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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Researching post-independence Africa in regional archives: possibilities and limits in Benin, Cabo Verde, Ghana and Congo-Brazzaville

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Abstract

Africa's regional archives offer crucial records to explore the continent's postcolonial past. Although these archives are often difficult to locate and access and are exposed to several challenges that might even threaten their existence, this article presents a solid case for reconsidering their importance. Recent trends, aptly labelled 'postcolonial African archival pessimism', have mainly pointed to problems and often to the limited accessibility of state archives in some regional and local contexts. This article instead engages with their potential, discussing four case studies in Benin, Cabo Verde, Ghana and Congo-Brazzaville. Results stemming from these case studies are brought into contact with wider debates on custodial cultures and the regional archives' role in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa. The intention is to provide a more positive and empirically based overview of research possibilities at regional archives and ultimately to change the nature of our approach to these resources.

Résumé

Les archives de province en Afrique contiennent des ressources essentielles en vue de l'interprétation du passé postcolonial du continent. Bien que ces archives soient souvent difficiles de localiser et d'accéder, et malgré le fait qu'elles sont sujettes à un nombre de défis qui peuvent même mettre en péril leur existence, cet article présente des arguments solides pour reconsidérer leur importance. Les tendances de discussion récentes, qualifiées de manière appropriée comme « pessimisme archivistique africain postcolonial », ont principalement déploré les problèmes et le manque d'accessibilité fréquents qui caractérisaient les archives d'état dans certains contextes locaux et provinciaux. Dans un sens bien contraire, cet article met l'accent sur leur potentiel, en discutant quatre études de cas – au Bénin, aux îles de Cap-Vert, au Ghana et au Congo-Brazzaville. Les résultats de ces études de cas sont mis en relation avec les débats portant sur les cultures de conservation et le rôle quotidien des archives de province en Afrique subsaharienne contemporaine. L'intention de l'article est de fournir une discussion des possibilités de recherche dans les archives de province bien plus positive et

résidant sur des observations empiriques plus profondes, et de changer en fin de compte la nature de notre approche pour ces ressources.

Resumo

Os arquivos distritais em África contêm recursos essenciais para o objetivo de interpretar o passado pós-colonial do continente. Embora por estes arquivos seja frequentemente difícil de os localizar e de obter o acesso, e mesmo em vista dos desafios que encontram e que podem até pôr em perigo a sua existência, este artigo propõe argumentos sólidos para uma reconsideração da importância dos recursos em questão. Tendências recentes, cujas posições têm sido qualificadas, de maneira bem apropriada, como um 'pessimismo arquivístico africano pós-colonial', têm discutido sobretudo os possíveis problemas e, muitas vezes, os limites de acessibilidade de certos arquivos de estado ao nível distrital e local. Utilizando a perspectiva contrária, este artigo expõe os seus potenciais, por uma discussão de quatro estudos de caso – do Benim, de Cabo Verde, do Gana e do Congo-Brazzaville. Os resultados obtidos da análise dos estudos de caso são postos em contato com debates mais amplos interessados em culturas de conservação e no papel do arquivo de distrito na África subsaariana contemporânea. A nossa intenção é de oferecer uma discussão mais positiva das possibilidades de investigação nos arquivos distritais, com base numa interpretação de observações empíricas, e de transformar finalmente a natureza da nossa visão sobre estes recursos.

Introduction

In November 2015, we had a conversation with the municipal archivist in the remaining old annexe of the flamboyant new town hall at Ouidah, one of the principal towns of Benin's Département de l'Atlantique.¹ We enquired about the current state of archives and the possibility of looking at documents related to the late colonial and early post-independence period. The archivist immediately gave us his pessimistic impression, according to which 'there [were] no archives dealing with the period that precedes Benin's transition to democracy [i.e. before the 1990s]' and 'therefore, there [was] nothing to see'.² This conversation, in many ways, is representative of the initial negative responses researchers are likely to have received in several places across West and Central Africa while conducting research in regional archives.³ Material was claimed to be destroyed or moved to national or state archives in capital cities – but these claims could rarely be sustained.

Public archives in Africa at the district (provincial) or municipal level have recently received scholarly interest: studies have looked at how these holdings are administered, according to which logics, and who seeks and gets access to these

¹ Ouidah is a medium-sized city located on Benin's coast, and its town hall (*mairie*) allegedly holds the entire local administration's archival collection. On the building, see 'Report de l'inauguration de l'Hôtel de ville de Ouidah: Séverin Adjovi dénonce l'acharnement du Préfet Azandé', *La Presse du Jour*, 1818, 6 February 2013. For the activities regarding Ouidah's historical past that the municipal administration promotes, see Ciarcia (2008).

² Conversation with Djibril Bounaïma, archivist at the town hall (*mairie*) at Ouidah, 16 November 2015.

³ In former British colonies (where 'regions' were and are an administrative unit), one would speak of 'regional archives'; in former French colonies (such as Benin and Congo-Brazzaville in this comparative study), the term '*archives de la préfecture*' prevails, as colonial 'districts' frequently became postcolonial '*préfectures*'. In most Lusophone African countries, the administrative term would be *arquivos do distrito*. Cabo Verde is an exception, having changed the name of the administrative unit from '*concelho*' to '*município*' and having *arquivos da câmara municipal*.

sources. Historians such as Edgar Taylor (2021: 548) have claimed that traditions of dealing with records in smaller archives originated in the (late) colonial period and that they were conditioned by the demands and routines of post-independence regimes. These issues may concern all smaller public archives, although – as our research experience observing routines and being users of the archives will show – they do not always result in a conscious effort to hold back or obscure archival materials.

