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Abstract: With the rise of information technology, an increasing proportion of public African archives are being digitized and made accessible on the internet. The same is being done to a certain extent with private archives too. As much as the new technologies are raising enthusiasm, they have prompted discussion among researchers and archivists, on subjects ranging from matters of intellectual property to sovereignty and governance. Digital archiving disrupts archival norms and practices, opening up a field of reflection relatively little explored by historians. This article therefore seeks to reflect on the digital turn of African archives as a subject for study in its own right, located at the crossroads of political and economic interests.

Résumé: Avec l'essor des technologies de l'information, de plus en plus d'archives africaines publiques (et dans une certaine mesure privées) sont numérisées et rendues accessibles sur Internet. Même si ces nouvelles technologies suscitent l'enthousiasme, elles génèrent également des discussions entre chercheurs et archivistes, qui vont de la propriété intellectuelle à la souveraineté en passant par la gouvernance. L'archivage numérique perturbe les normes et les pratiques archivistiques et conséquemment ouvre un champ de réflexion relativement peu exploré par les historiens. Cet article cherche à offrir une réflexion sur le virage numérique pris par les archives africaines en le considérant comme un objet d'étude à part entière situé au carrefour d'intérêts politiques et économiques.

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Introduction¹

As information technology has become more significant, steadily more African archives, both public and – at least to an extent – private ones, are being put into digital formats and made accessible on the internet. The gathering wave of digitization is usually seen as progress, as ambitious initiatives help to apply new technologies to cultural heritage, such as the rescue of the manuscripts of Timbuktu or the Endangered Archives programme at the British Library. Yet as much as the new technologies have raised enthusiasm, they have caused debate too among researchers and archivists, who are having to address concerns about intellectual property rights, and things like sovereignty and governance.

The digitization of archives has opened technical opportunities to negotiate tension between African and European countries on matters related to colonial archives, their ownership, and legacy. The questions relate to the challenges of "shared memory"

¹ The authors would like to thank Yann Potin, along with the scholars who kindly suggested changes to our introduction at the European Conference of African Studies (2019) and those who agreed to participate in the peer-review process.

and “shared history” as well as to “decolonization,”² or at any rate that has been the rationale for the presentation of digital copies on the international political scene and in various media. As an example, digitization has meant that the colonial archives kept in the Museum of Tervuren in Belgium might now be given back to the Rwandese government,³ while in 2014 a digitized copy of the records of the 1944 massacre in Thiaroye could be presented to Macky Sall, President of Senegal, by then French President François Hollande.⁴ However, such initiatives do not go without controversy and debate,⁵ which shows that beyond the strict technical aspects, archives carry with them their share of political issues. In that sense, debates over

² Abdoulaye Imorou, “Thiaroye, Oradour-sur-Glane et les défis d’une mémoire partagée. Une lecture croisée de *Camp Thiaroye* et du *Vieux Fusil*,” *Études Littéraires Africaines* 40 (2015), 61–76; Osmane Mbaye, “Le CAOM: Un Centre d’archives Partagées?” *Afrique & Histoire* 1-7 (2009), 291–299; John Lagae, “From ‘Patrimoine Partagé’ to ‘Whose Heritage’? Critical Reflections on Colonial Built Heritage in the City of Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of the Congo,” *Afrika Focus* 21-1 (2008), 11–30.

³ “La Belgique va rendre au Rwanda les archives de la période coloniale,” RTBF.be (8 September 2018), https://www.rtb.be/info/belgique/detail_la-belgique-va-rendre-au-rwanda-les-archives-de-la-periode-coloniale?id=10031374, accessed 7 February 2019.

⁴ Martin Moure, “Thiaroye 1944. Histoire et mémoire d’un massacre,” *Africa4, Libération* (16 August 2017), <http://libeafrica4.blogs.liberation.fr/2017/08/16/thiaroye-1944-histoire-et-memoire-dun-massacre/>, accessed 7 February 2019.

