Elusive History: Fractured Archives, Politicized Orality, and Sensing the Postcolonial Past

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Abstract: Inspired by my experiences in archives and research fields in Northern Nigeria, this essay analyzes four overlapping phenomena: archival fragmentation, the politicization of data and research transactions, the proliferation of memoirs and other texts of self-representation, and the question of sensing the African past beyond the recognized oral, written, and ethnographic corpus. At once familiar and novel, these trends present both problems and possibilities for historians of postcolonial Africa, and need to be negotiated carefully. I propose, in preliminary terms, that a complementary methodology of what I call *sensing* is not only possible but necessary if we want to fully capture the pace and flavor of postcolonial African experiences.

Résumé: A partir de recherches d'archives et de terrain dans le Nord du Nigéria, cet essai analyse quatre phénomènes imbriqués: la fragmentation des archives, la politisation des sources, la prolifération des mémoires et autres textes autobiographiques, et, finalement, la difficulté à "ressentir" le passé africain par-delà des données orales, écrites et ethnographiques. À la fois familières et inédites, ces tendances sont autant de nouvelles contraintes que de possibilités originales pour les historiens de l'Afrique postcoloniale. Elles doivent être exploitées avec précaution. La méthode complémentaire du "ressenti" que je définis provisoirement ici est non seulement possible mais nécessaire à une pleine capture du rythme et de la saveur des expériences de l'Afrique postcoloniale.

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Introduction[1]

In reflecting on the archives and modalities for professional history writing on postcolonial Africa, some familiar but mutating idioms emerge to organize the methodological questions we ask and attempt to answer on our way to producing finished, publishable historical works. Informed by my own personal experiences in archives and research fields in Northern Nigeria, the reflections in this essay broach and offer preliminary thoughts on the implications, for postcolonial African history writing, of archival fragmentation, the politicization of historical data, the boom in memoirs and autobiographies, and the question of *sensing* Africa outside the oral, written, and ethnographic templates.

Fragmentation here refers to the physical and textual decompartmentalization and scattering of archives, a phenomenon which presents both problems and opportunities for historians of postcolonial Africa. Fragmentation in this frame both closes and opens doors of discovery to the historian. The types of histories that are reconstructed from these fragmented sources and archival locations are thus dependent on whether the historian sees fragmentation as a problem, opportunity, or as two forces working dialectically to animate the stories and arguments being contemplated. In other words, fragmentation, in and of itself, does not undermine the Africanist historical craft any more than it enhances it. Fragmentation, in sum, has no independent instrumental life of its own outside the mediating sensibilities and interventions of the Africanist historian.

The second methodological phenomenon discussed here is politicization, a generic framing that at face value points to nothing other than the familiar problem of politics intruding into archival content and organization. To be sure, that is one sense in which politicization can be understood as it relates to postcolonial African history writing. But politicization can be understood in other ways and overlaps with other burgeoning methodological phenomena.

The third plank of my reflection is the question of autobiographical proliferation in the African postcolony and what this means for the methodological trajectories of historians of Africa conducting research in and on the postcolonial moment. The increased availability of self-representational materials written by and in many cases for Africans provokes new methodological questions and offers new vistas for entering the lived experiences of African actors who self-consciously write themselves into text. These Africans sometimes position themselves as mediators of histories that touch on their persons or on events in which they participated. They expect that their self-presentation would shape the formal narratives of professional historians who are examining them as fascinating people in their own rights

[1] I thank all the presenters on the roundtable for organizing and participating in such an energizing and provocative methodological and historiographical conversation on the state of African history as a field of inquiry.

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or as actors in events and movements. African autobiographical writers expect a certain fidelity to their perspectives in the works of professional Africanist historians. This expectation raises the question of how, as historians who are increasingly drawn to disciplined and strategically produced autobiographical narratives, we should balance the protocols of our craft and the rules of interpretation and evaluation that govern what we do against the pressures of historically conscious African research subjects and autobiographers. This heightened consciousness about personal history being part of a larger historical fabric and the spoken and unspoken desire of autobiographers to shape the narratives of this larger history compete with the historian's desire to write histories that transcend the individual.

