Writing the History of Africa after 1960

Fractures and Fragments: Finding Postcolonial Histories of Guinea in Local Archives

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Abstract: Using my experience working in the Regional Archives of Labé (Guinea), this essay examines the importance of using local archives to write political histories of postcolonial Africa. In doing so, I argue that the fractured and fragmentary nature of the postcolonial holdings of archives – often cited as a hurdle to writing histories of Africa after independence – is in fact the product of the states that (sometimes inadequately) maintain these repositories. As such, these "imperfect" archives should be approached as an opportunity to examine the local practice of statehood in postcolonial Africa.

Résumé: Sur la base de mon travail dans les archives régionales de Labé (Guinée-Conakry) je suggère dans cet essai l'importance cruciale des dépôts provinciaux pour écrire une histoire véritablement plurielle du politique en Afrique postcoloniale. Je soutiens que la nature fragmentaire de ces dépôts – souvent invoquée comme un obstacle à l'histoire de l'Afrique après les indépendances – offre une perspective unique sur les instances étatiques locales et sur leur techniques (parfois inaptes) de classement et de conservation documentaire. Il est donc important d'approcher ces archives "imparfaites" comme une opportunité permettant d'explorer les pratiques institutionnelles locales de l'Afrique postcoloniale.

Sketching the Postcolonial State

My aim in this short essay is to explore how research in local archives can contribute to the writing of political histories of Guinea following

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independence. Many research plans falling under the broad umbrella of postcolonial African history are immediately presented with a fundamental problem: there is, in most cases, no central archival source to consult. The postcolonial holdings in many national archives in Africa are either uncategorized or unavailable, with documents simply disappearing into a storage room or, most disappointingly, the flames of a bonfire. Researchers have responded by developing alternative source bases, often using published sources such as newspapers or memoires, transnational or international archives, or, more commonly, oral accounts. Recent studies have deftly wound together a wide range of local, transnational, and international sources to write postcolonial histories.[1] Yet there is still a nagging sense, perhaps from the scattered state of postcolonial archives, that what results is fragmentary or incomplete. For those historians who move past independence, there is very rarely a single place in which to find the core of one's story.

The fact remains, though, that despite their centrality and convenient location in capitals, national archives represent only a small number of the hundreds (if not thousands) of state-maintained repositories spread across the continent. Belying their numerical significance, local archives have still not received much attention from scholars of postcolonial Africa; for instance, they merit only a brief mention in one overview of the sources available to the subfield.[2] From the early years of the field of African history to the present, scholars have noted both the potential and the possible frustrations associated with archival research outside the capital city.[3] While local archives can vary widely in availability and condition, two main themes in these reports have been constant: one should bring a mask for the dust, if just in case; and one should possess ample reserves of patience, because they invariably will be drawn upon. With those edicts in mind, though, one can with dirty hands and some persistence find a unique window on the local practice of postcolonial statehood.

Given the wide range of preservation of and organization in African archives, one that has only widened since independence, my experiences using local archives – and ultimately the conclusions I draw from them – are

[1] See in particular Gabrielle Hecht and her discussion of the frustrations and prospects associated with finding sources on contemporary African history, in *Being Nuclear: Africans and the Global Uranium Trade* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012), 341–350.

[2] Stephen Ellis, "Writing Histories of Contemporary Africa," *Journal of African History* 43–1 (2002), 1–26, 13.

[3] Philip D. Curtin, "The Archives of Tropical Africa: A Reconnaissance," *Journal of African History* 1-1 (1960), 129–147; Gregory Mann, "Dust to Dust: A User's Guide to Local Archives in Mali," *History in Africa* 26 (1999), 453–456; Stuart McConnell, "Historical Research in Eastern Uganda: Local Archives," *History in Africa* 32 (2005), 467–478; Samuel Aniegye Ntewusu, "Serendipity: Conducting Research on Social History in Ghana's Archives," *History in Africa* 41 (2014), 417–423.

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necessarily anecdotal.[4] The main argument presented below, though, is intended to be more general: even when blessed with a wealth of documents, the histories that emerge from local archives are still the products of the states that created and (sometimes) manage the repositories upon which these narratives are drawn. In Guinea, local archives are the result of a particular state form that emerged after independence. Guinea's postcolonial First Republic was highly centralized, or at least imagined itself to be so. Yet the regional politics that shaped decolonization remained important following independence, even after Guinea's first president, Sékou Touré, enacted an ambitious set of reforms meant to forge a national identity and make Guinean society "modern." This fiction of a unitary Guinean state and society has largely been maintained in the documents found in archives in, for instance, Geneva, Paris, Kew, or even Conakry. The point of view afforded by the local archives in Labé – and, one could speculate, in Kankan, Nzérékoré, or Boké – present a different picture of the postcolonial Guinean state, one that is much more fractured and fragmentary than national or international sources imply. By privileging the site of local archives in this essay, I am not arguing that their national and international counterparts are less valuable for the historian of postcolonial Africa. Rather, in relating my experiences in the archives of the Labé *préfecture*, I seek to demonstrate that different levels of context as contained in state archives provide, at least in Guinea, very different views of the state itself. All three types of archives – local, national, and international – are, therefore, necessary to provide a sketch of the postcolonial state.