⁵ Stéphanie Trouillard, “Massacre de Thiaroye: 70 ans après, les zones d’ombre demeurent,” *France24.com* (1 December 2014), <https://www.france24.com/fr/20141128-massacre-thiaroye-commemoration-senegal-dakar-tirailleurs-armee-france-polemique-historien>, accessed 7 February 2019; “Massacre de Thiaroye en 1944: A quand la fin de l’obstruction à la manifestation de la vérité ?” *Le Monde Afrique* (1 December 2016), https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/12/01/massacre-de-thiaroye-en-1944-a-quand-la-fin-de-l-obstruction-a-la-manifestation-de-la-verite_5041553_3212.html, accessed 7 February 2019.

digitization are to be understood as a continuation of long-running problems and controversies over archives, notably colonial archives and microfilming.⁶

At the same time, expectations are great among scholars who might see the overall digitization process as an opportunity to “dematerialize” access to archives and to lay firmer hold on their sources without always exploring the implications and complexity of such a process as applied to archives. The focus in scholarly debates more often revolves around the production of knowledge and the reliability, or “truth,” of sources, and while those aspects are essential to contemporary research, the whole subject of the politics of the making of conventional archives – let alone that of digitized ones – is less often addressed.

The first point to make, in the digital era, is that the question of ownership of documents is a crucial one, since the very definition of archive is challenged. The unique “hard copies” of paper documents can now exist in a variety of formats potentially reproducible at will. New possibilities have arisen for potential partnerships, and those possibilities bring their own challenges with them in terms of access and accountability. Secondly, various technical and economic matters at stake are equally essential to the discussion and are intertwined with the matter of sovereignty. African institutions elaborating a digitization programme might be doing so at the initiative of donors or non-African scholars, so that such archives are affected by negotiations that go far beyond the simple technical and scientific aspects. In the field of history, archives are usually addressed as sources for research and are questioned as such because of their documentary and historical aspects. More rarely

⁶ Jean-Pierre Bat, “Les Archives de l’AEF,” *Afrique & Histoire* 7 (2009), 301–311; Shepard, Todd, “‘Of Sovereignty’: Disputed Archives, ‘Wholly Modern’ Archives, and the Post-Decolonization French and Algerian Republics, 1962–2012,” *American Historical Review* 120–3 (2015), 869–883; Nathan Mnjama and James Lowry, “A Proposal for Action on African Archives in Europe,” in: James Lowry (ed.), *Displaced Archives* (London: Routledge, 2017), 101–113; Vincent Hiribarren, “Hiding the Colonial Past, A Comparison of European Archival Policies,” in: James Lowry (ed.), *Displaced Archives* (London: Routledge, 2017), 74–85.

are they approached as historically constructed systems combining intellectual and physical dimensions in the way archival science theorises them. Digital archiving therefore disrupts archival norms and practices, so opening up a field of reflection relatively little explored by historians. The digital turn of African archives is therefore an object of study in its own right, standing at the crossroads of political and economic interests.

In addressing the wave of digitization of archives in Africa over the last fifteen years, this featured section of *History in Africa* therefore seeks to reflect on the practices of digitization of archives in Africa and to engage with both history and archival science.

Please, Add a Section Heading

A remarkable enthusiasm for archives as an object of study has kept many scholars busy in the last decades, scholars from a wide range of disciplines in the humanities, from philosophy to the arts. Numerous academic debates and discussions on archives have been prompted in the light of Foucault's *The Archeology of Knowledge*⁷ and Derrida's *Archive Fever*,⁸ and postmodernism more generally. Indeed, the “archival turn” in cultural studies has recently stretched the meaning of the word “archive” and shifted “archives as concrete places to archives as more abstract– but just as real – conditions of knowledge.”⁹ From that perspective the concept of “archive” (in the singular) seems to be able not only to encapsulate a variety of objects and entities such as oceans for example, but could also be “performed.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, Michelle

⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock, 1972).

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁹ Jussi Paprikka, “Archival Media Theory. An Introduction to Wolfgang Ernst's Media Archaeology,” in: Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archives* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1-22.

¹⁰ Renisa Mawani, “Archival Legal History. Towards the Ocean as Archive,” in: Markus D. Dubber and Christopher Tomlins (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Legal History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 291–310; Maëline Le Lay, “Performer l'archive pour réécrire l'histoire: l'exposition Congo Far West au Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale de Tervuren,” in: Maëline Le Lay, Dominique

Caswell reminds us that “the archive is not an archives,” and that work and research from the field of archival studies are often omitted from recent scholarship on archives.¹¹ The very word “Archive” has come to be used to describe an all-encompassing notion, and in the process has perhaps lost some of its clarity, to the point that Kate Theimer argued in 2014 that confusion exists between the term “archives” and what could simply be called “historical representation” based on a selection of documents from the past.¹² As a result, the term “archives” now tends to be vaguely defined and is often overused in relation to legacy, narrative and knowledge.

