

RESEARCH NOTE

ARCHIVAL RESEARCH IN AFRICA

SAMUEL FURY CHILDS DALY*

ABSTRACT

Despite the promises of the digital humanities, archival research in Africa continues to be a highly personalized and ‘analogue’ process. This is especially true for historians of the post-colonial period, who often find that state repositories contain few or no records from the years after independence. Drawing on a research project on the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), this research note discusses some of the methodological challenges for the study of the recent African past. It suggests ways that social scientists and historians can obtain and interpret documentary materials in the absence of centralized state archives. Those who study contemporary African history seldom have the luxury of working in a formal archive, state or otherwise.

IN THE SUMMER OF 2014 I arrived in the city of Owerri in eastern Nigeria to follow a tip that the personal papers of Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the head of state of the secessionist Republic of Biafra, had ended up in a zonal office of the Ministry of Information there. From working in the main branches of the Nigerian National Archives, I knew that few records from the period after independence in 1960 had been preserved, and so I was excited to see what I hoped would be a rich cache of documents on the Nigerian Civil War (1967–70). When I reached the office in a federal government building on the outskirts of town, the archivist graciously allowed me to look through the files in her charge. Over a week of dirty and strenuous work, it became clear that, if Ojukwu’s papers had ever passed through this office, they were long gone.

This research note provides a general survey of archival research on post-colonial Africa, addressing both the challenges that arise working in African repositories and the opportunities for original enquiry that they offer. As my visit to Owerri and many similarly fruitless journeys suggest,

*Samuel Fury Childs Daly (sfd38@scarletmail.rutgers.edu) is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar ‘Ethical Subjects: Moralities, Laws, Histories’ at Rutgers University. This research was funded by the Council on Library and Information Resources, the Mellon Foundation, and the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation. The author thanks the editors and anonymous reviewers of *African Affairs*.

the sources of post-colonial African history are increasingly found outside of state archives. The reasons for this are complicated. It is true that many African regimes were opaque or unsystematic in their modes of administration in the decades after independence, and this was especially true of military regimes like Nigeria's. But this does not fully explain why their archives are thin; the secretive nature of military regimes rarely implies that they keep no records. The paucity of post-colonial African archives reflects something more than a lack of commitment to funding and maintaining archival repositories, though in an age of austerity that problem should not be underestimated. Many historians of Africa have come to see the absence of post-colonial state archives as a sign of the larger politics of African states, or to interpret their apparent disorganization as evidence about maladministration. Rather than being a problem to overcome, the dispersed quality of this knowledge is the starting point for understanding how states in post-colonial Africa worked.

These observations are drawn from a study of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–70) and its aftermath. This project drew upon sources like legal documents, diplomatic correspondence, and the records of international organizations operating in the Republic of Biafra to craft a historical account of the war and the forms of criminal activity that it produced. How crime became such an important feature of Nigeria's social and political life is a question frequently asked in contemporary Nigerian historiography. A history of the war and the forms of criminality that attended it provides a partial answer.

In the context of humanitarian crisis in Biafra, many ordinary people survived through illegal activities. The war blurred legal and ethical lines in ways that could not easily be redrawn when it was over. War routinized practices of survival that were also 'criminal', embedding them in daily life and social practice in new ways. These criminal habits remained present, and were sometimes obliquely tolerated, in the peace that followed Biafra's defeat in 1970. Criminal legal records on armed violence and fraud from the 1970s and 1980s suggest that their presence in post-war Nigeria was a continuation of the circumstances of wartime, rather than a crime wave that surged out of nowhere. It was not coincidental that Nigeria's long national experience of crime started and eventually crested in the eastern and south-south regions:¹ both formerly parts of Biafra and the places where the war was fought with the greatest intensity. This research suggests that Nigeria's late-twentieth-century history of crime emerged out of events in the *moyenne durée*. It is neither a purely contemporary phenomenon, nor one that can be explained by some essential

1. South-south is the name conventionally given to the region encompassing the Niger Delta, Mid-West, and Cross River in southern Nigeria.

episode in the deeper past of colonialism or before, 'leapfrogging' into the present, as Frederick Cooper describes historical legacies that seem to come and go.²

Post-colonial history from fragments

Reflecting the nature of many African states themselves in this period, post-colonial archives are often fragmentary and closed off to their putative publics. No archive is ever a 'complete' record of the institution or place it concerns, but the almost complete absence of late-twentieth-century records in Nigeria is striking. Individual attempts by historians and others to preserve the documents they find elsewhere help to fill this gap, but the problem is larger than any one individual can address.³ Initiatives like the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme and various university libraries' attempts to preserve individual collections have achieved much, but state and other archives remain profoundly threatened.⁴ In practice, this means that historians of the recent past must make do with less material, even though the time period they consider is closer to our own. The difficulty of accessing archival materials on the period after independence has precipitated a return to the broad and omnivorous approach to sources taken by earlier generations of Africanist historians. Historical ethnography, oral history, the interpretation of material culture, and other methods most frequently turned to the study of the pre-colonial past, are coming 'back' into African historical practice, though now to reconstruct a more recent period.