Inside a "Closed" State

I arrived in Conakry, Guinea, in January 2012, ready and eager to conduct research. Unfortunately, I soon found that the institution I hoped would provide the bulk of sources for my project – the Guinean National Archives – had been closed for the past two months and would be shuttered indefinitely due to accusations of embezzlement. Given that the doors to the National Archives had been closed with a padlock and a gendarme posted outside, I was forced to cultivate a new set of sources. These included conducting interviews with former government officials and opposition members. It meant finding and negotiating access to private collections.

And finally, I had the opportunity to pursue what was then only a vague sense that local archives existed in Guinea's regional capitals. I had read one of Jean Suret-Canale's articles from the 1960s that made use of several

[4] The results of my research in the Regional Archives of Labé will appear in my dissertation entitled "The 'Particular Situation' in the Futa Jallon: Ethnicity, Regionalism, and the Nation in Twentieth-Century Guinea," PhD dissertation, Columbia University (New York, forthcoming).

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regional archives.[5] I hoped that such an archive existed in Labé, the Futa Jallon region's largest town and one of the main settings of my research project. Several researchers had told me that the Labé archives had probably been destroyed at some point over the past two decades. And stories of the archive's demise seemed plausible; when I was living near Labé in 2007 working as a high school English teacher, I had seen smoke billowing from the building that I now know houses the archives during anti-government riots. Thankfully, while waiting around in Conakry for the National Archives to open I met with Ismaël Barry, historian and Director of the Doctoral Program in Humanities and Social Sciences at the Université G.L.C. de Sonfonia-Conakry, who told me that the Labé archives were still intact. Armed with a new sense of purpose and assurance, I set off on the ten hour-long bush taxi ride to Labé.

After waiting a few days for the Labé archivist to return from visiting his family, I finally gained access to the regional archive. The archive was comprised of one dark, windowless room, in which I found documents stacked in six to eight foot piles and caked in a half inch of the red dust that seems to cover everything in the Futa Jallon during the dry season. The archivist told me that there was a rough classification system – one corner contained mostly colonial material, another from the post-independence First Republic, and a center table was supposedly piled with documents from the post-coup Lansana Conté regime – but in practice I found that most documents were jumbled together. One might find, for example, a handwritten political report from a French commandant from 1905 next to a propaganda handbook for the militant youth wing of Guinea's postcolonial government from the 1970s. While at some point in the past the archives might have had a classification system, subsequent years of moving documents and partial attempts at reorganization had left what remained in a mess.

The archive's disorganization represented a logistical nightmare. Hours and sometimes days would pass before a useful document would appear, and it was difficult to gauge if said find was representative of a larger trove or simply a one-off pleasant surprise. Yet, as time passed, the temporal fracturing and reordering of the archives, like jumbled strata worked and reworked by geologic forces, began to highlight the entanglement that is so present in histories of Africa spanning the twentieth century. For example, both colonial and postcolonial administrators in the Northern Futa Jallon fretted over seasonal labor migrants called *navétanes* who often worked in Senegal during the May to August rainy season, expressing the same concerns as their predecessors but altering their political language and grammar for new political realities. Under French rule, these laborers had proved to be integral to the functioning of Senegal's peanut economy.

[5] Jean Suret-Canale, "La Fin de la Chefferie en Guinée," *Journal of African History* 7–3 (1966), 459–493.

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The postcolonial Guinean state, on the other hand, cast the *navétanes* as traitors to their nation who preferred to gain their riches abroad rather than helping build their own country. Both states attempted to control seasonal migration – one to funnel, the other to staunch – but French and Guinean officials alike recognized that inhabitants of the Labé region, and in particular young men looking to gain some money in order to marry, would migrate in the ways they believed best suited their goals and largely irrespective of state control. These colonial and postcolonial officials faced similar phenomena, although they approached them from radically different angles. And yet, they often came up with strikingly similar ways to describe the *navétanes,* sought to control them through similar techniques, and often repeated the failures of their predecessors with knowledge of what had occurred before. Thus, while two specific documents might have ended up next to one another by chance, their inadvertent proximity thrust to the fore the resonances and echoes of state concerns over the course of the twentieth century.