However, or maybe for that reason, the echo of postmodernism in the field of archival science and some of the debates over it contrasted one another.¹³ As stated by Rachel Hardiman: “Although postmodernist ideas have their origins in fields external to the recordkeeping world, their impact and pervasiveness is such that, accepted or rejected, they cannot be simply ignored.”¹⁴ The postmodernist critique, when specifically directed at the production of knowledge and historiography and especially but not only in relation to Africa, has uncovered the limits of a “positivist”

Malaquais and Nadine Siegert (eds.), *Archive (Re)mix. Vues d’Afrique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015), 107–123.

¹¹ Caswell, Michelle L., “‘The Archives’ is not an Archives: On Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies,” *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Cultures* 16-1 (2016), 10-11, <<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7bn4v1fk>>, accessed 13 June 2019.

¹² Kate Theimer, “A Distinction Worth Exploring: ‘Archives’ and ‘Digital Historical Representations,’” *Journal of Digital Humanities* Vol. 2, No 3 (2014), <http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/3-2/a-distinction-worth-exploring-archives-and-digital-historical-representations/>, accessed 20 December 2018.

¹³ For an article providing a comprehensive summary of the postmodernist debate within the archive science community as well as an extensive bibliographic reference list, see: Terry Cook, “Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts,” *Archival Science* 1-1 (2001), 3–24.

¹⁴ Rachel Hardiman, “En Mal d’Archive: Postmodernist Theory and Record Keeping,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 30-1 (2009), 27–44.

approach to knowledge and demonstrated the relevance of examining and re-examining the making of archives as well as of history. “Archives” have themselves become a subject of study going beyond the professional activities of archivists and historians. Antoinette Burton, for example, has written about evidence, narrative, and the archive.¹⁵ Anthropologists like Ann Laura Stoler have begun to use archives in their own research and have theorised their use.¹⁶ Many researchers have engaged with the subject and have produced thought-provoking works about the articulation between colonial narrative and archives.¹⁷ Archivists themselves of course, explore the topic and are able to further the theoretical reflection from their concrete, practical perspective.¹⁸

The works of those writers, and the whole field more broadly, are essential to the examination of the production of knowledge. Such writers focus on content and narrative, and therefore engage with archives as documents. Yet another notion, often overlooked by historians, defines archives as the *fonds*, which is the basic unit for their classification rather than documents or records. When designing classification systems, archivists work to identify and bring to light the function of the governing

¹⁵ Antoinette M. Burton, *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

¹⁶ Ann Laura Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance: On the Content in the Form,” in: Francis X Blouin and William G. Rosenberg (eds.), *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory Essays from the Sanyer Seminar* (Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 267–279.

¹⁷ To name a small selection: Abena P.A. Busia, “Creating the Archive of African Women’s Writing: Reflecting on Feminism, Epistemology, and the Women Writing Africa Project,” *Meridians* 17-2 (2018), 233–245; Shiera S. El-Malik and Isaac A. Kamola (eds.), *Politics of African Anticolonial Archives* (London/New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, “Archival Fever,” Dipsaus podcast (30 December 2018), <https://www.dipsaus.org/exclusives-posts/2018/12/29/ihbijoa397wfc7xsgdhodv1r2l6wlvn>, accessed 7 February 2018.

¹⁸ Ellen Ndeshi Namhila, “Content and Use of Colonial Archives: An Under-Researched Issue,” *Archival Science* 16 (2016), 111-123; Ellen Ndeshi Namhila, “Archives of Anto-Colonial Resistance and the Liberation Struggle (AACRLS), An Integrated Programme to Fill the Colonial Gaps in the Archival Record of Namibia,” *Journal for Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences* 4-1/2 (2015), 168-178.

body that produced a given document, and they consider that function within its larger administrative framework. In short, they seek the “why” of the documents and not the “what.” Anyone might file documents in a specific and personally suitable manner, depending perhaps on equipment, habits of work, or some particular approach. In the same way, a governing body will order documents in a way specific to its own organization and rationale.