Studies have assessed custodial cultures in some regional archives, but what those regional archives can provide as a source for the historian has rarely been pointed out. We hope, in this article, to engage in important ways with claims regarding archival sources on Africa's postcolonial past. While the need to survey the potential of African archives was formulated as early as 1960 in Philip Curtin's classic article, historians have assumed, in the absence of a thorough, updated survey of Africa's documentary repositories, that archival sources for the period after independence are likely to be few, 'poorly maintained and difficult to use' (Ellis 2002: 13). As we will show, there are good reasons to challenge what Nana Osei-Opare (2021: 63–4) recently called 'postcolonial African archival pessimism'. We endeavour to contribute to the creation of a 'burgeoning school' engaging with postcolonial archives, and this article will demonstrate their importance at the regional level.⁴

We will try to demonstrate the potential of postcolonial regional archives through four examples that qualify them as *essential* resources, in particular for the study of social historical contexts. The article questions the somewhat broadly held assumption that postcolonial archival records are mainly lost or inaccessible by proposing a more empirically based discussion of what kind of resources are available and what research possibilities they offer. We bring together several examples to highlight a series of research opportunities on the post-independence era and to survey differences but also, crucially, common denominators.

The four countries selected have different historical and archival traditions and are located in different geographical areas of the African continent. The regional archives include those of Ouidah and Abomey in Benin, Ribeira Grande and Paúl in Santo Antão, Cabo Verde, Ho in Ghana, and Pointe-Noire in the Republic of Congo. Although four case studies do not offer an exhaustive picture for postcolonial Africa, they certainly take us away from claims made on the basis of a single, and often exceptional, example. Our results point to several under-researched paths that deserve careful attention and cover more of the potentials and opportunities. What emerges is that, although accessing regional archives may come with a number of difficulties, their repositories can offer spectacular material for engagement with themes within social and local history in particular – but also for wider and interregional themes. Finally, our discussion links to the importance of the archive in post-independence African society. The accessibility and usefulness of archival holdings for researchers and the status of the archives in their everyday use by the administration (of both the archives and the state) are closely connected. Through the cases discussed here, it becomes evident that access to archives and to the particular story and custodial practice of the local archive, in contrast to the national archives, shapes their function and decline.

⁴ This importance has very rarely been admitted; see, however, Straussberger (2015: 300).

What is the regional archive about?

The combination of colonial rule and the production of archival documents by European colonial administrators in the first place gave archives a particular character; in many administrative posts, practices of archiving usually dated from that earlier period.⁵ They presented future archivists with blueprints of what was relevant to keep and also potentially introduced them to specific cultures of secrecy, which Taylor highlights for the Ugandan case. There, the British colonizers came with ideas of what might subsequently be hidden or destroyed. This approach could then lead to the withholding or removal of information lingering from the late colonial period into the practices of the postcolonial decades, practices that could later be reinforced by repressive state policies, for example under Idi Amin's Ugandan regime. Archivists might thus be the heirs to colonial traditions in distrusting researchers and removing files (Taylor 2021: 540–1).

Derek Peterson systematically explains, again for Uganda, how specific conditions and priorities of political regimes after independence – and also material constraints – have influenced decisions about what is kept, how access is given to these archival holdings, and who might seek access to these archives (Peterson 2021: 6). Taylor puts the relations between the archivist and her or his visitors at the heart of the current realities of postcolonial archival practices, both in Uganda and in Africa more generally. In that vision, the archivist carries out 'the delicate work of anticipating how a visitor will read and use archival documents' (Taylor 2021: 542–3). Therefore, access to archives could be constrained by the archivist's perception of risk; or, as Benedito Machava and Euclides Gonçalves have pointed out for Mozambique, it could be conditioned by regimes of uncertainty, in which archivists have an incentive to classify most files as secret and to withhold them as much as possible from visitors, in a quest to avoid committing mistakes (Machava and Gonçalves 2021: 564–5).

However, our four case studies differ from those considerations. First, the focus is not on national archives but on provincial archives, at the level of the district or the municipality. The complex custodial cultures Caroline Hamilton refers to when speaking of archives, calling them 'artefacts' and suggesting that they should be treated as entities with their own history and biography (Hamilton 2013: 5, 12), do not quite fit with the picture of postcolonial Africa's 'dead archives' analysed here. These 'dead archives' are large series of historical documents from the first postcolonial decades, stored at the margins of small, functioning, administrative archives. In officially French-speaking African countries, they are effectively known as '*archives mortes*'; in Lusophone countries, they are the '*arquivo morto*' – and we take up the sense of this expression. Second, not every case shares the dramatic historical context that applied to Uganda's archives after the Idi Amin regime, or the Nigerian provinces affected by the Biafran War. As Samuel Fury Childs Daly illustrates, Nigerian Biafran bureaucrats did not feel committed to record keeping, and some civilian administrators deliberately saw the lack of record keeping as a method to defend society against authoritarian rule and repression (Daly 2020: 21–2). This important observation, however, is specific to one of the harshest civil war experiences in postcolonial Africa.

⁵ Although there are some important cases of local use outside colonial regimes, see the Angolan Dembos case discussed by Catarina Madeira Santos (2009).

As we will show, not all provincial archives were affected by such logics and constraints; in fact, many were not. In our case studies, the treatment of the 'dead archive' remained conditioned by it being an inconvenient but necessary product of bureaucratic culture; while that bureaucratic culture might have been rooted in colonial practices (Awenengo Dalberto and Banégas 2021; Awenengo Dalberto 2020), it proved to be powerful enough to preclude the destruction of the holdings of provincial archives. This explains why reports about the destruction of such archives by officials wishing to clean up their place of activity (Machava and Gonçalves 2021: 557) and circulating stories about files from the archives being sold to street vendors for wrapping up merchandise are not the general experience. In many cases, records in the 'dead archive' might be inconvenient as they occupy storage space; often, they are not consulted for a long time or they are never consulted; but while they are certainly not intentionally well kept, there is an underlying notion that they cannot be removed either, as, even in their 'dead' nature, they remain part of bureaucratic modernity.