The out-of-the-wayness of local archives also provided an opportunity to uncover histories that had been obscured, either intentionally or not. Regimes in Guinea have a long history of archival mutilation, with two notable periods of systematic destruction having occurred during the last sixty years. The first, on the eve of an unexpected Guinean independence, saw French officials destroying not only sensitive documents but also other symbols like the state china in order to erase problematic traces of their then rapidly waning rule and hinder the new regime.[6] The second and more thorough "cleansing," which probably happened sometime after the death of Sékou Touré in 1984 and the subsequent coup d'état, included the near complete destruction of documents concerning the "Age of Purges" (1970 to 1976), again most likely to erase the traces of the new regime's participation in past crimes.[7] In this sense, Guinea's postcolonial archival trajectory converges with several others in Africa, be they in Kinshasa or Monrovia.[8]

In Guinea, though, the mutilation of archives followed pre-existing geographies of power. While large piles of documents from the National Archives were burned, some collections in the interior remained largely intact. This is how the regional archives of Labé came to contain sensitive documents produced by Touré's regime. These fragments of the past range widely. One document I found, for example, contained orders from the Office of the President to sacrifice cows with certain markings and color patterns in order to secure good fortunes for the regime, in one case to

[6] See: Curtin, "The Archives of Tropical Africa," 133–134.

[7] Michael McGovern, "Unmasking the State: Developing Modern Political Subjectivities in 20th Century Guinea," PhD dissertation, Emory University (Atlanta, 2004), 31.

[8] Cf. Ellis, "Writing Histories of Contemporary Africa," 12–13.

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ensure that the Guinean soccer team won an international friendly against Senegal.[9] Other documents lay bare the systematic elimination of Touré's political rivals, including one telegram ordering the arrest (and probable execution) of a brother of Barry Diawadou, a prominent Fulbe politician and rival of Touré's during decolonization.[10] These are just two examples of a state confident in its symbolic and actual power in Guinea's interior.

Other stories rest in the Labé archives, however, ones that undermine the Touré government's claim of being the representative of the collective will of all Guineans. Local security reports recall resistance to state reforms in the Futa Jallon through migration, most notably in reaction to 1960s price controls and the semi-nationalization of the region's cattle in the 1970s.[11] Other requests from Conakry to regional authorities show a state that is unsure of the public's continued loyalty, asking in one case for the Governor of Labé to conduct a poll of the public's reaction to a recent policy shift.[12] In these local archives, therefore, one is presented with dual pictures of the Guinean First Republic: one of a state that is unhesitant to project its power, or at least the nurture the public perception that the reach of the Conakry government was widespread and its grip strong; another of a state that not only is faced with local resistance, but one that also recognizes the all-too-real limits of its ability to control and transform. The Guinean state as contained in the Labé archives was, in sum, seemingly on the cusp of fracturing, held together by hastily constructed policies and, as the 1970s wore one, increasingly violent coercion.

As Guinea was, at least in theory, a "closed state" under Touré, outside sources often fail to account for these local contestations of state power, symbols, and policy. Reports from foreign intelligence sources, or from accounts of the exiled opposition, or from personal memoires, or even Touré's own voluminous published writings offer a very particular view of Guinea's First Republic, one that emphasized the totalitarian nature of the monolithic government. The regional archive in Labé, though, shows both

[9] Archives Régionales de Labé, "Message Radio, Secréraire Général par intérim à tous Gouverneurs et Secrétaires Fédéraux, no. 103-051730" (11 November 1977).

[10] Archives Régionales de Labé, "Message Chiffré, Ministre Délégué Moyenne Guinée Labé à tous Gouverneurs Commissaires et Commandants Brigade Gendarmerie Moyenne Guinée, no. 32/C" (5 March 1968).

[11] Archives Régionales de Labé, "Commissariat de Police de Labé, Renseignements, no. 58/C-SP-L" (23 June 1965); Archives Régionales de Labé, "Gouverneur de la Région Administrative de Mali au Camarade Gouverneur de la Région Administrative de Labé, no. 17/RAM/RG" (21 June 1976).

[12] Archives Régionales de Labé, "Message Radio Chiffré, Dama Marcel Mato, Secrétaire État Intérieur Conakry à Gouverneurs Région Kindia, Kankan, Labé, N'Zérékoré" (19 February 1968).

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how political theory was put into practice, and more importantly that there existed within the First Republic diverging views of what the Guinean government and society should look like. These internal perspectives contained in local documents are unique to the Labé region – although, given the country's history of regional political mobilization, particularly in Guinea's Forest region, they might apply to other parts of the country. Crucially, though, they provide an important and previously neglected window on the local articulation of political power in Guinea's First Republic.