That is an essential feature of archives and understanding it is crucial to being able to grasp the difference between archival science and library and information science:

An archival collection is an organic whole, a living organism, which grows, takes shape, and undergoes changes in accordance with rules. If the functions of the body change, the nature of the archival collection changes likewise. The rules which govern the composition, the arrangement and the formation of an archival collection, therefore, cannot be fixed by the archivist in advance; he can only study the organism and ascertain the rules under which it was formed. Every archival collection has, therefore, as it were, its own personality, its individuality, which the archivist must become acquainted with before he can proceed to its arrangement.¹⁹

That definition of archives is not intended to mean that archival stewardship is by any means neutral.²⁰ However, it does imply that an archive is as much a structure as a gathering of documents. The digital turn that archives are taking is therefore of huge

¹⁹ Samuel Muller, Johan A. Feith and Robert Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1940), 19.

²⁰ Katherine Kim, “‘Archives Have Never Been Neutral:’ An NDSA Interview with Jarrett Drake,” *Digital Library Federation (DLF)* (15 February 2017), <https://www.diglib.org/archives-have-never-been-neutral-an-nds-interview-with-jarrett-drake/>, accessed 7 February 2019; Francis X. Blouin Jr. and William G. Rosenberg (eds.), *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory* (Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 87.

significance because it might affect the nature of the *fonds* as well as their arrangement. It is in fact a reflection of a broader shift in structures of power and governing dynamics.

With that in mind, we can see that the process of digitization therefore consists not simply of making digital copies of paper documents, for it is more than “digital photocopying.” Rather, the whole structure of any archive ought to be preserved and conveyed so as to reflect the rationale of the administration that created it. Such information is essential to the historical contextualization of sources and to understand the structures of power and governance.

That is even more true of the African case. There, many countries have developed archive institutions only relatively recently and certain of those have moved directly to “digital archives” without necessarily converting existing material, practices and processes from paper to a digital format. In other cases on the African continent digitization processes have been designed not only to classify but to “salvage” numerous endangered documents. The making of a detailed and hierarchically arranged listing of documents to be digitalised might then be favoured at the expense of preserving the *fonds* and structure of that archive. From that perspective the metadata of the archive can potentially become *de facto* an archival index with the attendant risk that basic archival standards such as provenance and *respect des fonds* (original order) are lost in the process.

The making of metadata is certainly accompanied by its share of challenges. As a structuring norm metadata tends to follow standards which might not always meet the structure of the *fonds* and might be dictated by the requirements of computer programming. For example, it might not always be possible to apply ATOM standards to African archives created in the first half of the twentieth century even if the International Council of Archives, as the body responsible for the creation of the

international ISAD(G) norms, was the first to support AToM.²¹ Moreover, because it is in many instances incomplete, digitization of existing archives tends to flatten a classification process which might actually have taken months or even years to create. By privileging a loose definition of “archives” as being mainly an index of documents/items/artefacts rather than a constituted *fonds*, the importance of the physical structure in the making of archives can come to be overlooked. That can in turn put at risk the long-term preservation of the physical *fonds*, jeopardizing the information and knowledge it conveys about the governing body or entity that produced it.

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The shift from paper to digital formats does not therefore consist solely of technicalities, although it certainly represents an epistemic “digital turn” in the history of archival practices and usage. First, the volume of and even the very structure of digital sources and data raise questions about the legitimacy and neutrality of the management of archives. Secondly, it consists in a reflection of the reconfiguration of worldwide power dynamics on the local and the global scales. In a “dematerialized” world, how can archives be controlled, both as part of a legacy but also as a record of the tools of government? Third, while the potential of unlimited access to sources by the public all over the world creates numerous opportunities, those very opportunities are accompanied by ethical and methodological problems.