A third issue concerns the role of the national archives in postcolonial African countries in relation to administrative archives at the provincial level; this also links to questions of access. In our four case studies, the national archives are either responsible for or involved in the conservation of provincial archives, in ways comparable to the case of the 1992 legislation in Mozambique commented on by Machava and Gonçalves (2021: 556, 558). Archivists from the central structure might be involved in preserving local archives; however, normally, there is no resource base for such engagement. For the four case studies discussed here, there have been moments in which the link played a role for conservation only in Ghana, with its very specific structure that defines the historical parts of regional archives as regional branches of the national archives, and in Cabo Verde, where in rare cases the Arquivo Nacional was able to mobilize funds to intervene in regional archives – but, as we point out, this role was often ambivalent. However, in terms of access, reference to the national archives is essential in all cases: for the international and national researcher to enter the 'dead archive', they need to be known at the level of the national archives and be recommended and supported by these archives. At the provincial level, this recommendation is more powerful than any other credentials, as held by Machava and Gonçalves (2021: 566–7) with regard to their Mozambican case study.

Postcolonial African archival pessimism: another obstacle for research?

From the 1950s, scholars began addressing the problematic nature of archival sources and their association with the distorted views of Africa produced by earlier colonial and imperial scholarship. As the limitations of colonial sources were taken as a methodological given, scholars turned to other sources of evidence, such as oral traditions and life histories, using them notably for themes within social and precolonial history (Cooper 1994; Miller 1999). Even so, the use of archival sources has obviously remained a standard practice in research on the colonial period, which is mostly based on records from the national archives of African countries, combined with interpretation of documents found in the colonial archives of former metropolises.

Within these trends, research opportunities in regional archives tend to receive little attention. Only rather rarely have scholars emphasized the importance of carrying out research in smaller and less-explored archives.⁶ For colonial archives, recent scholarly work has pointed to possibilities in Uganda, Ghana and Mali (Mann 1999; McConnell 2005; Ntewusu 2014; Rodet 2010). We have already noted the importance of vital new insights on regional archives relating to issues of custodial cultures and material challenges, but the question of their research potential remains unaddressed; in other words, it is mostly unclear what these archives are able to provide for historical research.

For the study of postcolonial Africa, a pessimistic approach towards the archives seems even more established and, in certain ways, more radical. Historians have argued that records from the national archives of different countries are unlikely to provide a useful picture (White 2015: 310–3). Other key studies focus on the nature of ‘fragmented archives’, arguing that alternative approaches to exploring post-independence themes are inevitable (Bernault 2015: 275–6; Ochonu 2015: 290–2). This debate often ignores the regional archives, which remain outside the picture; if they are mentioned at all, comments focus on their limitations, and not on opportunities stemming from their systematic – or even unsystematic – use.⁷

The ‘global turn’ in historical research has also contributed to endorsing a search for further archival records outside Africa (Zimmerman 2010; Keller 2018; Allman 2013: 106). The two trends together have worked as a disincentive to seek new archival resources on the African continent. In a particularly influential article, Jean Allman argued for the importance of the ‘transnational archive’ based on a variety of different archives in a wide range of countries.⁸ The evidence this author presents for her specific case is very clear; however, drawing from one single case study to make broader generalizations can be risky and problematic. Consider also the principal monograph on the Biafran War, a landmark event for both Nigeria’s postcolonial history and the history of (West) Africa after independence, recently published by Daly (2020). Daly’s monograph and related research activity constitute exactly what the field of African history needs: new studies of excellence engaging with important research questions through meticulous analysis of various types of primary sources. In the case of the Biafran War, this was a milestone.⁹

However, in a way, the author’s impressions also contributed to the generally negative image of the potential of archival resources in Africa, including regional archives at district level – which in Nigeria are known as regional branches of the national archives (Daly 2017a: 313–14). Despite relying on archival records in the

⁶ As discussed during a roundtable ‘Writing the History of Postcolonial Societies through Regional Archives’, held at the biennial Collaborative Research Group (CRG) African History conference, Pilsen, Czech Republic, 15 June 2018. Remarkably, the feeling in the audience was that local/regional archives are well known and abundantly used – which is not obvious at all given their limited appearance in publications.

⁷ On the limits of archival sources, see Gordon (2018).

⁸ ‘Written records do “not reside in one place, or even two or three. It is a global, transnational archive, ranging from Accra to Beijing, from New Delhi to Frankfurt, from Moscow to Bucharest, from Tel Aviv to Harlem” (Allman 2013: 126–7).

⁹ Earlier research tended to focus on the international contexts of the war, as in the important work by Desgrandchamps (2018), or on conceptual goals, as in Moses and Heerten (2018).

Enugu branch of Nigeria's national archives for legal cases and achieving interesting results (Daly 2017b), the overall comment on the potential of (regional) archives remains pessimistic: the limited amount of archival evidence documenting the civil war available within Nigeria led the author to suggest that 'the sources of post-colonial African history are increasingly found outside of state archives' (Daly 2017a: 311–12). The problem here is twofold: on the one hand, as already pointed out, Daly's is an exceptional case where an absence of archival resources in Nigeria might be expected; on the other, as he argued in a related research note, this case study does not provide a 'general survey' from which it might be possible to generalize (Daly 2017a: 311). In our view, a general survey *must* examine a significant number of case studies. If not, it inevitably carries a series of intrinsic limitations. What is at stake here is thus not only the reputation, so to speak, of archival research on post-independence Africa. It also affects the way in which scholars conceive of the archival space and plan future research, and our discussion hopes to change decisions taken in this area.

Land issues, regionalism and local religion: the municipal archives of Ouidah and the provincial archives of Abomey, Benin

Benin's national archives, the Archives Nationales du Bénin (ANB) in Porto-Novo, hold important records on the period after independence. The presidential series, the *Archives présidentielles*, are especially important as they contain essential sources, for example in the form of numerous boxes of petitions sent to Mathieu Kérékou's presidential office from the period between 1972 and 1990, when Benin was ruled by an authoritarian regime defining itself as Marxist-Leninist from 1974 (Keese 2020a; 2020b). The ANB also holds the single party's newspaper *Ehuzu*, another important resource (see, for example, Phelan 2014). In terms of regional archives, the team at the national archives has oversight over archival activities in the public sector (Lawson 2017), and archivist Patricia Bachabi guided us through the system and put us in contact with local archivists in Abomey and Ouidah.

