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The Africanist Archive in the Post-colonial Era of New Media:
Conservation and Creation at the African Studies Centre in the Netherlands

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Whose Archives and Database in the Epoch of New Media: The Africanist Archive in the Post-colonial Era; Experiences in Conservation and Creation at the African Studies Centre in the Netherlands

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Abstract

In this paper we search the hidden post-colonial archives of Africanist research and how to make these available to scholars and the public. These are diverse archives: the personal archive of the scholar, often hidden in 'trunks' at 'homes', the institutional archives hidden in not connected places in Africa, like university libraries etc.. Modern technologies have increased the archiving problem by adding the hidden digitalised archives: the electronic archives on African websites, and other electronic storage, and finally the increasingly growing digital archives of scholars. How can we 'safe' these archives and make these accessible for the wider scholarly community? Archiving should be both a concern of librarians who want to 'conserve' as much data as possible, but as well researchers/scholars who are faced with increasing possibilities to gather data and to store these electronically, but how to make sure these will not only be kept in ('electronic') 'trunks'? In this paper we explore the practice of archiving as has been experienced at the African Studies Centre in Leiden as an example for debate. This paper is a call for collaboration between librarians and researchers who should create 'living' archives, that are 'open-access', both of scholarly research but as well of the newly appearing digitalised materials.

Introduction

An important body of knowledge about Africa is hidden in personal archives of scholars. Only a few of these archives have the privilege to become a public archive (open access) often only after the death of its celebrated creator. These 'trunk archives' contain valuable information often in condensed form of a lifetime research in a few places in post colonial Africa. It is a serious loss for knowledge production if these archives, often of less famous scholars, disappear in shredders, or stay in trunks on the upper floor of the scholar's children's houses. However today's libraries have no space to take care of these archives and indeed many are refused a place even before their content is understood. The African Studies centre is a unique

centre where researchers have indeed been able to build up their own archives of post-colonial Africa, but what has been done to conserve these?

These observations should alarm today's scholars about the future of their own archives. Archiving research data has become easier with the advance of digital techniques, although this has as well led to the untamed gathering of data, piling up photographs, e-documents and ever increasing voice and film records, that are difficult to be analysed. The other side of this digital story is however that we can indeed store our data easily (though not always very safe). Libraries do increasingly use digitalisation as a way to gain space and to store more. The difference with the former generation of researchers is also the fluidity of data itself. Communication is increasingly done in cyberspace and letters or written diaries are disappearing, instead there is a load of SMS messages, facebook accounts and email exchanges. These do hardly end up in a 'trunk'. Libraries and researchers need new technological knowledge to be able to create an archive and subsequently conserve it. A research programme into mobile telephony and society in Africa faces these challenges that are so far unresolved.

There are two other aspects of African archives that need to be considered. The first one is the aspect of conservation and digitalisation of paper archives existing in Africa. Many of these archives have been neglected for the past years, though they contain interesting information concerning the history of Africa. There are a few initiatives that pay attention to these archives: in Africa itself, but also at such diverging institutes as the ZAB (Basel), IISG (Amsterdam) and the British Library in London (and the ASC).

Another challenge both scholars and librarians are facing is the question of the overflowing load of information that can be found on websites in Africa -and the preservation of it. Some of this information can only be accessed for a short period (theses Nsukka Nigeria, Zuma court case) and then seems to disappear into oblivion. Government publications from African countries used to appear in paper form, but are now regularly published online only. Who will safeguard this material, beyond the personal interest of the scholar who will certainly safe some of this material in his or her trunk? Should constitutions of African countries be printed out, bound in paper form and be shipped to libraries all over the world? If not, who will make sure that a certified copy will be maintained on a safeguarded server?

These questions become even more relevant considering today's debate about 'open-access'. On October 13 the NRC-Handelsblad one of the biggest newspapers in the Netherlands reported on the new development in NWO (Dutch foundation for the funding of research) that has announced to its research community that all research data from the projects they finance should be shared with NWO who will make it part of its open access policy. This announcement was followed by reactions from the researchers' community that are both very much in favour or against this idea of open access of raw data. One of the objections is indeed the ethical dilemma. However most prominent is the question if indeed the researcher is 'owner' of these data. It is however time that we investigate the possibility of leaving good archives while we are doing our research. In present day research with the technological possibilities of digital recording, filming etc. it seems relatively easy to make an archive of these materials. Should today's libraries not as well take as their tasks to store these life stories, film and videos? But as these are always linked to real people and persona, we should question the ethics. However was this ever done by the colonial fonctionnaires and their archive building?