As a consequence, the current wave of digitization is also radically changing the nature of research for scholars, archivists and governments. Scholars can now read documents without the cost of travelling to different archive centres and are able therefore to produce research results based on “remote African” documents. At the time of writing this introduction, examples are countless, but it is worth mentioning

²¹ AToM (Access to Memory) is a web-based archive description norm, ISAD(G) (General International Standard Archival Description) is an international standard used to describe archives in numerous countries.

that since the 1960s many documents have been duplicated by means of the microfilming of entire collections by universities – such as Syracuse University²² – or by governments. However, the digitization and the subsequent uploading of considerable amounts of data to servers has made large amounts of material available virtually everywhere on the planet, at least to institutions or individuals who can afford an Internet connection. The pioneers were the Digital Imaging South Africa team (DISA) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban in South Africa in 2002. Funded by the Andrew Mellon foundation, the project's aim was to digitize periodicals concerned with the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa from 1960 to 1994. DISA also inaugurated a pattern which is still recognisable fifteen years later where a Northern institution, or in the case of the Andrew Mellon foundation a private foundation, provides funds for a digitization project actually based in Africa. Aluka is an online platform created in 2003 on the same model, to gather documents on the liberation struggles of southern Africa during the second half of the twentieth century.²³ Funded initially by the US Mellon, Hewlett, and Niarchos private foundations it became an important archival repository before being integrated into JSTOR in 2008.²⁴ Incidentally both Aluka and JSTOR are sub-branches of the not-for-profit Ithaka organization, also a US initiative. Aluka specifically became one of the first collaborative platforms whereby archivists and researchers tried to develop a new narrative of the recently-won battles for liberation. Indeed it was no coincidence that all those projects were hosted in South Africa and the publication in 2002 of

²² Syracuse University microfilmed most of the archives hosted by the National Archives of Kenya in the 1960s: <https://surface.syr.edu/archiveguidekenya/9/>, accessed 11 April 2019.

²³ Allen Isaacman, Lalu Premesh 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.

²⁴ <https://about.jstor.org/whats-in-jstor/primary-sources/struggles-freedom-southern-africa/partnerships/>, accessed 15 January 2018. See also: Deirdre Ryan, "Aluka: Digitization from Maputo to Timbuktu," *OCLC Systems & Services* 26 (2010), 29–38.

Refiguring the Archive illustrates the phenomenon particularly well.²⁵ Peter Limb, a scholar of South Africa, was among the first to develop a critical understanding of that first wave of digitization and all his publications show that his original insight was accurate: “Twenty-first century missionaries carry not Bibles but scanners.”²⁶ The hope of this featured section of *History in Africa* is at least to further the debate. The last twenty years have witnessed the multiplication of digitization programmes in Africa.²⁷ Many projects are now available online despite their being difficult to find via most search engines. Because there are so many it would be nearly impossible to draw up a full list of all the projects undertaken by charities like the Mormons, universities,²⁸ governments (French “cooperation”), private companies like Arkhênum and Google²⁹ – or individuals.³⁰ In response to calls from international Northern institutions like Blue Shield, Archivistes Sans Frontières - International, British

²⁵ Lalu Premesh, “The Virtual Stampede for Africa: Digitization, Postcoloniality and Archives of the Liberation Struggles in Southern Africa,” *Innovation* 34-1 (2007), 28–44 or Keith Breckenridge, “The Politics of the Parallel Archive: Digital Imperialism and the Future of Record-Keeping in the Age of Digital Reproduction,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 40 (2014), 499–519.

²⁶ Peter Limb, “The Politics of Digital ‘Reform and Revolution’ towards Mainstreaming and African Control of African Digitisation,” *Innovation* 34-1 (2007), 18–27, 23. See also: Peter Limb, “The Digitization of Africa,” *Africa Today* 52-2 (2005), 3–19.

²⁷ Jean-Pierre Delva, “Un autre regard sur les archives en Afrique,” *Comma* 2015 (2016), 113–118.

²⁸ See the tremendous work done by Derek Peterson over the years in Uganda: <https://derekrpetererson.com/archive-work/>, accessed 4 November 2018. See also: Edgar Taylor, Ashley Rockenbach and Natalie Bond, “Archives and the Past: Cataloguing and Digitisation in Uganda’s Archives,” in: Terry Barringer and Marion Wallace (eds.), *Dis/Connects: African Studies in the Digital Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 163-178.

²⁹ In 2015, Google launched a programme of digitization of cultural artefacts, including archives, with the Kenya National Archives: <https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/kenya-national-archives>, accessed 20 June 2019.

³⁰ Enrique Martino, “Open Sourcing the Colonial Archive – A Digital Montage of the History of Fernando Pó and the Bight of Biafra,” *History in Africa* 14 (2014), 387–415.