Everyday Use of Guinean Archives

Lastly, I want to make clear that local archives are not some long-hidden artifact waiting to be discovered by the dogged researcher. In reality, they are consulted frequently by people looking for documents that might shed light on, for instance, their family's history or support a claim either in court or in an appeal to the local administration. Each day, both while working in the National Archives in Conakry and the Regional Archives in Labé, I was surrounded by people looking for birth certificates, the colonial file of one of their parents, a land deed, or a certificate of studies. In fact, I made a deal with the Labé archivist: in exchange for taking over half of his desk, I agreed to put aside any of the types of documents that are frequently requested. Thus, although dusty, these archives are not so due to underuse. It is simply that those who use the archives on a regular basis are not part of the scholarly networks upon which we rely for reconnaissance. Connecting these local and scholarly modes of archival inquiry might mean simply going somewhere and seeing what one can find. It is a high-risk proposition, but one that, I believe, may pay a historically rich reward in the end.

Imperfection and Opportunity

While providing a wealth of information, local archives are not the perfect source base; in fact, they are far from it. The disorganization and sheer volume of documents presents several difficulties, and leads to a different sort of fragmentation than what many scholars interested in postcolonial African history often encounter. I spent, in total, two months working in the local archives in Labé; my time was cut short by periodic protests and preparations for upcoming legislative elections. I vacillated between, on the one hand, systematically moving from one pile to another, sorting out those documents that were related to my research topic, and on the other pulling test cores of documents in different parts of the room. In the end, I estimate that I only processed perhaps a fourth of the material.

One could completely catalogue the archives, an important but time consuming task that is nevertheless aided by increasing use of

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digitization.[13] Simply creating digital copies, however, runs the risk of creating new fragments, offering ease of consultation but stripping away the local contexts in which reports or cables were produced. For example, one of the most informative experiences I had at the archives was looking through a stack of Touré-era photographs of Labé dignitaries with the archivist and some of his prefectural colleagues.[14] An image with a caption might have identified who the figures were and their official positions, but only through viewing the photos with those who have deep knowledge of the area's politics was I able to find out that one Labé Governor was widely loved, his successor was widely despised, and several internal fault lines in the Labé government resulted from the stark difference in public reception between the two. Furthermore, one must also be wary of a false sense of wholeness resulting from making (still needed) organization, as the coverage of documents would still be subject to a different kind of mutilation, namely that caused by termites, leaks in the roof, or the collateral damage of a Molotov cocktail. What I found in the archive, or even my finding of the building altogether, was ultimately subject to chance. Any history written from the documents contained therein, therefore, is by its very nature partial, subject to the whims of both arsonists and insects.

The disappointment that comes from finding a room filled to the brim with unique and perhaps confidential documents, however buried they might be, but still coming away with a messy historical narrative shouldn't be surprising (although in the moment it still was for me). As scholars who have taken an ethnographic approach to the colonial archives have demonstrated, archives are first and foremost molded by the states that produce them, shaped by their logic and (gaps in) knowledge and filled with contents prescribed by long-gone civil servants.[15] Turning a critical eye onto often-neglected local archives, therefore, might offer the historian of postcolonial Africa a unique opportunity to examine both the logic and imperfect practice of governance following independence.

Finding national archives wanting, one can move either to international or local sources or, ideally, both. I've given an example of the latter path, one that has provided almost too many sources to handle but one

[13] On one initiative to create a digital archive in Africa, see: Allen Isaacman, Premesh Lalu and Thomas Nygren, "Digitization, History, and the Making of a Postcolonial Archive of Southern African Liberation Struggles: The Aluka Project," *Africa Today* 52–2 (2005), 55–77. On the difficulties and responsibilities of access and sustainability associated with digitization, see: Peter Limb, "The Digitization of Africa," *Africa Today* 52–2 (2005), 3–19.

[14] Ghislaine Lydon describes a similar research method in *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[15] In particular, see: Ann L. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

that was still messy and partial. As such, I argue that the incomplete nature of archival sources, often cited as a significant hurdle to writing histories of Africa after independence, is not especially unique to the postcolonial period, nor is it tied to a particular lack of documentation. Rather, archives, whether at the local, national, or international level, reflect the states and particular historical trajectories that produced them. One should, therefore, approach these imperfect repositories as opportunities rather than problems to overcome. In Labé, one sees the fractured state during the First Republic and, due to subsequent collapses and retreat, the fragmentary condition of the documents that remain. It is a perspective hard to come by, and one that is still incomplete. Yet these artifacts of local states are still integral to chasing that elusive and probably misguided goal of writing a more comprehensive history of postcolonial Guinea.

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