Historians of the recent past have become accustomed to piecing together their sources from a wide range of depositories, many of which are neither intended for historical research nor lend themselves easily to it. These 'shadow archives' and 'hidden corridors' of post-colonial history, as Jean Allman calls them, bring new potential and new challenges to the study of contemporary Africa.⁵ This has led historians to a greater reflexivity about the sources that they use. It would be hard to write any account of post-colonial Africa from a purely empiricist viewpoint, and few would deny what Antoinette Burton calls the 'complex processes of

2. Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in question: Theory, knowledge, history* (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2005), p. 17.

3. Comparatively, see David Zeitlyn, 'A dying art? Archiving photographs in Cameroon', *Anthropology Today* 25, 4 (2009), pp. 23–6.

4. Maja Kominko (ed.), *From dust to digital: Ten years of the Endangered Archives Programme* (Open Book Publishers, Cambridge, 2015).

5. Jean Allman, 'Phantoms of the archive: Kwame Nkrumah, a Nazi pilot named Hanna, and the contingencies of postcolonial history-writing', *The American Historical Review* 118, 1 (2013), pp. 104–29; see also Samuel Aniegye Ntewusu, 'Serendipity: Conducting research on social history in Ghana's archives', *History in Africa* 4, 1 (2014), pp. 417–23.

selection, interpretation, and even creative invention' that archival work entails.⁶ Evidence about politics, administration, and ideology can be read from the inscrutability of state archives, as much as in the points where they coalesce into legible stories. As Gregory Mann writes, 'archives for the postcolonial period are as scattered, contingent and partial as the history they imperfectly capture'.⁷ For Achille Mbembe, the destruction of state records inscribes 'the memory of the archive and its contents in a double register', producing a form of knowledge by the act of obliteration while its absence 'haunts the state in the form of a spectre'.⁸ Biafra's memory haunts Nigerian politics in this way, and it is only now that fifty years have passed since secession that the war's legacy is being discussed openly.

Despite their concealments and silences, most European records on the colonial period have been accessible to historians, treating as they do a time that is quickly receding from the political present.⁹ Recently, the release of thousands of British documents from the period of decolonization, including files describing the suppression of Mau Mau in Kenya, has confirmed the suspicion – not surprising to most – that what appears in finding aids and catalogues does not represent the true sum of the British Empire's archive.¹⁰ It remains to be seen whether these particular documents reveal much that historians do not already know, since Mau Mau's victims had described its excesses long before evidence from the British government itself was revealed through court cases and freedom of information requests. The preponderance of paper in colonial regimes meant that, if they were so inclined, historians of colonialism could read the records of colonial states 'against the grain', as members of the Subaltern school admonished, or 'along' it, paying attention as Ann Laura Stoler did to the 'unexplored fault lines, ragged edges, and unremarked disruptions to the seamless and smooth surface of colonialism's archival genres'.¹¹ Those who study the period after independence must look well beyond state archives, as there is often no grain to follow.

6. Antoinette Burton (ed.), *Archive stories: Facts, fictions, and the writing of history* (Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2005), p. 8.

7. Quoted in Luise White, 'Introduction – Suitcases, roads, and archives: Writing the history of Africa after 1960', *History in Africa* 42 (2015), p. 266.

8. Achille Mbembe, 'The power of the archive and its limits', in Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid, and Razia Saleh (eds), *Refiguring the archive* (Springer, Dordrecht, 2002), pp. 19–28, pp. 23–4.

9. Though, as Florence Bernault warns, colonial archives are seldom as complete or as powerful as they appear. Florence Bernault, 'Suitcases and the poetics of oddities: Writing history from disorderly archives', *History in Africa* 42 (2015), pp. 269–77.

10. See Caroline Elkins, 'The colonial papers: FCO transparency is a carefully cultivated myth', *The Guardian*, 17 April 2012.

11. Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the archival grain: Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2009), p. 52.

