of a written record.

The absence of records and archives detailing precolonial African rights and entitlements exposed the continent to distorted histories and narratives that deprived the continent of its identity and wealth. Fanon (1968, 16) stated that colonialism distorted, disfigured and destroyed the past of oppressed peoples. McEwan (2003, 743) noted that the lack of records and archives exposes communities to becoming the objects of other people's perceptions and studies with all the risks of limited insight inherent in that form of scholarship. As a result of the lack of written records during the pre-European era in Africa, the challenge of writing pre-colonial African history has been recognised by historians (Phiri 1983, 214). Within Africa's oral medium, there exists a treasure trove of knowledge that could contribute to the solution of many of the continent's persistent problems (Sturges and Neill 1990, 11). Failure to capture the African oral history robs the continent of its identity (Mosweu 2011). Many children and grandchildren do not know their own history, and

people do not have easy access to that knowledge because there are no elders left who know it all and can teach the younger generation (Szekely 1997). The legacy of precolonial African leaders cannot be passed on and relived as their legacies and histories have either been distorted or forgotten. Future generations will know more about colonialists such as Cecil John Rhodes and know less about the achievements of great precolonial leaders, philosophers and other great men.

The challenge of relying on orality is that the past is not felt as an itemised terrain, peppered with verifiable facts or bits of information. It is the domain of the ancestors, a resonant source for renewing awareness of present existence, which itself is not an itemised terrain either (Ong 1982, 29). Foucault (1974) noted that genealogy is grey, meticulous and patiently documentary. It operates in a field of entangled and confused parchments on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times. Though there are oral history programmes aimed at documenting tribal history and migration, these programmes are not a part of permanent archival budgets in developing countries (Alexander and Pessek 1988, 124). Harris (2002) lamented the fact that oral history programmes frequently promote the further disempowerment of marginalised voices.

Problem Statement

The establishment of archival systems and the dominance of these systems over African oral traditions were mechanisms that colonisers used to undermine African traditional government systems and in the process justify colonialism. The supremacy of the written record over oral traditions was a means of stripping Africans of their entitlement to self-rule and in the process robbing them of their entitlement to their land and wealth. Ngugi (2009, 4) warned that the colonialists had dismembered the colonised from their memory, turning their heads upside down and burying all the memories they carried. Perry (2005) argued that the subordination of native authority was made possible by privileging the written record as the most reliable record of the past compared to other modes of transmitting knowledge. The stronger the impact of colonisation on an indigenous society, the greater the importance that recorded memory assumed in the recovery of rights and identity (Wareham 2002, 198).

Purpose of the Study

This article seeks to assess the role played by archives in Africa, and their privileged position over indigenous oral traditions, being colonial mechanisms aimed at undermining the rights, entitlements and authorities of indigenous Africans.

Methodology

In conducting this conceptual study, the author reviewed literature that related to colonial archives, the origination of archives, African oral tradition, and the role of archives and colonialism in general. The author did a manual search of some literature and also used Google to do electronic searches. The aim of the literature study was to assess the role

played by archives in Africa, and their privileged position over indigenous oral traditions, being colonial mechanisms aimed at undermining the rights, entitlements and authorities of indigenous Africans.

The Rise of the Record over Orality

According to Wareham (2002, 197), oral forms of recording memories have been undermined through social changes imposed by new economic patterns and educational practices, the growth of government and economic systems for which written record keeping is an integral support, and the expectation that memory is being kept elsewhere. Gordon (2014) opined that colonial repertoires worked to supplant indigenous repertoires, even if this often led to the transformation as opposed to the erasure of these indigenous repertoires. The establishment of Western bureaucracy in African cultures, which were overwhelmingly oral (Tough 2009, 1), marked the genesis of record keeping in Africa. Positions of authority in the indigenous institutions were obtained through inheritance, at least in principle, whereas the colonial state was bureaucratic and meritocratic (Fieldhouse 1984). One key characteristic of bureaucracies is that information is stored in files and all transactions are recorded (Lane 2003, 2), and administration is based on written documents as this tends to make the office (the bureau) the heart of modern government (Lane 2003, 2). Perry (2005) argued that the privileged position of the written archival record as the most reliable record of the past over other modes of transmitting knowledge, such as myths, songs, stories, and oral histories, has less to do with the written record's material qualities than with it being the result of the long history of subordinating native authority and world views to settler authority and capitalist relations so as to secure settler title and entitlement to stolen native land (Perry 2005). Perry (2005) pointed out that written archival records are privileged as evidence over oral histories and other non-textual evidence. Perry (2005, 334) also stressed that the authority of written archival records remains intimately tied to their role as the "adjudicator of empire" in settler states, in particular in Canada. Such an arrangement disadvantages native Africans' entitlement to land and other rights, which prior to colonialism were their entitlements as enshrined in oral traditions and or word of mouth.