The final grid of my reflection is what one might call sensory history, a designation meant to convey how historians of postcolonial Africa in particular but of other periods of African history might augment their fractured archives by sensing the physical and human subjects of their study – the artifacts of the African past. This is not the same as a call for investment in orality, as the oral is not necessarily a sensory gateway to the rhythms and flavors of African lives and experiences. Overcoming the limitations of archives requires a less scripted, less formal version of ethnography, a form of immersion not designed merely for participatory observation but for sensing, seeing, smelling, hearing, and tasting the world represented in archival and oral testimonies – the physical and metaphysical worlds in which the subjects and objects of our inquiries thrive(d).

Fragmentation

Fragmentation is a familiar feature of African colonial archives. The fragmented state of the archive is understandable, given what Luise White describes as the randomness and sloppiness of colonial statecraft and the ways in which the documentary artifacts and debris of this type of statecraft have retained the sloppiness of the system that produced them.[2] For postcolonial African history, fragmentation is a more ambivalent proposition because it means more than the literal denotation of scattered sources. All sources and archives, no matter the best efforts of archivists and historical actors looking to impose order and logic on them, are scattered subjects and objects produced by certain political and epistemological anxieties.[3]

[2] See Luise White's contribution (this volume).

[3] Ann L. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Ann L. Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Art of Governance," *Archival Science* 2 (2002), 87–109, 87. Stoler coined and used the term "ethnography in the archives" in a series of lectures and reflections as a way of theorizing the ways in which archives, long regarded by historians as sources waiting to be extracted and analyzed, also function in the ethnographic methodological conception as a site of governmentality and as a subject of inquiry into how power formations seek to organize knowledge and the space for accessing it.

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Historians must therefore piece together and reassemble the disparate details to tell a story or advance an argument. This kind of fragmentation is incidental, expected; it is in the nature of physical things to resist order and structure. Moreover, Africa's postcolonial bureaucratic dysfunction manifests itself as chaos in the archives.

In postcolonial African history, fragmentation can take another form: a deliberate effort on the part of contemporary actors to keep sources and documents apart, scattered, and sometimes indiscernible. This is the physical, literal mutilation of written archival materials, which leads to fragmented, truncated, and distorted threads of data and information. Archival mutilation has emerged as a critical aspect of the challenge of writing postcolonial African history because postcolonial history is a charged terrain carrying high stakes. It activates the human tendency to strategically mutilate information that can be weaponized, metaphorically speaking, by one's rivals and by contending forces. This conception of archival data as weapons of postcolonial political warfare means that mutilation intersects with politicization, which I discuss below. This intersection occurs at precisely that juncture where the mutilation can be read as a deliberate political act meant to take possession of textual testaments favorable to one's claims, or to keep unfavorable texts from the hands of competitors. This interplay between fragmentation and politicization will only intensify as postcolonial politics continues to be judicialized and as African judiciaries are continually politicized as a consequence.

Postcolonial archival fragmentation, whether it is of the bureaucratic type or a product of deliberate meddling, is not necessarily a bad thing, for all historical explanations and interpretations are provisional and fragmentary.[4] However, as a practical matter, mutilated and fragmented archives can prolong research endeavors, compel a historian to advance overly speculative interpretations, and muddy the itineraries and trajectories of research. Yet, as more Africanist historians turn their attention to the postcolonial period, fragmentation presents an opening for imagining a new kind of history writing in which the concept of the bureaucratically organized archive is passé, inadequate. This kind of archive is proving increasingly inadequate because the physical and bureaucratic space of the formal archive is not capacious enough to contain the multivalent historical and contemporary events and experiences oozing daily from postcolonial African societies.

Bureaucratic attempts to produce a usable, convenient archive or a neatly organized, catalogued, and efficiently run collection could themselves be read as a form of mutilation, since postcolonial African history is expansive, elastic, and happens largely outside of archives and in the living,

[4] See Florence Bernault's contribution (this volume).