Archiving personal and institutional archives of the pre-digital era

People can be understood as being archives. They contain stories and narratives that are the living memory of past events. It is therefore that in regions where 'traditional' archives are not present, as is the case in many African regions, the only resort we have are the memories and life histories of people. The construction of history on the basis of these memories has its problems of subjectivity, construction of the past, etc. Nevertheless these stories when transcribed do form archives. How can we make these archives accessible for future researchers? And what are experiences with it? One of the obvious problems that we will encounter is that these stories might be very personal or contain information that are rather not shown to the public, in some cases even endangering the person and his/her family who told the story. These ethical problems are especially present in the more qualitative approaches within African Studies.

The African Studies Centre (Leiden) may serve as an example. The centre exists since around 1960 as an independent research and documentation centre. Most researchers employed by the centre stay for life and produce(d) different research data, recording African history of the post-independent period. These are stored by

the researchers in their own ways, often in maps, diaries, some data bases, pictures etc. are often not well archived. The risk is that these personal archives simply get lost. Researchers make their own decisions where their data will go, often there was no interference of the centre. This is for instance what happened to the archive of Robert Buijtenhuis who did research in Chad for many years, followed the rebellions and its actors, and stored many of his data in written form (he could not handle a computer), at the most by a typewriter, in a trunk; the trunk archive of the individual researcher. At his death these trunks have disappeared and there is no record of where they could be. He was able to decide on his own where his valuable data gathered over a period of three decades could go.

Another example is the archive of Gerti Hesseling. She was a person who organised her data in a very organised and rigid manner. The boxes with data are now piled up in one of the offices of our institute. When these were proposed to the library for storage this was kindly refused. There is no space/room to keep all these maps and organised but not registered materials. Gerti's books were donated to an African Library in Senegal.

These private data archives are probably one of the most important archives we will have in the future about post-colonial Africa. Let alone the personal archives of African scholars.

These personal archives consist of archive layers. They are the personal observations of the researchers, for instance in his or her diaries; but they are also documents gathered in the field, for instance news papers etc., that were rarely stored in these African countries. Furthermore they often contain personal archives of African people who were part of the research as informants. These are the hidden non-digitalised archives in Africa: the diaries, the photo albums, often scattered photo's and letters in the many houses of African elites or educated people. The loss of a scholar's archive may mean the loss of these personal archives as well. Of course these scholars will publish about part of these data, but often many of these data will end up in the personal archives that then are destroyed or divided over different people, as exemplified above.

Possibilities for libraries

Part of the problems we are facing will need some technical reflections. What can we do to conserve these archives? If space is lacking what alternatives are there? And what about confidentiality of these archives? Can they be open-access immediately?

(…..)to create open access for these archives, or even to store them is not an easy task. One solution often proposed is the digitalisation of these archives, but which archives will be included and which not? Who decides? What is important for the future?

And what about the ethical questions? Did the scholar who made his/her archive realise that this would be open for public use one day? How to protect the informants?

These questions go beyond the scholar's archive and include a more general question of how far the libraries can go with the digitalisation of (perishing) paper archives in Africa. Many of these archives have been neglected for the past years, though they contain interesting information concerning the history of Africa. There are a few initiatives that pay attention to these archives: in Africa itself, but also at such diverging institutes as the ZAB (Basel), IISG (Amsterdam) and the British Library in London. (to be extended…….)

Archiving hidden digital archive: the 'living archive'

The digital era in which many documentation is created in cyberspace poses new challenges for research. It does not only multiply the documents in archives as producing text in the digital era has become so much easier, but it also questions the researcher's own possibilities to create an archive. In fact we are observing a period that could be labelled the period of the 'living' archive, both the creation of archives in institutions as a continuous process and the creation of a scholarly archive as part of the research practice. What are the roles of scholars and librarians in the 'conservation and creation of the ling archive'?