In both Abomey and Ouidah, older archival collections lack any clear inventory; in Ouidah, there simply is no organization of the 'dead archive', and researchers first need to engage in that task, starting at random points. In Abomey, where archival sources are particularly relevant for research on taxation and its organization in Benin's Zou region, records are arranged into different folders and filed under certain series labels. However, these labels remain extremely general, giving only the principal period.

In Abomey, the part of the regional archive that contains documents from between the 1960s and the 1990s is usually not organized for specific purposes, although there is particular interest in keeping files on issues of taxation and tax resistance from that period. There is no particular culture of obscuring the existence of files. It seems obvious to the archival team that the files need to be kept because of their relationship to the administrative functions of the state – even if they end up in a 'dead archive'.¹⁰ In Ouidah, the records from that period are kept in much more precarious conditions; the fact that they are 'dead' clearly means that nobody is

¹⁰ Personal communications in Abomey, 9 and 10 November 2015.

expected to actually need to consult them – but they remain expressions of state routines and are to be preserved as such. They thus cannot be removed or destroyed, but need to be kept, without much thought being dedicated to their existence.

Guided by the local team in Abomey, or working totally at random as in Ouidah, researchers can find abundant and compelling sources in these archives. For instance, it became evident that the archive at Ouidah is a key place for studying the social effects of Vodun practices, related to local Beninese religion, and for understanding the wider administrative debate that developed during the Kérékou regime to control them.¹¹ Past studies have demonstrated how regional cases can help in understanding the broader history of the persecution of some religious beliefs after independence.¹² For Benin, Jeffrey Kahn has used the newspaper *Ehuzu* and oral evidence to reconstruct the persecution of so-called ‘sorcerers’ in the Zou region in 1976 and 1977 (Kahn 2011). The municipal archive at Ouidah offers different types of evidence on similar issues, as well as links to petitions within the presidential series at the ANB regarding ‘witchcraft’ and the government’s attempts to suppress Vodun-connected communities accused of such practices.¹³

Local archival collections also tell us a great deal about issues related to land possession, rural organization and hierarchies in rural areas.¹⁴ Themes include opposition to the imposition of taxes and refusal to pay taxes, a trend noticeable throughout the 1970s, and local reactions to the state’s efforts to reform land and agricultural regimes.¹⁵ As an example, these developments are reflected in the history of the land conflicts between the family of Carlos Domingo Cerqueira Lima and the tenant Gnagassi Ahouandjinou Boukari, and between Sounlingbé Dolè and the Boukassi family. These individual conflicts offer a long-term view of broader clashes over land spanning from the 1950s to the 1970s. Understanding such processes can be very important to appreciate changes in land-use schemes and export agriculture from the late colonial period until the Kérékou regime, the two issues being closely related.¹⁶ For Benin’s coastal south, archival sources at Ouidah are therefore key to conducting further research on post-independence land conflicts, a topic that is mostly absent at the ANB in Porto-Novo, and to analysing the regional implication of these conflicts. In practical terms, clearly such research initiatives in rural and religious history create a dialogue with the archivists in place – and at the ANB – and

¹¹ On Vodun in Ouidah, see Tall (2009).

¹² For a comparative case from Central Africa, see Gordon (2008: 64–5).

¹³ See Archives Nationales du Bénin, Porto-Novo, Benin (ANB), Archives Présidentielles (PR), 1524, E.-P. Amoussou, Secretary-General of Government, to Minister of the Interior and of Security Issues, *Cérémonies fétichistes à Ouidah* (62/SGG/c), 20 February 1975.

¹⁴ This would at least enrich studies such as the one by Filippello (2017), as important analysis for the post-independence period.

¹⁵ Archives de la Commune de Ouidah, Benin, *fonds non classifiés*, Victorin Gougla, Simon Badou, Kimpli Agassounon, Innocent Aholoukpé, E. Antoine Evedjre, Houéssouvo, Allahassa, Le S. E. du CCR de Savi (Commune Rurale de Savi, District d’Ouidah, Province de l’Atlantique), to Commander of Brigade of Ouidah [no number], 30 April 1975.

¹⁶ Archives de la Commune de Ouidah, *fonds non classifiés*, Linsouto Djomakon, Village Chief of Couzoumè, to Carlos Lima [no number], 25 January 1965; ANB, PR, 923, Adrien Degbey, Minister of Rural Development and Cooperation, *Note de Présentation de projets de décrets déterminant des périmètres de mise en valeur et fixant la consistance des travaux* (1269/MDRC/SONADER), 5 December 1964.

appear in Benin as a crucial step towards bringing the ‘dead archive’ back into local view and putting the basic need for preservation onto the table.

Understanding complex social reform and local resistance: the municipal archives of Ribeira Grande and Paúl in Cabo Verde

With its late decolonization experience in 1974–75, Cabo Verde’s transition to independence is usually considered as part of a trajectory common to several Lusophone African societies. In other Portuguese colonies, the history of decolonization was characterized by an armed anti-colonial struggle against the authoritarian colonial government between the early 1960s and 1974; in the Cape Verdean case, there was no such struggle, despite repression by the colonial regime and attempts by anti-colonial movements to operate in the archipelago (Chabal 2002). At the same time, while Cabo Verde’s experience of colonial contact and settlement history set it apart from other African societies, giving it a ‘Creole’ character, its historical trajectory still integrates it within the larger group of West African societies after independence (Fêo Rodrigues 2003). One principal distinction lies in the long-lasting legacy of colonial land regimes – which included different systems of sharecropping and tenancy under extremely dire climatic conditions, subject to frequent and severe droughts and marked by local revolts – which generally lack good historical analysis for the whole of the twentieth century and certainly for the post-independence decades.¹⁷ Indeed, the period between 1975 and the early 1990s, coinciding with the authoritarian one-party regime, remains, to date, practically unresearched, and the few studies that do exist reproduce the glorifying rhetoric of the anti-colonial struggle (Vicente Lopes 2002).¹⁸ Local interviews demonstrate that land conflict was a huge issue in the first years after independence.¹⁹ Oral testimonies and the rare critical contemporary media reports regarding the late 1970s and 1980s point to traumatic episodes of repression such as the violence that occurred during the campaign for agrarian reform in Santo Antão in 1981.²⁰ Historical discussions of the fall of the regime in the early 1990s and the opposition’s rise to power do not exist at all.²¹ As we will see, sources stored in municipal archives in Cabo Verde are particularly important as they lead us to the complicated realities and to local resistance on the ground after 1974.