Library Endangered Archives Programme;³¹ the Foundation Mário Suarez, the Prince Claus fund³² or Modern Endangered Archives Programme,³³ since the beginning of the twenty-first century archivists and historians have embraced digital solutions to preserve documents in their areas of expertise. Admittedly, Africa is not the only continent on which digitization programmes have taken place, but it is worth noting that African archives have been disappearing at an alarming rate not only because of political factors but climatic ones too. Consequently, a very large share of the money invested in digitization has been spent on programmes actually in Africa.

The phenomenon may be partially explained by technological advances, in the first instance. Inversely following Moore's Law which predicted that the number of transistors in an integrated circuit would double every two years, the price of the IT equipment necessary to undertake digitization programmes has fallen dramatically. Digital cameras for example have become much more affordable and in certain application have replaced cumbersome scanners. More crucially, hard drives, on which thousands of files of professional quality may now be stored, are considerably cheaper than they were in the 2000s as are Internet connections. Large-scale digitization programmes are therefore now increasingly feasible using relatively smaller amounts of money. One collateral symptom of the technological evolution is that many scholars have been able to store on hard drives many gigabytes of photographs of archives taken in Africa using their mobile telephone cameras. One could argue that the often un-coordinated efforts of massive digitization projects

³¹ <https://eap.bl.uk/>, accessed 23 January 2019. Two co-authors of this introduction (Marie Rodet and Vincent Hiribarren) have obtained major grants from the British Library. Jody Butterworth, "Saving Archives through Digitisation: Reflections on Endangered Archives Programme in Africa," *SCOLMA* (2017), 2–14 (SCOLMA is the UK Libraries and Archives Group on Africa).

³² The Prince Claus fund is funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a Dutch National Lottery, and private individuals and corporations.

³³ <https://www.library.ucla.edu/partnerships/modern-endangered-archives-program>, accessed 15 September 2019. A co-author of this introduction (Vincent Hiribarren) is a member of the international board of UCLA's Modern Endangered Archives Programme, funded by Arcadia.

extend the concept of an “archive” so that virtual and dispersed collection as in the case of “anticolonial archives” may be genuinely labeled “archives.”³⁴

Finally, there is still the widespread positivist belief that holds science – in this case digitization – to be the solution to all the problems faced by historians, archivists, or governments. Furthermore, the “complex of the white savior” seems sometimes to have been turned into the “complex of the digital savior” in a humanitarian African context, as so many Northern governments, institutions, or individuals have wished to join hands with African archivists to work on digitization projects.³⁵ There again, the idea of Western science being a panacea for the problems of development and governance faced by the African continent, is far from new.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints – better known as the Mormon Church – has assumed responsibility for the microfilming and digitization of birth and death registers in numerous African countries.³⁶ In their case the “savior complex” is explicitly Christian and based on the belief that the dead may be baptised in order to “redeem” and “save” any who die “with no knowledge of Jesus.”³⁷ While the number of documents digitized by the Mormon Church remains unclear, their genealogy database FamilySearch contains data obtained from thousands of documents digitized in Africa.³⁸

³⁴ Shiera S. El-Malik and Isaac A. Kamola (eds.), *Politics of African Anticolonial Archive* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

³⁵ Bhakti Shringarpure, “Africa and the Digital Savior Complex,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2018.1555749>, accessed 29 October 2019.

³⁶ See an example in Sierra Leone <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/church-preserves-precious-records-of-african-nation>, accessed 20 June 2019.

³⁷ <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/2017/08/why-baptisms-for-the-dead?lang=eng>, accessed 20 June 2019.

³⁸

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/list/?page=1&recordType=Migration&ec=region%3AAFRICA>, accessed 20 June 2019.