The 'living' archive in institutions

How to deal with the enormous load of information that can be found on websites in Africa -and the preservation of it? Some of this information can only be accessed for a short period (theses Nsukka Nigeria, Zuma court case) and then

seems to disappear into oblivion. Government publications from African countries used to appear in paper form, but are now regularly published online only. Who will safeguard this material? Should constitutions of African countries be printed out, bound in paper form and be shipped to libraries all over the world? If not, who will make sure that a certified copy will be maintained on a safeguarded server?

(…….. to be elaborated…)

The fear is that:

'The digital trunk vanishes for ever in cyber space.'

'Living archives' as practice in on-going qualitative research

Experiences with the building of an archive for qualitative research are hardly documented. It is a new practice copied from the examples of quantitative research. The debate around the accessibility of these data is only starting as the challenge is only recently become a public debate in the Netherlands an also elsewhere. However the related issues of ethics, ownership etc. are of old. We need to reconsider these questions in the digital era (references). Next to these profound ethical questions there is as well a very practical question: how to do it? In today's research programmes in which the practice is increasingly collaboration between researchers, working in teams of professors, Post-doc researchers and PhD and MA students, the archiving exercise becomes much more complicated than in the case of individual researchers controlling their own data. The possibilities of accessing data and of storing data as was already discussed above complicate this practice of archiving even more. Increasingly qualitative research does also relate to complicated programmes to process the data: example is kwalitan. These programmes allow researchers to store and organise qualitative data in a semi-quantitative way. It is a tool to organise the increasing loads of data in the digital era.

On-going practice

In this section we will explain how we are struggling to gather recent historical data in a research programme on communication technology in Africa. We embarked on a programme for the understanding of present day changes in Africa related to the introduction of new ICTs in 2008. The research developed around the wish to understand social and economic change in marginal regions where mobile

telephony was a recent phenomenon (and still is). The case studies are developed from marginal areas: Central Chad, Anglophone Cameroon, South Africa and South-west Angola, and north and central Mali. We are at the middle of this project and still in the process to figure out how to work in the new media environment that in this case is both part of our field research practice (cf. Pelckmans 2009) and topic of research. One of the conclusions is that this world of communication is a fluid world and that the location of data is increasingly difficult to define. On the other hand the possibilities to collect data, through digital recording, scamming, photography (of archives for instance), etc. the amount of data we gather today is overwhelming, let alone to turn these into archives for the future.

New Media as part of the research problem

'New mobility patterns and dynamics of social interaction between migrants and their home communities result from the introduction of ICT, just as old logics are mobilised to shape the new ICTs (Castells 1996/2000). Amongst the ICTs, the Internet and mobile phone are the most striking in their global impact, and particularly relevant to understand the possibilities and limitations of marginal regions and social categories. In Africa, the mobile phone is not only complementary to the Internet. Its flexible mobility makes it especially adapted to the connection of remote regions amongst themselves and with physically mobile 'Others' in the urban spaces of the same country or with distant places on the continent and globally. Its amenability to use even by the most illiterate in the most remote corners of Africa makes of the mobile phone the technology par excellence of monitoring the impact of ICTs socially in an African context. For this reason, the mobile phone forms an important entry point into this study. Recent technological innovation, however exciting, cannot be wholly understood in historical isolation, hence our interest in the history of ICTs in Africa in general, and in the selected countries and regions in particular'

The research questions we formulated were:

❖ How do new ICTs, notably the mobile phone, (re)shape social/economic relations between people *in* and *from* the 'mobile margins'?

❖ How do people in these margins interpret and evaluate the impact of ICTs, in view of the histories of centrality/marginality, contact/isolation, inclusion/exclusion?

❖ To what extent and with what outcomes do Africans in marginal communities on the one hand and within marginal social categories on the other, socially shape ICTs, the mobile phone in particular?

❖ What lessons could be drawn from the experiences of mobile margins in and from Africa on the introduction and appropriation of ICTs, towards informing scholarship and policy on development, poverty alleviation, citizenship and global relations?

As is often the case in these research proposals the methodological paragraph is obvious and the research very 'doable':

'The methodology of a project on 'mobile margins' should be flexible revolving around strings of people and not necessarily geographical spaces. 'Marginal communities' and their worldwide diasporic connections will be part of the research. Mobility, or real and virtual presence and absence, must dictate research methods in which the very ICTs studied play a central role. Doing surveys, tracing people for interviewing (either face-to-face or via email and mobile phone) and studying documents in written, audio and electronic archives in various places (as opposed to being located in particular geographical spaces for fieldwork in the conventional sense) may not only lead to interesting new findings, but also provide new and potentially enriching methodological alleys to explore. While there is some information about the methodological implications of family histories (…), we look forward to combining these insights with current explorations in the field of migrant cultures and trans-national studies (….). We intend to draw on source material on how new ICTs such as the mobile phone and e-mail messaging may transgress the traditional divisions of oral sources and written documents, and suggest new methodologies for interpreting 'virtual' sources (….).'