Following decentralization in the archipelago after the end of the authoritarian regime in 1991, and the shift away from single-party politics towards elected municipalities controlling local issues, including responsibility for local archives, the role of historical holdings has changed. The ‘dead archives’ are not consulted;

¹⁷ This is currently being studied by José Silva Évora (2005); see also Vicente Lopes (2021).

¹⁸ Many recent works simply focus on Amílcar Cabral as key protagonist of the Cape Verdean anti-colonial networks (but operating from Guinea-Bissau and internationally) and the heritage of his anti-colonial thought.

¹⁹ For the ‘harmonious account’, see the interview with Eduardo Manuel Silva (a former Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e de Cabo Verde (PAIGC) supporter), Janela, Paúl district, Cabo Verde, 26 January 2018 (these recorded interviews can be consulted, as part of an oral history project, in the town hall of Paúl district), partly contradicted by comments made by anonymous bystanders.

²⁰ This issue of memory has recently, if rarely, been covered by the media (see Montezinho 2015).

²¹ An important, but non-academic, detailed account is Cardoso (2016).

normally, no one expects them to be consulted. Yet, the local caretakers in charge of the archives see their preservation, if sometimes in complicated contexts, as being part of an improved and improving 'modernized' state. In Ponta do Sol, for example, this idea of bureaucratic modernity is seen as being achieved if the files are at least kept in folders indicating the year of their production.²² Moreover, there is an idea that these holdings are part of a historical past that belongs to the municipality – and town councillors in charge of social or cultural affairs regard them as potentially important for future engagement with that past.²³ This is still a vague project. However, it has led to the Arquivo Nacional de Cabo Verde (ANCV) being considered as a legitimate second custodian of these records, which might be ceded to the national archives – while some local authorities worry that records removed to the national archives for restoration and subsequent safekeeping might be 'lost forever' for the communities of the more outlying islands, thus depriving them of a part of their historical artefacts.

As in Benin, not only regional archives but also the postcolonial holdings of the national archives in the capital are practically unknown to researchers and thus unused. The ANCV in Praia holds some postcolonial series, while others can be found in the 'dead archives', even partly classified, at the Archive of the Ministry of Agriculture (Keese 2017: 297). At the same time, archivists such as José Évora in the ANCV are of immense help in contacting municipalities in the different island districts, and, where these authorities are open to granting access, as in Santo Antão, the research opportunities are substantial.

For instance, in Ponta do Sol, on the island of Santo Antão, the municipal archives store important reports covering questions related to land, and they also provide insights about the conflicting ways in which the regime of the Partido Africano da Independência de Cabo Verde (PAICV) attempted to exercise control over the island's population.²⁴ In Ponta do Sol, more recent records are kept together with those from between 1975 and 1991, some indicating the year. As a result, questions of a merely technical and bureaucratic nature are stored together with reports drafted by administrators in the field discussing local reforms, with protocols produced by deliberative council sessions, or with correspondence from the single party's local units. Sometimes – but not always – they also contain documents coming from the PAICV.²⁵

In Paúl, where the 'historical' – pre-1990 – archives were once located in a remote storage space, the whole collection was moved to the ANCV for restoration and reclassification. While not being actively advertised, these records are now available in Praia, and the hundreds of boxes can be explored through a rather convoluted 'pre-inventory'. In spite of their underlying rhetoric that emphasizes PAICV revolutionary

²² Conversation with Francisco Dias, town councillor, Ribeira Grande, 9 February 2017.

²³ Conversation with Nilton César Gomes, town councillor, Paúl, 25 January 2018.

²⁴ Arquivo da Câmara Municipal da Ribeira Grande, Ponta do Sol, Santo Antão, Cabo Verde (ACMRG-CV), 30 – Actividades política e partidária, Carlos Reis, Secretary of the National Council of the PAICV, to Executive Secretaries of the Sector Committees in Santo Antão (CN/227/90), 30 June 1990.

²⁵ Arquivo da Câmara Municipal do Porto Novo, Santo Antão, Cabo Verde (ACMPN-CV), *Pasta Relatórios, Propostas e Informações* – 20.09 (1978), Manuel Duarte, Administrative Agent of Alto Mira, to Delegate of the Government at Porto Novo, *Relatório do Agente Administrativo da Secção de Alto-Mira, durante o mês de Setembro* (7/78), 30 September 1978.

success, these documents give much detail on the difficulties postcolonial administrations experienced in Santo Antão when confronted with episodes of local resistance.²⁶ Thanks to these local sources, researchers can better understand issues related to land conflicts and changes of land regime, which are ultimately key to the study of postcolonial Cape Verdean society beyond life in the two urban centres of Praia and Mindelo.²⁷

Cape Verdean regional archives held by the municipalities offer the possibility to explore new and diverse avenues for historical research on the post-independence era. Those avenues include questions related to environmental history, changes and conflicts over access to land and water, and the local and social effects of regime change. Some more ‘classified’ files produced by the single political party PAICV might be missing, but Cabo Verde’s municipal archives offer important insights. Some current local administrations, such as those of the three municipalities in Santo Antão, devote a great deal of attention to Cape Verdean history and culture and are keen to welcome and assist researchers; this creates opportunities both for research and for the provincial archive, with the ANCV as a second custodian.