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breathing interactions of African life. In this sense, one could argue that the historian in fact should fragment an archive organized according to bureaucratic or political logic – that fragmentation is paradoxically one way to overcome the strictures associated with bureaucratic and technocratic ways of articulating and organizing primary materials. In short, as historians of postcolonial Africa strive to make sense of an African historical moment that has technically not yet passed, they must scramble the archive into fragments in order to keep up with the fast-evolving pace of African experiences.

Politicization

In postcolonial Africa, the past encroaches aggressively on the present, and the present is often an aggregation of multiple remembered pasts. Such is the denseness of the past in contemporary politics that historical methodologies in postcolonial Africa have become implicated in the fraught politics of remembering and recovering. As the terrain of history, as both a chronicle of events and a professional practice of making sense of those events, has proliferated in postcolonial Africa, so has the political stakes that inform how participants in this fluid terrain of history position themselves.

Individual African investments in the technologies for rendering the past have soared in the context of increased contentions and claims over scarce resources, zero-sum political privileges, and the struggle for recognition or identity politics. To complicate matters, postcolonial African states have become historians in their own rights, claiming the supreme right to interpret, mediate, and disseminate the past.[5] The postcolonial African state controls the organs that facilitate professional historical inquiries – archives, collections, bureaus of statistics, etc. It also often insists on the kinds of history that are acceptable, that is, compatible with the nation-state project. The postcolonial state disciplines histories that promote alternative historical and political imaginations.

Africanist historians researching and writing on the postcolonial period have to negotiate with these individual and state actors in the historical field. They have to both bypass these informal political historians and engage them. For instance, one has to bypass the bureaucracies that

[5] This characterization loops back to remarks made by Mamadou Diouf in an interview he granted to the defunct PONAL Dialogues, the online interview series of the Project on New African Literatures (PONAL), which was managed by Professor Pius Adesanmi at Carleton University, Canada: http://www.projectponal.com/pqf/introit.html. An archive of the interviews conducted in the PONAL series is now held in the Institute of African Studies at Carleton University.

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enforce national historical imaginations in order to conduct research unencumbered by the pressures of politics. But in writing up the research, one has to not only acknowledge the existence of these alternate institutions of history writing and historical silencing but also engage with the anxieties and political stakes that animate them. It is a delicate act of balancing, and the historian of postcolonial Africa learns to keep that balance no matter how unstable it may be.

All of this is to say that the politicization of the postcolonial archive compels the Africanist historian to become a politician in a sense. Apart from navigating the proliferation of individual, community, and state historians, historians of Africa now have to contend with the effort of African research assistants, or co-producers of knowledge, as Lyn Schumaker characterizes them,[6] to conscript them into their stories or their preferred slants of a given narrative.[7] This attempt to skew the story in a preferred trajectory challenges the boundaries of scholarly neutrality and detachment. And yet, outright indifference to and detachment from the stories our African subjects prefer to tell is methodologically ill advised, for empathy opens the door for research and without displaying it the researcher may not gain the confidence of informants or access to their stories. Here, then, are two dueling pressures, one scholarly, the other practical.

The concept of the postcolonial historical oral researcher as a politician is not a suggestion that the historian should participate in or share the political agendas that underpin the oral narratives of his or her sources. Rather, the formulation captures the phenomenon of the researcher having to perform the political act of appearing to be simultaneously empathetic to multiple contending narratives. I would argue that without showing empathy, the oral interview, the holy grail of postcolonial historical research, is reduced to a mechanical exercise in data

[6] Lyn Schumaker, *Africanizing Anthropology: Fieldwork, Networks, and the Making of Cultural Knowledge in Central Africa* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

[7] My own personal experience with this phenomenon came during the research phase of my book, *Colonialism by Proxy: Hausa Imperial Agents and Middle Belt Consciousness in Nigeria* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2014). There were contemporary stakes in the issues and questions I was posing in the research field, with contending Hausa-Fulani/Caliphate narratives and claims competing with non-Muslim Middle Belt constructs and each side invoking and conscripting history to bolster its claims. As a result of this charged research arena, I sometimes found myself resisting the clever maneuvers of my informants, who would try to nudge me in the direction of certain narratives and who, when I brought up countervailing perspectives, would try to move me away from them.

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collection, a mere transaction between the researcher and his/her subjects or informants.[8]

A Biographical Turn in African History?