In a final paragraph of the proposal we 'promise' that in order to make this project into a success also for future research we should develop an archive of the project, which would serve as an archive for the future. By that we meant that each of the researchers should make a rough selection of their interviews etc. to make it available for a next generation of researchers.

In this research there are several problems with regard to data gathering and archiving of these; but there are as well challenges with regard to new media and archiving as such. In fact what the programme does is 'thick description' as proposed by Geertz (cf. Benedikter & Giordano 2011).

(…)

In the research projects that form our programme the solution for this has been the intensive engagement of the researchers with their informants and societies. The proposal was to travel with them, to understand their conversations, to see the in-between in practice.

Building the 'living archive'

Thus the programme is challenged by both its own topic of research that introduces the new techniques of communication/ new media, but at the same time makes it impossible to deny the existence of these new techniques for dissemination of research and for 'storing' data. Indeed all researchers in the programme have their own computers with many gigabytes, etc.

To be able to build the living archive the first thing we did in the programme was setting up a web site, where we try to keep a record of the research reports, of film, of pictures, and of events. The other is the closed chat box where exchanges between the team members are a way of recording on-going process of research. The most important in this living archive is however the documentation of the data of the separate projects. Although it was our intention to make this into a similar endeavour for each of the projects, it soon turned out that all researchers have their own way of doing in the process of gathering qualitative data. Most of the interviews are typed out, a lot of data digitalised. The next step in the project is to make the 'trunks' and as we discussed with the researchers they have to be closed as long as the PhD and Post-doc students are publishing about them. The question of ownership has been quite severe. In fact it is only after the finalisation of the PhD work that these data can be accessible. The effort to make an accessible archive (with consent of the informants) is as time-consuming as the PhD-thesis writing itself is. We hope to give you more insight into this process when we present our findings in relation to the living archive in June in Dakar (….).

Film as an exchange medium and as a 'living archive'

In this project we have intentionally included film not only as a means to make a documentary/reportage to disseminate the results of the research, but also as a way to document and archive the research findings. Film and photography are stored integrally as material to be explored by others. For this part of the project we work with a professional filmer who has been able to follow the researchers in Cameroon. They have shared their experiences with him, made interviews that are now recorded, etc. The material of these films is integrally stored on hard disks and available for the future. It has also been used to make short documentaries and a longer film that helps disseminate the results of the research. These short films are also used to discuss developments observed by some researchers with the others.

The difficulty of this type of 'live archiving' is that it is rather costly. In this project we have chosen therefore to only film in Cameroon. The evaluation of this part of the project should show its relevance and in the end cost effectiveness. (cf. www.mobileafricarevisited.wordpress.com).

Libraries in the digital era

Is there not a new task for libraries in the digital era? It would be great if libraries could start a systematic effort to 'store' these private and research project archives, i.e. with the increasing possibilities to digitalise data it must be possible to develop skills and room for this new challenge so that the archives are not lost for the future.

These new possibilities demand new codes for academic trust and behaviour. (…..to be elaborated on…)

Conclusion: Whose archives? Technicalities, Open-access and ownership

In this paper we have emphasised the technical questions that we are facing both as librarians and as scholars in the changing research practices in our digital era. It is clear that we are at a turning point. We have proposed the 'building' of 'living archives' as a possible new direction in the discussion about the post-colonial archive of Africa. This paper intended only to raise the issues and start the discussion and we consider this paper as a first step towards a better

conceptualisation of our ideas and the opening of a debate that we hope to further in June in Dakar…..

Changing research practices… changing institutional practices…. Go with new ways for the researchers; new archives….. we are at a turning point; but in the end that what is conserved in what way will define the knowledge production of the future and thus define power relations in the world; it is therefore that these questions raised in this paper are important, the technical possibilities that are at our disposal today do create opportunities to reformulate the knowledge landscape…

Is 'living archive' a good concept to further elaborate????

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