Beyond the “Digital Savior”

The 2010s were the decade when the “complex of the digital savior” affected historians and archivists most spectacularly. Conflict-ridden regions have become archetypal places where traces of the past need to be preserved. A striking example is Mali, where historians-cum-saviors have digitized manuscripts from Timbuktu.³⁹ Captured in 2012 by members of Ansar Dine and the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, Timbuktu has become the reluctant symbol of African culture under attack by jihadist obscurantists. The need for Timbuktu’s manuscripts to be saved was not new and had actually been at the origin of the creation of the Ahmed Baba national archives in Timbuktu. However, the crisis of 2012 in Mali added new urgency to the situation. New private archive entrepreneurs saw an opportunity to place under the spotlight a series of mostly private emergency rescue and digitization projects, which required enormous and urgent worldwide fundraising campaigns. Strikingly, the sustainability of such large-scale digital projects is not always thoroughly considered. Terabytes of data are now held on hard drives and to a lesser extent on memory sticks and DVDs. Hard drives (external Solid State Drives) are usually designed to survive for ten years if they are used as cold storage. Funding bodies in many Western countries actually ask their successful candidates to provide a data management plan to manage data files in the immediate future but no one yet knows how to preserve digital data for much longer times without constantly duplicating it. Surely it is far from fanciful even now to think of future projects being needed to save endangered digital files, perhaps in just a few decades? After all, in many archive centres today microfilms are urgently being digitized.

³⁹ See in particular the South Africa funded Timbuktu manuscripts project: <https://www.tombouctoumanuscripts.org/>, accessed 29 October 2019. On an early critique of fundraising campaigns to salvage the “Timbuktu manuscripts”, see Bruce H. Hall’s op-ed on H-West-Africa: “Timbuktu manuscripts fundraising response” <https://lists.h-net.org/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-West-Africa&month=1306&week=b&msg=Ba8ZfluKZ7AYy3J52KZBBw>, accessed 29 October 2019. On the genealogy of West African Arabic Manuscript projects, see also: Graziano Krätli, “West African Arabic Manuscript Heritage at a Crossroads: Dust to Digital or Digital Dust?” *Anuari de Filologia. Antiqua et Mediaevalia* (Anu.Filol.Antiq.Mediaevalia) 5 (2015), 41-66, <http://revistes.ub.edu/index.php/AFAM/article/viewFile/15232/18463>, accessed 29 October 2019.

Already accused of fetishizing written documents even in an African context, many historians appropriated the discourse on “endangered archives.” They have chosen to save “their” archives, sometimes joining forces with private archiving entrepreneurs while dismissing the role played by professional archivists working in the public sector. The trend of private initiatives can prove extremely problematic when historians disregard what archivists have previously done or are currently doing to preserve the documents in question – even if more slowly and within a national institutional framework. In the French context Yann Potin has already explored the “divorce” between historians and archivists and stressed that most historians ignore what archivists have accomplished in creating, classifying, cataloguing, and preserving “their” archives.⁴⁰ Such ignorance of the archivist’s work is often exacerbated by the fact that some digitization projects have dealt only vaguely with historical “archives,” such projects certainly tending to reinforce a form of disciplinary arrogance, as Michelle Caswell argued in 2016:

There seems to be little understanding in the humanities that professional archivists have master’s degrees, that archival standards and best practices are culturally constructed artefacts, and that behind every act of archival practice is at least a century-old theoretical conversation.⁴¹

The digital files we see on our computer screens give the false impression that the documents were discovered and “harvested” easily, like large nuggets littering the floor of an archival gold mine. All the archival work undertaken before, during, and after digitization is being made invisible, as the term “archive” has come to designate not the physical documents any more, but what appears on the screen. Such

⁴⁰ Yann Potin, “Intervention de Yann Potin,” *Gazette des Archives* 225 (2012), 49–53.

⁴¹ Caswell, “‘The Archive’ Is Not an Archives,” 11.

obliteration, as it were, of the work of African archivists coupled with the “digital imperialism” already observed in the 2000s might yet have dramatic consequences for the future of African archives, which are already underfunded. Most current digitization projects rely on money from Northern institutions, and they tend to focus on the final product, which of course is the digital material. Many if not most digitization projects therefore concern archives which have already been classified and inventoried. As a noticeable result, only increasingly limited funding is being provided for what is practically needed to support the physical salvaging of genuinely endangered archives. Such things as acid-free paper, boxes, shelves, air conditioned rooms in suitable buildings, and so on are scarce, expensive, and undervalued, it seems. There is now a greater risk that archives which have not been previously classified and inventoried will be lost because the slow work of digitization projects monopolises the time of many archivists. There is then the very real prospect that the process of digitising will endanger not only the activities of archivists but to a certain extent even their very profession. In other words, Northern digital aspirations, with the complicity of Southern governments driven by short-term financial interests, might ruin longer-term Southern efforts at analogue preservation. Paradoxically all this will have been done in the name of enhancing good governance in the South.⁴² When on top of that digitization programmes are conducted by private companies or “heritage entrepreneurs” whose aim is financial profit, one can understand the sense of pillage being experienced by local populations and certain public experts in the sector. They are powerless to do more than deplore the increasing sub-contracting strategy of an under-resourced state. They can only deprecate neglectful or sometimes ill-intentioned politicians for whom archives are certainly not the priority, despite the fact that archives are a central public service, a state prerogative, and a crucial government instrument which can ensure accountability and good governance.