Increasingly the archives of postcolonial Africa's ongoing histories are constituted by informational corpuses rooted in autobiographies, autobiographical pamphlets, self-crafted photographs, and other artifacts of self-representation. Defined broadly, these texts depict Africans telling their own stories and are distinctly African expressions of what Niel Genzlinger calls the "age of oversharing" – the ways in which the democratization of the means of publishing and information dissemination has produced a tendency for people the world over to invite others into the significant and mundane details of their lives and experiences.[9]

Given the familiar historiographical critique of African stories that are mediated by colonial, nationalist, and bureaucratic filters,[10] the

[8] In the Africanist historiography of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the collection of oral tradition, marked most prominently by the art of the oral interview, was regarded as the very methodological identity of the field of African history. Jan Vansina's work helped to engender this veneration of orality in African historiography. Vansina's forceful and robust defense of orality as an indispensable component of African history provided a much-needed corrective to a field that had grown inordinately dependent on colonial written sources. However, the transactional nature of oral research as a formulaic practice never registered on practitioners of the field until perhaps the mid-1990s, when new questions about the nature of memory, remembering, and about the symbiotic relationships between the written and the oral birthed a new, more critical attitude to the collection and use of oral sources. Luise White's *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) was in a sense an authoritative summation of a series of methodological shifts that questioned the taken-for-grantedness of oral tradition as an authentic, unmediated window into the African past.

[9] Niel Genzlinger, "The Problems with Memoirs," *New York Times* (28 January 2011).

[10] The colonial bureaucratic filters I have in mind here are the ones Victor Y. Mudimbe theorized collectively as the "colonial library" as well as the lingering afterlives of the seminal epistemic violence of colonialism, which can still be discerned in African-produced texts even in this postcolonial moment. See: Victor Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1988); Victor Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1994). For a sample survey and critique of colonially inflected African historiography in the Nigerian and African contexts, see: Mu'azu Abdullahi Saulawa, "A History of Historical Writings in Nigeria since c. 1960 A.D.," *Savannah: A Journal of the Environmental and Historical Sciences* 10–2 (1989), 76–85. Jacob F. Ade Ajayi's critique of imperialist perspectives on African colonial history still rings true today. See: Jacob F. Ade Ajayi, "Colonialism: An Episode

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accompanying calls for Africans to tell their own stories, and the contention that professional historians should take these stories more seriously as sources of history, the proliferation of biography in the form of creative nonfiction, autobiographical novels, and memoirs should be celebrated as something of a turn to African stories as sources for recovering "authentic" African experiences. But the genre of memoirs and other autobiographical writings is fraught with methodological minefields, not the least of which is the fact that autobiographical writings are founded almost exclusively on memory, on remembering, and more specifically on strategic and selective remembering.

The "memoir boom," as Paula Fass calls it,[11] raises, in the African context, several challenges for postcolonial Africanist historians. One such problem is that of how to treat the text as a source without being seduced by its narrative and polemical inflections. As Fass states, memoirs are particularly problematic for historians because "unlike literary critics and theorists whose object is to interrogate memoirs as a specialized form of text, historians are accustomed to viewing the memoir as a source."[12] As historical sources for reconstructing postcolonial African histories, autobiographies, whether they are comprehensive accounts or snapshots in time and space, present the familiar methodological problems of self-portrayal. How do we move, analytically, from the individual to the social, and how do we locate the latter in the former without losing insightful sociological dynamics in the conflation? How do we locate individuals, as they want to be viewed, in the social without undermining the agencies and subjectivities of these individual autobiographers? Then there is the related question of how to navigate narrative narcissism and excess in autobiographies.

In dealing with colonial African history, an area I consider the primary focus of my research, I take for granted that the autobiographical writings of Africans are mediated by colonial registers and governed by colonial regimes of writing and understanding. One also accepts *a priori* that the vocabularies at play in the texts are suffused in the language of colonial power, whether this is apparent or not. The question, in dealing with autobiographical narratives emanating from colonial – and neocolonial – conditions is that of what weight one should ascribe to the prevailing political and economic structures of society as shapers of autobiographical stories without occluding the writers' intimate portraits and positioning of themselves.