The Ghanaian opportunity: interpreting local histories through a regionalized (branch) archival system in Ghana

Ghana is very different from all the other cases discussed in this study and from most African countries (although Nigeria, where Daly worked, follows a similar administrative logic), in that it has a decentralized archives system with regional branches – but even those, while separated from the current administrative archive, do not attract sufficient attention. The Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD) guarantees in principle that local archival records do not remain in the possession of the regional administration as ‘dead archives’; instead, it obliges the regional branches of the PRAAD to organize the storage of such regional historical documentation (Akussah 2002). Most of these branches hold collections related to the postcolonial period. In theory, their direct link to the national archives makes them much easier to access than archives kept by administrative services (Akussah 2003). They can also have – though only in particular instances – a much more practical function in using archival evidence than in the three other public cultures discussed here: in Ghana, archival evidence is actively sought in land conflicts and conflicts regarding ‘traditional rule’;²⁸ individuals and, especially, representatives of traditional authorities use the regional archives to find administrative records that give information on land possession and precedence in conflicts between ‘traditional rulers’. Therefore, at least rudimentary access to the ‘dead archive’ needs to be guaranteed, because provincial archives can maintain this

²⁶ Arquivo Nacional de Cabo Verde (ANCV), Fundo Paúl, SAP, cx. 104, Joaquim Tomás Gomes, *Partido Africano [da] Independência da Guiné e do Cabo Verde – Direcção Regional de Santo Antão – Sector do Paúl – Relatório apresentado pelo Comité de Secção de Passagem/Cabo de Ribeira à 3ª Conferência realizada em 8 de Maio de 1980* [no number, undated].

²⁷ For a first analysis of such documentation regarding the transition period of 1974–75, see Keese (2020c: 91–3).

²⁸ The use of records for land cases of this kind belongs to a long tradition in southern Ghana, going back to the first half of the twentieth century; for Akyem Abuakwa, see Rathbone (1993).

function only with the help of inventories and with files being kept somewhere where they can be found. The legislation of 1996–97 that established the PRAAD with its regional branches was meant to prepare local repositories for that task.

Yet in spite of easier access conditions, the availability of comparably more elaborate inventories, and a vibrant and growing research community working on Ghanaian history, research at regional archives (or PRAAD branches) remains uneven.²⁹ While the PRAAD branch in Tamale is much frequented for research on northern Ghana (Lentz 2006; Kunkel 2018), others are much less consulted. Among the latter is the PRAAD branch in Ho, in Ghana's Volta Region, which was in a poor material situation for a long time, and even affected by floods in the rainy season. Only recently have the archivists at Ho organized important external funding, which allowed for better storage conditions.³⁰ The archivists also insist on updated inventories as a key instrument for a quality archive.³¹ Nevertheless, the branch at Ho has always remained accessible to the public throughout the last two decades, even during the earlier, more difficult phases. In principle, many scholars are interested in the area, as the Volta Region was at the centre of a number of ambitious and seminal studies on Ewe-speaking ethno-nationalism, on smuggling and on border identities. The timeframe of these studies spans from the 1940s and 1950s – i.e. before the 1956 referendum that led to the integration of the Volta Region (then known as British Togoland) into independent Ghana – to later decades (Amenumey 1989; Nugent 2002; Lawrance 2006; Skinner 2015; Keese 2016a). Documentation held at the PRAAD branch in Ho, the focus of which also touches on different decades, specifically from 1945 to 1978, offers yet more important new evidence on these topics. Existing studies have relied on archival documents only in part and, with the notable exceptions of Akyeampong, Nugent and, to an extent, Skinner, have not used archival sources for the period after Ghana's independence (Akyeampong 2002; Skinner 2015; Nugent 2019). What is more, collections at Ho can serve as a fundamental source for certain, rather neglected, themes relating to the social history of the region and add nuance to others whose study relies on collected oral evidence, including for the difficult relations between the governments of Ghana and Togo, for example (Skinner 2020).

Holdings at Ho consist of hundreds of boxes whose rich materials contain detailed reports and correspondence on smuggling operations between 1957 and 1977, and security files dealing with various constituencies in the region, as well as documents on several land disputes between different figures and communities.³² Collections also

²⁹ An exemplary study mobilizing various Ghanaian regional archives, the postcolonial series of the PRAAD's Accra headquarters, and archival records in the USA, is Lambert (2019).

³⁰ After major refurbishment in 2020–21, the Ho archives now have comparably good storage and equipment. Among the archives discussed here, they are the only ones with a webpage: <<https://www.hopraadarchive.com/>> (which, however, was not working at the time of writing).

³¹ Conversations with Augustine Gede, 20 March 2013, 27 November 2017 and 14 November 2022.

³² On security issues, for example, see PRAAD (Ho Branch), VRG/1/355, Regional Office, Ho, *Notes of the 6th Meeting of the Volta Regional Intelligence Committee held in the Regional Office, Ho, on Saturday 29th April, 1961* [no number], 29 April 1961. On land issues, see PRAAD (Ho Branch), VRG/1/176 (formerly VRG/NA/5), *Togbe Nyangbotsi IV to Secretary of National Liberation Council, Wusuta Gadze Lands Affairs* [no number], 14 December 1966. For information on the anti-smuggling Operation Octopod of 1970, see, for instance, PRAAD (Ho Branch), VRG/1/409 (formerly VRG/AD/867), B. K. Kyeremateng, Lieutenant, Patrol Leader, 'A' Battery, Medium Mortar Regiment, Volta Barracks, Ho, *Patrol Report – Operation Octopod* (ABTY/13019/G), 14 August 1970.

shed light on other issues, such as the effects of the Aliens Compliance Order (which led to the expulsion of West African immigrants from Ghana between 1969 and 1972), episodes of xenophobia in the Volta Region, the organization of communal labour, and the National Service Corps during the short-lived period of the Busia government.³³ In Ho, the organization of the records is frequently a continuation of colonial logics focusing on 'traditional affairs' by chieftaincy division; this is more visible in the regional branch than in the RG (Record Group) files (postcolonial series) held at the PRAAD headquarters in Accra.³⁴ Many dossiers on the 1960s and 1970s to be found in Ho are labelled in the 'colonial' way.