Gordon (2014, 65) confirmed this view:

The imposition of written record keeping practices and "written" archives on Indigenous populations are part of the colonizing process that works, in settler-national contexts, to secure settler title and entitlement to stolen land by privileging settler legal structures, modes of governance, and private property rights, over and against traditional Indigenous authorities and relationships to the land.

Lihoma (2012) noted that as wars and slave trade intensified and tribes disintegrated, some of the tribal institutions and traditions for capturing and preserving information were disrupted, but, despite that, the mode of information management remained as it had always been, oral. The exclusion of entitlements and ownership of land and the power to self-

government in colonial archives was a deliberate move to rob Africans of their wealth and rights. Colonial domination is associated with written record keeping in the region in multiple ways, and oral cultures were displaced by written systems (Wareham 2002, 199). Wareham (2002, 198) further highlighted that when traditions of orality shift, recordings, whether written or audio-visual, gain in significance, and the records that remain become sources to prove rights and recover memories which were previously held in oral memory and its mnemonics. Colonialism denied the importance of documenting the lives of indigenous people, and African traditions were not recognised as having anything approaching the importance of written records (Alexander and Pessek 1988, 124). With the disappearance of traditional village life and the extended family, memory based on personal, shared story-telling is no longer possible. Researchers have pointed out that the archive remains one foundation of historical understanding: it validates our experiences, our perceptions, our narratives, our stories (Schwartz and Cook 2002, 18). The colonisation of Africa brought about the replacement of capturing transactions orally with capturing them in records (Lihoma 2012). Furthermore, Hedstrom (2002, 28) noted that written evidence often is distinguished from oral transmission on the basis of its persistence and immutability, adding that the written and print culture imposes stability on the transmission of memory and knowledge because written documents do not change and rewrite themselves with each reading or transmission.

As stated in the National Archives of Canada (2003), archives help people to understand their history and the role of particular organisations, individuals and movements in shaping the past. Wareham (2002) added that records relating to land and genealogy are a potent source of traditional evidence of current rights. Further, Alexander and Pessek (1988, 127) stressed that survey maps and title deeds in the custody of archivists have been useful in promoting agricultural development and land reform in the immediate post-independence period. For example, such materials were used to help Kenyans acquire large farms owned by non-Kenyans and to facilitate de-colonisation (Alexander and Pessek 1988, 127). Janke and Iacovino (2012) expressed the view that archives reconnect indigenous people with their families and provide copies of records for the purposes of establishing family and clan connections. However, Perry (2005) noted that Canadian indigenous people have routinely pointed to the disjunctures between the written and oral records of treaties and to the colonial state's selective and self-serving interpretation of their meaning. Harris (2000) argued that records which are oral in form are not necessarily compliant with Western archival ideals of recordness.

Origins of Archives

Seipel (2010) highlighted that the preservation of written information dates back as far as the first Babylonian empire in 3300 BC when people used clay tablets and later papyrus on which to record information. Schwartz and Cook (2002) postulated that the origins of archives lie in the information needs and social values of the rulers, governments, businesses, associations, and individuals who establish and maintain them. Archives often serve the interests of entrenched power, but they can also empower the marginalised groups