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in African History," in: Peter Duignan and L.H. Gann (eds.), *Colonialism in Africa 1870–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 497–509. Frederick Cooper, for his part, critiques both the imperialist and nationalist frames of colonial African history. See: Frederick Cooper, "Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History," *American Historical Review* 99–5 (1994), 1516–1545.

[11] Paula Fass, "The Memoir Problem," *Reviews in American History* 34–1 (2006), 107–123.

[12] Fass, "The Memoir Problem," 107.

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In my current research, which analyzes the travel writings of Northern Nigerian Muslim aristocrats and intellectuals who traveled to Britain in colonial and postcolonial times and returned to pen stories in local publications about their travel experiences, the phenomenon of self-portrayal comes across sharply. Yahaya Aliyu, the emir of Gwandu and the second-ranking ruler in the spiritual and political hierarchy of the defunct Sokoto caliphate, returned from a sightseeing trip to Britain in 1934. Five years later he published a travel memoir in the local Hausa language newspaper, *Gaskiya Tafi Kwabo*, the opening lines of which are "Kai! ba shakka duniya na birin London" (lit.: "Wow! No doubt, the world begins and ends in London," or "Wow! No doubt, the entire world is in London").[13] Dikko was essentially telling his readers that he had seen the end of the world of modernity and technology, situating himself squarely in the modernist endpoint being presented.

In the context of the mid-colonial period, the statement may get subsumed under the assumption that the emir, a favored subaltern traditional ruler, was pandering to his colonial benefactors, although one could argue that the statement was more about the emir and his self-image than it was about London or the metropole. A similar statement from the postcolonial period would open up entirely different interpretive possibilities. Specifically, it is most likely to be taken as less strategic and more sincerely spontaneous in its hifalutin praise for London, even though the postcolonial moment contains its own filters and curbs on autobiographical narrative liberties, filters which turn on a more intimate, personal awareness on the part of Africans about the importance of self-portrayal. Additionally, a similar autobiographical statement in the postcolonial period may elicit calls for considering variables such as conscious cultural appropriation, transnational connections, and overlapping modernities. The problems and analytical possibilities of African autobiographical texts and other materials of self-portrayal are thus indexed by the normative political and scholarly sensibilities of a particular moment.

I suggest that historians of postcolonial Africa apply the skepticism and critical distance that characterize their use of colonial-era African autobiographical writings to the growing corpus of African postcolonial memoirs

[13] Yahaya Aliyu, "Godiya ta Tabbata Ga Allah, Daga Sarkin Gwandu Yahaya," *Gaskiya ta fi Kwabo* (October 1939), 4. British colonial authorities established *Gaskiya ta fi Kwabo* to rally the Hausa-speaking peoples of Northern Nigeria round the war efforts of the allies and to counter German propaganda during the Second World War. The paper soon became a vibrant platform for political debate, literary creativity, and autobiographical narratives of travel and self-reflection. For an analysis of the early editions of the newspaper, see: John E. Philips, "The Early Issues of the First Newspaper in Hausa Gaskiya ta fi Kwabo, 1939–1945," *History in Africa* 41 (2014), 425–431.

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and autobiographies. The filters are different for the postcolonial period,[14] as are the forces that silence or animate certain elements and ignore others. Nonetheless, as histories of postcolonial Africa embrace the lives and experiences of ordinary Africans as windows into more consequential political, social, and economic engagements, they have to develop a methodological toolkit for making sense of the growing body of African memoirs. Social histories of the African everyday and of the illuminating possibilities of ordinariness are also increasingly engaging the energies of Africanist historians. In this novel historiographical endeavor, a keener, more discerning attention to memoirs and other narratives of self-portrayal is indispensible.

Sensing the African Past

One of the methodological challenges confronting African studies and Africanist historical research in particular is how best to capture the rhythms, tempo, and undercurrents of African lives and experiences. In the age of constant informational flows and the technological ability to research Africa from a physical distance, how does one access the inner lives of things and people in Africa – the unseen ingredients that escape the familiar oral and written methodologies to which Africanists have grown accustomed? The answer to this poser is not the old copout of oral tradition and the oral interview. Interviews can now be done without physical contact – by telephone, Skype, and other communication mediums that have penetrated not just African urban centers but also some rural locales.