Research at the branches of the PRAAD, on its own, does not suffice to study the political histories of the Nkrumah, Busia, Acheampong and Rawlings presidencies, the histories of Ghana's coups d'état and the longer phases of military rule. As Allman suggested, for these perspectives on the broader political history of post-independence Ghana, the researcher might require a multi-archival approach towards documents scattered across different continents (Allman 2013: 119–20). Still, the regional branches of the PRAAD are not only a useful and important addition to Allman's research strategy if paired with oral accounts, as proposed by Jeffrey Ahlman (2017: 25–6). Regional archives should in many cases be the first port of call for carrying out research on certain (numerous) themes within Ghana's social history that had a clear effect on societies in specific regions, and even for larger questions, such as, for example, the effects of economic austerity during Acheampong's rule from 1972 (most notably during 'Operation Feed Yourself'; see Lemmenmeier 2012), or the effects of the Aliens Compliance Order (Kobo 2010). Safeguarding these regional depositories, as in the case of Ho, is thus extremely important for future research. Historians wishing to write the histories of Ghana's postcolonial past may not have exploited the regional branches of the PRAAD in full, but those holdings ought to become a principal resource.

Rehabilitating the regional archive: finding a systematic approach towards the Pointe-Noire and Kouilou prefecture archives, Republic of Congo

The Republic of Congo is yet another type of case study. It is characterized by a recent violent past (affected by the civil war of 1997), which we do not find in the other three cases, and it is interesting to assess what small regional archives can provide in that case.³⁵ It appears as the stereotypical context where one would imagine records to be widely destroyed, or where administrative caretakers and archivists might routinely

³³ There is a great deal of documentation relating to the so-called 'expulsion of aliens', including security reports, letters, petitions, and correspondence between lawyers and officials. One example is PRAAD (Ho Branch), RAO/3/83, W. W. Anti-Taylor, Barrister and Solicitor, Accra, to District Administrative Officer, Jasikan, *Re Alien Kobri Kabre and Others: Money Lenders: Apesokubi* [no number], 28 August 1970; for the National Service Corps, see PRAAD (Ho Branch), RAO/C.1017, A. W. Parker, District Administrative Officer, to Chiefs in Jasikan District, *Jasikan District and the National Service Corps* (AD.53/29), 23 February 1970.

³⁴ On the use of RG files in the PRAAD headquarters at Accra, see Ahlman (2012: 88).

³⁵ An exception is northern Ghana in the 1990s (see Bogner 2001). On the effects of the civil war in the Republic of Congo, see Yengo (2006).

refuse to give access to files. However, as the case of Pointe-Noire shows, important holdings at the regional level are indeed quite accessible.

'Dead archives' stored in the prefectures and in the municipalities of the Republic of Congo are associated either with representing a complicated, problematic past before the civil war or even with going back to the colonial period and thus being remote (although they are rarely as old as that). At the same time, from the point of view of local caretakers, the archives cannot be destroyed, as their holdings again belong to 'correct' bureaucratic routines. The rigid hierarchies of Congolese political life sustain this idea: it is generally held that the Ministry of Culture, represented by the national archives, has a particular interest in the existence of these records.³⁶ Therefore, while they are stored in complicated conditions and nobody consults them, they are not directly threatened, at least in the case of Pointe-Noire. In the case of the municipal archives in the two principal cities, Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire, the situation is different again, because the archivist Eugène Loubou has created a kind of professional pride in the archival teams for preserving these archives, making them especially well-kept (and inventoried) resources.

Compared with the provincial archives, the Archives Nationales de la République du Congo have few resources to offer on postcolonial contexts, with some records on the period between 1966 and 1968 to be found in their PR (*Affaires présidentielles*) series (Keese 2016b). The two principal cities of the country, Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire, have their municipal archives in good shape, offering records on a variety of themes including urban social policies and police activities.³⁷ As collections of primary sources on postcolonial social history, they remained widely untouched by the civil war. Few historians have ever profited from these municipal archives.³⁸

The prefectures hold impressive amounts of documentation, covering many themes in social history. However, research in the 'dead archive' can be realized only as part of a safeguarding activity, involving the national archives and the caretakers on the spot who are usually sympathetic to such measures, if they are endorsed by the hierarchy of the Ministry of Culture.³⁹ This case study was based on a project of the Endangered Archives Programme (EAP) 844, originally striving to safeguard other, colonial types of records, but ultimately classifying roughly 10 per cent of a mostly postcolonial historical collection for Pointe-Noire and the surrounding Kouilou district. These include dossiers of very diverse natures, such as detailed security files

³⁶ Personal communication at the prefecture of Pointe-Noire, 26 May 2017.

³⁷ As examples of numerous important records to be found in those two municipal archives, see Archives Municipales de Brazzaville (AMB-CON), 3N, Mabiala, *Rapport du Capitaine Mabiala, Commandant le Groupement Centre de Gendarmerie Interpréfectorale à Brazzaville, sur: les mauvais agissements des nommé[s] Assendza, Thérèse - Okono, Marie-Jeanne - Gnonza, Germaine Beyangoua, Marie-Angèle - Gneyila, Alphonsine - Mombe, Marie-Antoinette* (71/2.GNC), 18 January 1965; for detailed daily reports, including a number of interesting issues, see also, for example, Archives Municipales de Pointe-Noire, République du Congo (AMPN-CON), M8, A. Makouangou, Central Commissioner of the Police to Director of National Security Services at Brazzaville, *Rapport Journalier d'Activité - 26 Juin 1961* (2417), 27 June 1961.

³⁸ Two recent PhD theses that consider municipal archives and the presidential series at the Archives Nationales de la République du Congo are Swagler (2017) and Kiriakou (2019).

³⁹ Meike de Goede's impressive research project, with preliminary visits to several other regional archives in Congo-Brazzaville in 2017, was subsequently discontinued. For the academic community, while waiting for publication of her local observations on archives, this author's principal output (which, however, does not rely on that archival evidence) remains De Goede (2018).

from 1961, reports on trade unions and on immigration from Congo-Léopoldville (Kinshasa) and Kabinda (in Portuguese Angola), as well as on religious trends in the south-western region of Congo-Brazzaville. Documents produced during the 'Marxist-Leninist' period of the postcolonial state, between 1969 and 1992, constitute a relevant if smaller part of these postcolonial holdings, and they address issues of different phases of the regime, including social control and the creation of a compulsory civil service for the youth.⁴⁰

Such newly accessible archival collections therefore hold the potential to revitalize the stagnant research on Congo-Brazzaville's history. They would allow a deepening of Florence Bernault's important analysis (1996), which included the regime changes of the 1960s, through the use of new local archival material. It could open doors to the study of postcolonial society beyond the dominant approaches of colonial memory on the one hand, and the early independent state's neocolonial entanglements on the other (Melphon Kamba 2010; Mberi 2010). Certainly, in light of the archival records already reorganized and analysed at Pointe-Noire, it also seems clear that the social historical studies resulting from their interpretation will by far surpass, in terms of empirical depth, the odd economic (if certainly interesting) history article of the 1980s dedicated to Congolese post-independence society (Sanders 1983).