in society (Jimerson 2007). The power of archives in society is made explicit in Jacques Le Goff's discussion of the origins of central political consolidation in the ancient world under a monarch and the establishment of the first archives to buttress his control (Schwartz and Cook 2002, 6). Ancient Greece had archival repositories, so did the Roman Empire, which is the starting point for every study of European legal, political, and cultural history (Posner 1972). New monarchies (German, French, English, and later Spanish), the great feudal powers, the church and the towns organised their own record keeping independently so that little by little local or national traditions and methods were created, giving birth in modern times to the various archival systems which now exist (Duchein 1992, 15). European archives began to revive only in the eleventh and twelfth centuries when a new political and religious organisation of the continent gradually emerged from the chaos (Duchein 1992, 15). Public archival repositories in Hungary were called *loci credibiles*, which could be interpreted as "places which give legal credibility to the documents kept within them" (Duchein 1992, 15).

Jimerson (2007) highlighted that since the era of ancient Sumeria, archives have consolidated economic and political power as writing emerged in hierarchical societies, which needed to control and account for property and laws. The modern European public archive came into being to solidify and memorialise first monarchical rule, and then the power of the nation state (Steedman 2002, 69). Archives have throughout Western history served the interests of the state and its rulers. This archival partisanship occurs in both monarchical and democratic societies, including the United States, Brazil, and other countries (Jimerson 2007). In most of Africa, with a few exceptions, such as Ethiopia and those parts controlled by the Arabs, the keeping of records began no earlier than the 1880s (Curtin 1960, 145).

The Power of the Archive

Malcolm X (1970, 55) noted that history is a people's memory and without a memory man is demoted to the level of the lower animals. There is no political power without control of the archive (Derrida 1996). Harris (2011) noted that those who have power, the elites, use "the archive" unconsciously, if not consciously, as an instrument of power. The relevance of archives in society has been captured more succinctly by the National Archives of Canada (2003) in which it is suggested that archives serve as society's collective memory; they provide evidence of the past and promote accountability and transparency of past actions and also help to foster and promote a sense of community and identity. Foucault (1974) highlighted that the archive is not an institution but the law of what can be said, not a library of events but that system that establishes statements as events and things, that system of their enunciabilities. To put it in the words of Ashforth (1990, 5), the real seat of power in modern states is the bureau, the locus of writing. Moreover, Scott (1998) posited that builders of the modern nation state do not merely describe, observe, and map; they strive to shape a people and landscape that will fit their techniques of observation; there are virtually no facts for the state other than those that are contained in documents. Archives are not just useless or dormant: archival development in any region could be seen as an act

of evangelism, the privileging of one system over another accompanied by the disempowerment and rejection of a previous philosophy (Wareham 2002, 204). One can therefore argue that the implementation of archival systems in Africa was a means of disempowering and rejecting African traditional governance systems and the privileging of the colonial system.

Records and archives are dynamic technologies of rule that actually create the histories and social realities they ostensibly only describe (Schwartz and Cook 2002, 7). The chief monument of the history of a nation is its archives, the preservation of which is recognised in all civilised countries as a natural and proper function of government (Leland 1956). Schwartz and Cook (2002, 13) noted that archives have always been about power, whether it is the power of the state, the church, the corporation, the family, the public, or the individual. Archives have the power to privilege and to marginalise (Schwartz and Cook 2002, 13). Archives embody and shape public perceptions of what is valuable and important, and they are part of the history and philosophy of knowledge in both the humanities and the sciences, and this history and philosophy are in part also created by them (Pearce 1993, 89). They are the basis for and validation of the stories we tell ourselves, the story-telling narratives that give cohesion and meaning to individuals, groups, and societies (Schwartz and Cook 2002, 12).

Archives then are not some pristine storehouse of historical documentation that has piled up, but a reflection of and often justification for the society that creates them (Schwartz and Cook 2002, 12). Archives can be a tool of hegemony; they can be a tool of resistance. They both reflect and constitute power relations (Schwartz and Cook 2002, 13). Guha (1983) postulated that colonial documents were rhetorical sleights of hand that erased the facts of subjugation, reclassified petty crimes as political subversion, or simply effaced the colonised. Engagement with the colonial archive was devoted to a reading of upper-class sources upside down that would reveal the language of rule and the biases inherent in statist perceptions (Stoler 1985). Colonial archives were institutions that fashioned histories as they concealed, revealed and reproduced the power of the state (Hegel 1956).