What about the traditional physical interviews with African subjects *in* Africa, or the classic ethnographic tradition of living among peoples to informally gauge the salient aspects of their lives, their material culture, and their spiritual values? These methods remain important today, perhaps even more important, given the increasing propensity, enabled by information technologies, to research Africa from a distance. Nonetheless, the familiar written and oral mechanisms for accessing African experiences and pasts will not suffice today because the pace of African lives has accelerated, and the distinct flavors of African experiences can no longer fit into

[14] In Mudimbe's idea of the "colonial library," which is developed most robustly in *The Invention of Africa*, the library in question is a compromised and biased site of research, an informational corpus constituted, in form and content, by a system of filters. Although less explicitly stated, the assumption is that the "postcolonial library" in Africa, that is, collections or primary materials produced about and/or in Africa after independence, do not suffer from this problem of filtration and inflection. The postcolonial moment, however, has its own bureaucratic and political anxieties, which authorize and preserve biases and strictures that in turn inform the nature of primary sources available for postcolonial African history writing.

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old bromides that enabled historians in the past to approach archives and oral resources with methodological finality.

This is to say that there are aspects of African lives and experiences that cannot be accessed in archives and in oral exchanges with African subjects, and that there is something intimate and rewarding about adopting a holistic methodological arsenal that enables one to develop a comprehensive portrait of lived experiences, of the unseen sensory forces animating African lives. This intimate grounding of Africanist historical research can come from smelling, feeling, tasting, seeing, and hearing Africa in the present, *in the moment*. The smells and tastes of Africa in the present can provide clues to the past and vice versa.

In this respect, I want to suggest that Africanists embrace a new sensory methodology in which the art of smelling, touching, seeing, hearing, and feeling the subjects and objects of one's study becomes a central part of the historical inquiry. Not only would this sensory approach make the information gathered from archives and oral interviews come alive, the sensory resources that it produces can give the researcher a rare window into the rhythms and flavors of life in a given African locale. Listening to, feeling, and smelling Africa goes beyond merely being physically present in Africa, although that is one element of it; it is synecdochical of a larger methodological shift. It entails a research endeavor that goes beyond merely treating African settings as places for gathering information – oral and written – important as that may be.

The sensory keenness I am suggesting is in fact not focused on information and data but on locating in one's senses the unseen constellation of energies and sensory forces that undergird African lives – forces that neither the archive nor oral and formal ethnographic inquiry can reveal or capture.

Conclusion

The four trends and phenomena I have posited and analyzed here intrude on and challenge the effort of historians of Africa to write the histories of postcolonial Africa. Because this historical period and the experiences that mark it out are imbricated in a broader challenge of researching and writing history in the age of seamless informational flows, of heightened politicization of history, of intimate self-narration in the public space, and of long distance scholarly inquiries, there is a need for historians of Africa to develop a new methodological and analytical toolbox for making sense of novel realities. There is a need to develop alternative methodological imaginations outside the traditional forms.

As sources for writing African postcolonial stories have proliferated, new, exciting possibilities for intertextual and contextual interpretations have emerged. But these new sources, which include a dizzying array of autobiographical writings in multiple genres, have also created problems

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of interpretation and navigation for the historian. I have made a few preliminary suggestions on how historians of postcolonial Africa might approach and overcome this ironic co-emergence of research possibility and difficulty in the quest to *know* postcolonial Africa. One reason for this problem, to the extent that it is a problem, is that the pace of African life has accelerated in the postcolonial period of rapid globalization, transnational seepage, and technological diffusion.

Understanding postcolonial African pasts and presents requires, I have suggested, a new attention to the unconventional approach of sensing, feeling, hearing, smelling, and tasting the unseen currents and forces driving events and experiences in African communities. The historian of postcolonial Africa needs to become more attuned to the informal sensory properties of African communities and experiences. This suggestion is conceived not as replacement for traditional ways of doing African postcolonial history but as complementary to them.

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