⁴² For example, see: John Abdul Kargbo, “The Connection between Good Governance and Record Keeping: The Sierra Leone Experience,” *Journal of The Society of Archivists* 30 (2009), 249–260.

Structure and Content of this Special Issue

Stockreiter's article clearly shows the potential of private partnerships between local initiatives and international heritage entrepreneurs when the state is absent, as in the case of the Djenné Manuscript Library. As such initiatives can be funded almost solely by external means (The British Library's Endangered Archives Programme in that case) their drawbacks are immediately obvious, with the risk that digitization programmes will be ill-equipped to deal with local tensions and conflicting political interests, and will lack the necessary research experience to understand local contexts in order to secure access to the archives. Consequently there then arises the question of the outcome of the programme once the external heritage entrepreneurs and their funding have left. The inability of such projects to build digital sustainability and long-term development strategies is certainly one of the greatest limitations to the success of private partnerships driven from outside – if there will be no local and central government involvement in the long-term.

Keese and Owabira's article is another that shows the limits of digitizing programmes which, as with many greatly endangered archives in Africa, tend to overlook the necessity of first salvaging physical archives many of which have never been classified nor even inventoried. There is in such cases an immediate risk of disappearance. For example, in the case of the postcolonial regional archives in Pointe Noire highlighted in this article, the number of files digitized is not a sufficient benchmark to assess the success of preserving similar such endangered archives. Cooperation between archivist and historian is here central to ensuring that the actual work done by archivists on the ground with very limited means does not suffer the endangerment which is always a possible side-effect of mostly externally driven digitization projects and "digital humanitarianism."

Schneider and Weinberg's article discusses directly and at length what constitutes the African photography archive and its contradictions, and how digitization might actually change the very nature of the photographs digitized. Increased accessibility globally might also and paradoxically accelerate the digital divide, as internet

accessibility remains notably low in Africa. Who are the global audience, indeed? To whom are the digital contents made accessible? How can the whole dimension of a photograph be rendered in a digital collection? Which brings us back to the fundamental questions, “What is an African photography digital archive?” and “To what extent does the digitization process disrupt archival norms, practices and definitions while as asserted by the authors “There is no way back!?”

El Qadim’s article explores what a modern service of archives centred on digitization means and implies as in the case of the Archives du Maroc created in 2011. Has digitization become the new seal of approval for an archive to be considered modern in Africa? That is indubitably what the Archives du Maroc services claim and a central policy that they pursue at every level despite the onerous costs. But in a context of limited resources and while that institution is still in a fragile legitimation state, it is also probably a strategic “necessary evil” to secure more resources and funding in future.

Losch’s article shows that the digitization processes targeting broadcasting archives at risk in West Africa since the beginning of the century have to do with pre-existing technical cooperation networks, which are themselves connected to colonial history. Losch also questions the practical implications for digitization in former French colonies in West Africa which do not retain digital copies of their oldest audio-visual heritage. The vast majority of that heritage is still in France, more specifically in the hands of its Institut National de l’Audiovisuel which has placed the material behind a pay wall. One consequence of that is an accrued postcolonial digital divide which has limited the national broadcasters’ leeway, as in practice, safeguarding and preservation cannot be separated from the logics of restitution and sharing of already digitized audio-visual resources pertaining to a supposedly “shared” history.

Finally, Lawrance, Corcoran and Hooper’s article more broadly questions the matter of “digital dispersal” of archives when that occurs simultaneously and haphazardly, whether accidentally or intentionally as in the case of asylum documentation. They consider what that implies for the archives of the future history of forced

international migration as it applies to countries such as Togo. They refer again to questions about the dangers of digital documentation where there are no physical copies and the possible consequences of that situation for future access, and thus for transparency and ultimately its effect on governance.