Introduction – Suitcases, Roads, and Archives: Writing the History of Africa after 1960

Luise White (with the help of Gregory Mann)

I originally organized the roundtable on which these papers are based for no more intellectual reason than I had not been to a meeting of the African Studies Association for two or three years and thought I should go and do something. I had also just finished a book manuscript on the history of the Rhodesian state and had grappled with archives and sources for the period after 1960. The proposal for the roundtable was a collaborative effort: I wrote an initial draft and everyone helped revise it. It had a fancy title – Fragments, Fictions, and the Oral: Writing the History of Africa after 1960 – and made some points we all thought African historians never addressed directly. For that reason I'm quoting it in its entirety:

> This roundtable asks how historians can research and write the history of Africa after 1960. Few historians actually do this, even though the postcolonial era is now two-thirds as long as the colonial one. This is usually explained by the limitations of national and transnational archives. Between thirty and thirty-five years embargos on releasing documents and the current understaffing in African archives, there is very little of what historians consider "reliable" sources. The result are publications that tend to be based on some combination of metropolitan archives, newspapers and the contentious grounded knowledges in memoirs and interviews. The participants in this roundtable will explore the kinds of sources that lie beyond the archive and published works? We would all agree that part of our job is to identify and preserve these sources, but what are the

History in Africa, Volume 42 (2015), pp. 265–267

doi:10.1017/hia.2015.9

> responsible and reliable ways to use them to reconstruct the postcolonial past? If we triangulate between fragments found in national and metropolitan archives, interviews, and manuscript collections found all over, what do we see and what can we narrate? Can we use fragmentary sources to write the history of the fragment itself – the separatist movements, the reinvention of precolonial forms, and non-national politics? Does looking at non-governmental sources (oral and written) reveal governmentality to be complete or frayed? How do we understand the place of African society in the politics of the last fifty years without falling back on "tradition?" And how do we relate this history to the longer past of Africa?

I assumed no one read it after the panel was accepted for the conference: I certainly didn't. Once I did read it again, I was struck by the extent to which this was focused on postcolonial states, not simply because they were tasked with maintaining and filling archives, but because the postcolonial has become almost synonymous with postcolonial states. There's nothing in this abstract about the experience of being a postcolonial actor and how historians might access that experience, and nothing at all about the freighted and sometimes odd practices such as election observers in Ian Smith's Rhodesia and televised beauty contests in Gabon.

When I circulated what I thought was the final draft of this introduction, however, Gregory Mann not only re-read the abstract but made a critical suggestion that I think offers a very powerful frame for the papers presented here. Again, I quote in its entirety:

> Africanist historiography has changed considerably in the last few years, as the set of interventions of which this paper is a part demonstrates. 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. In this group of papers, it emerged as only a minor theme. We recognized what was once virtually an instinctive methodological approach, so highly developed with regards to colonial Africa and its popular struggles, as in and of itself less than adequate for our questions. 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. Is it a sign of our times that four of the five address archives, archiving, and the very conceptualization of "the archive?" If so, what do we make of the fact that even while a wave of big data looms, it has not yet crashed onto Africanist historical practice?

Leaving aside whatever anxieties we might eventually have about big data, the papers presented here seem to have the statements of the conference abstract as a starting point, assertions and ideas that were most useful when they were elaborated on and argued with. What does oral history mean, for example, when we can text and Skype our informants? And what do these

https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2015.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

new technologies do to our own authority based on "being there?" How should we think about archives that are in every country but the one we are studying, or when they are used far more often by local people than they are by historians? All these papers explore questions of evidence and archives in ways that articulate the history of Africa after 1960, but they also do something more: all of these papers are intensely personal. They are autobiographical in ways that historians rarely are, and as such they offer a salutary window into the research and the questions that go into writing the history of postcolonial Africa.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2015.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press