Powell (2008) suggested that archives have long been imperial projects. Sela (2015) noted that the national archives in Israel and the various military archives are but one component of a complex set of physical and discursive colonial mechanisms operating in such diverse areas as education, media, law, planning, and finance. Imperialist archives function as institutions of Western thought through training of new (epistemic obedient) members and control of who enters and what knowledge-making is allowed, disavowed, devalued or celebrated (Mignolo 2011a). Arondekar (2009) opined that colonial archives were tied up in colonial-imperial panoptic fantasies in which agents of empire were imagined to produce a total archive where nothing was left out. Colonial archives were and in many ways continue to be tied up in and integral to colonial knowledge production in as far as colonial knowledge both enabled conquest and was produced by it (Dirks 1996, ix). Mignolo (2001, 28) argued that the imaginary of the modern/colonial world arose from the complex

articulation of forces, of voices heard or silenced, of memories compacted or fractured. Bastian (2006) expressed the opinion that the problem of the colonial archive concerns its role in producing silences: absences and absent presences. Mignolo (2011b) stressed that archives strain visitors to view artefacts along a singular linear concept of time in which the Western modernity can invent tradition by naming its stages of progress and development, for example, antiquity, middle ages and renaissance. Mignolo (2011b) highlighted that this singular notion of tradition, created under the framing narrative of linear time, was used to disavow the legitimacy of the traditions of civilisations that were colonised.

However, even though the records produced by the colonial state often excluded and marginalised colonised subjects, Bastian (2006) expressed concern that contemporary archival practices and theories are intensifying these silences. The rise of the modern nation state required a foundational narrative of its temporal genealogy, resulting in a re-organisation of the archives “in the name of history” as a new discourse (Ernst 2010). Bastian (2006) added that because archivists are inheritors and promoters, intentionally or not, of a colonial world, archival practices and theories are not neutral but participate in a continuing colonial order of things.

Colonial archives bolstered the production of colonial states (Stoler 2002, 97–8), and the question of control of the archives is a crucial political issue (Christie 2000, 6). Panitch (2000, 104) highlighted that government archives, prior to the French Revolution, supported the entire legal, political, and economic legitimacy of the monarchy and nobility. Furthermore, Kallberg (2012, 28) stressed that in the middle ages, written documents became recognised as records and as evidence of an act that had taken place, and the records were used in order to defend the legitimacy of the state. Using dates, archives and museums train their visitors to be epistemologically obedient to Western modernity’s concept of tradition (Cushman 2013). Our capacity to make systematic forays beyond our current knowledge horizons will be severely hampered if we rely exclusively on those aspects of the Western archive that disregard other epistemic traditions (Mbembe n.d.).

Discussion and Conclusion

As indicated in this article, archives are instruments used by whoever wields power to establish dominance, legitimacy and entitlement to rule, exercise authority over other groups of people who might feel entitled to power and authority. The exclusion of land and wealth ownership by African communities by settlers in their archives was a deliberate and calculated ploy to justify colonialism and also make the settlers entitled to the land and natural resources of the indigenous African communities and to usurp authority over them. The author has concluded that archives were used to eclipse African precolonial political structures which were then replaced or even subordinated by settler imperial political systems. These settler systems were then legitimised, justified and buttressed through evidence in the form of records and archives. The African culture of orally transmitting information may have been one major weakness that was manipulated by colonisers to

subdue African monarchs and other traditional governance systems. As a result, most African people have been left with distorted and conflicting views on succession and the history of their kingdoms and rulers. Battles over succession usually mar efforts to revive African monarchies and other traditional governance systems because no records and archives detailing succession and other issues have been left behind by previous rulers.

The author has concluded that colonial archives were imperial projects that were used to partition and embezzle African resources such as land and minerals. Furthermore, in post-colonial Africa, archives were used by nationalists to silence and overshadow traditional governance systems and in the process take the limelight. Archives are but projects used by rulers to legitimise their rule whilst prohibiting and discrediting other forms of government such as traditional governance. To conclude, unless decolonisation of archives takes place in Africa, African archives will continue to stand as evidence of settler entitlement to African resources.

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