As in Ouidah, but perhaps even more compellingly considering the size of Pointe-Noire, the state of this regional archive points to the wider question of what measures are needed to safeguard archival holdings in Africa today (Keese and Owabira 2020). Often, these archives have very basic facilities, and their depositories consist of rooms full of piles of papers frequently placed together without a coherent order. As became clear during the EAP 844 project, the combined efforts of local archivists and researchers, together with support provided by state administrations, in this case by the Archives Nationales de la République du Congo, are essential to achieve positive results. Yet, as in Ouidah, the possibility of carrying out further research might depend on the continuation of interventions aimed at protecting the physical state of the files. In that context, physical safeguarding is currently much more relevant than visionary ideas of digitization.

Conclusion: acknowledging the value of regional archives and preserving their essential resources

Regional archives in postcolonial Africa are often difficult to locate and access and are exposed to a number of challenges that might threaten their existence. However, the results presented here demonstrate their importance: local archives provide crucial records to explore Africa's postcolonial past. To simply dismiss their accessibility, or their importance, or even to question their existence, is highly problematic. For some themes, they clearly provide by far the most important kind of evidence, while in

⁴⁰ On religion and Kabindan immigration, see Archives de la Préfecture de Pointe-Noire, République du Congo (APPN-CON), Carton (provisoire) 96, Dossier 96.1, [Renseignements] A/s de Lassy Zéphérin [no number], 26 December 1961; APPN-CON, Carton (provisoire) 96, Dossier 96.1, [Renseignements] A/s De la Religion Christianisme Prophétique [no number], 6 November 1961; on immigration from the neighbouring (former Belgian) Congo, see APPN-CON, Carton (provisoire) 96, Dossier 96.1, [Renseignements] A/s Activité Politique d'un Congolais Ex-Belge [no number], 26 December 1961; on trade union opposition, see APPN-CON, Carton (provisoire) 96, Dossier 96.1, [Renseignements] A/s du SPCFF-ATEC [no number], 27 December 1961.

other cases, they are useful in combination with globally dispersed archives such as the ones illustrated by Jean Allman as well as with oral evidence. Nevertheless, they always remain essential resources.

Postcolonial archival pessimism or the lack of initiatives to explore regional repositories might result, consciously or unconsciously, in a non-engagement with such research paths. This may have dramatic consequences for future research. What is more, local records could give studies a necessary social historical dimension and provide researchers with pools of evidence that might help us understand how political transformations affected people's everyday life histories. In some cases, evidence from regional archives may also be complementary to oral information in challenging those nationalist historiographies that use history to defend specific ideas of national communities while excluding the struggles and experiences of others.

Custodial cultures and the need of the archivist to anticipate the researchers' goals and make decisions about the risk of giving access, paired with traditions of secrecy, might all play a role in decisions not to keep or to obscure records, or not to allow researchers to consult them. However, as we pointed out, there is a world of the regional archive beyond those cases that involve especially troubled histories of repressive regimes or civil war experiences. In Benin, Cabo Verde and the Republic of Congo, archivists and caretakers hold the 'dead archive' as something that is mainly part of administrative modernity; in Ghana, while being kept by regional branches of the PRAAD, they receive yet further recognition as part of archival professionalism. Under these circumstances, there is no impetus to prevent historical research, especially if the national archives endorse the initiative and facilitate contacts in accessing the regional archives.

Engagement with regional sources also has a very practical relevance for the preservation and improvement of the regional archives and, more generally, for hindering their decay. As the 'dead archive' is no longer relevant for everyday administrative use and is considered to be irrelevant for consultation, while it needs to be kept as part of an administrative past, large parts of this 'dead archive' do survive in decaying storerooms. Its destruction is not imagined nor imaginable, but its deterioration could have the same effect. The teams of national archives recognized the importance of safeguarding local records in all cases. However, as long as the value of regional archives is not acknowledged by the sustained presence of a national and international research community, national archives' staff are left alone. Researchers can support this custodial culture by bringing in suggestions for joint efforts of conservation and classification. They are in turn rewarded with access to collections of records that have probably never been explored. Only through creating a widespread consciousness about the importance of such material for writing the history of local societies, which would also mean getting the support of administrators and public officials responsible for these resources, can those records acquire status, gaining respect and the effort necessary for safeguarding them in a context where resources at the regional level are sometimes scarce, and where the archives frequently do not receive even the minimum needed to preserve older documents.

The experience of the regional archives of Kayes in Mali visibly demonstrates what can happen if this consciousness is missing. During riots in May 2020, following widespread frustration about what were perceived to be rigged elections, the archives

were set on fire. Thanks to the efforts of Marie Rodet with local partners and archivists, the Kayes archives had become a model for the preservation of (colonial) archival records, which also explains why their destruction was documented (Rodet *et al.* 2020). Certainly, not all regional archives in West and Central Africa are currently threatened by extreme incidents of that kind. But such episodes point to the dangers of what might happen to resources that are seen as unimportant in terms of historical value and that are associated with state power. Therefore, if researchers wish to write adequate histories of post-independence societies, they will need to take the potential of these archives seriously. Using them for research may serve to demonstrate their essential role for fostering further discussion about the past and, in turn, help support regional archives' preservation.⁴¹ Time invested and ongoing interest in the 'dead archives' are certainly invaluable for that struggle to come.

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⁴¹ In this sense, we are more sceptical about existing international research in provincial archives than seems to be the case in Machava and Gonçalves (2021: 568).

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