Politics, austerity, and archival accessions

The absence of state records is particularly striking for this project, since both the Biafran and Nigerian governments made a concerted effort to destroy the documentary proof of Biafra's existence. Biafra's state functionaries feared how records might personally implicate them once the war was over. One prominent Biafran administrator recalled in his memoirs that he 'hardly kept records; nor did I consider that there was much in my life deserving of such attention [...] I was initially persuaded to commence this work, after a discussion with [Biafran head of state] General Ojukwu, in those heady days. He asked if I was keeping some records, and I answered in the negative: he was also not keeping any. What a pity, we thought, that both of us, students of history, were so a-historical.'¹² After the war, the administrator told Nigeria's head of state that he had some documents that might be of historical interest:

This pleased [Nigerian Head of State] Alhaji Yusufu [Gowon], and he promised to send his staff in a few days to bring us to Lagos, with the documents. As soon as they left, Ikpa and I occupied ourselves going through the documents in our possession, to ensure that anything incriminating, which could be used against our people, was destroyed. Indeed, it was a painful task, reliving the experience of Biafra, and dumping into the toilet-bin, documents which stirred emotion. This we had to do, for in spite of Yusufu's warm-heartedness, we could not predict what the Nigerian authorities would do with us.¹³

Biafran administrators destroyed many documents in the final weeks of the war, fearing how they might be used against them once Biafra was defeated. After the war the Nigerian government did not in fact use Biafra's records to pursue those who had supported the secessionist state, but by this point most political files had been liquidated. Nigeria, too, had its reasons for wishing to keep Biafra's records out of the public eye. In the early 1970s, the Nigerian Federal Government decided that the demands of reconciliation and reintegration trumped those of posterity, and all Biafra's state records that could be found were intentionally destroyed. Reintegration was predicated on the idea that Biafra had never formally existed, so part of the process of 'reconciliation' entailed erasing it from the archival record. As the historian Ekong Sampson laments, 'Much as that was a valid reaction to forge the post-war ethos suitable to the continued unity of Nigeria, those keen on meaningful research into the Biafran situation would find some of the inhibitions quite frustrating.'¹⁴

12. Godwin Alaoma Onyegbula, *The memoirs of the Nigerian-Biafran bureaucrat: An account of life in Biafra and within Nigeria* (Spectrum, Ibadan, 2005), p. ix.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

14. Ekong Sampson, *The path of justice Chike Idigbe* (Distinct Universal Limited, Lagos, 1999), p. 71.

It is tempting to interpret the thinness of the post-colonial archival record as a conspiracy of silence, especially given these intentional acts of effacement. Saheed Aderinto and Paul Osifodunrin write that ‘the Nigerian government has refused to abide by its own archive administration law passed in 1992 that made provision for the declassification of official documents older than twenty-five years.’¹⁵ Indeed, Nigeria’s largely autonomous government agencies often mistrust the National Archives asking for their confidential files, and it is likely that there have been other instances of self-censorship like the one the Biafran administrator described in his memoirs. Politics explains some of post-colonial archive’s unevenness, but it is also a problem of resources. The long tail of ‘structural adjustment’ measures implemented in Nigeria and elsewhere continues to hobble the work of publicly funded repositories like state archives and university libraries.¹⁶ This is a problem of accession as much as an intentional act of exclusion. The Nigerian National Archives have collected hardly any records from government agencies since the early 1960s, and have processed even fewer.

Legal archives and state history

Aside from its famously gruesome propaganda, what remains of Biafra’s paper trail are fragments of its legal record, preserved in uncatalogued collections in the storerooms of courthouses across the former Biafra. Why these records were preserved is not always clear. Some seem to have been kept out of inertia, or because it was not worth the trouble of disposing of them. Others were probably kept because a registrar thought that it was worth keeping records of everyday civil matters like divorce proceedings and land disputes, even if the Biafran stamps on them rendered them void for most legal purposes in postwar Nigeria.

In the Enugu State High Court, which constitutes the largest single repository for this project, partial collections of cases from Biafra were preserved by the justices who wrote their decisions, possibly ‘for reasons of vanity’, as a current librarian hypothesized. They are irregularly organized, incomplete, and deteriorating. Perhaps because they are of little practical value to the legal practitioners who use the law libraries and

15. Saheed Aderinto and Paul Osifodunrin (eds), *The third wave of historical scholarship on Nigeria: Essays in honor of Ayodeji Olukoju* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2012), pp. 6–7.

16. Extensive collections at the University of Nigeria-Nsukka and the University of Dar es Salaam’s Africana collections are examples of academic libraries that contain government records not available in national archives. Deposits of occasional papers and studies published locally are also most likely to be found here, as are student theses. Researchers may well find that a postgraduate student at a nearby university has asked the very question they are trying to answer.

registries where they are held, I was in most cases freely allowed to view these documents. These cases, most of which are of an everyday sort, vividly depict a society at war. They demonstrate how acts of wartime survivalism blurred into crime, and how the Biafran state struggled to maintain order in these circumstances. This is an important task for post-colonial historiography, which has struggled to understand how independent African states – of which Biafra is an example – governed through any means other than repression and co-optation.

The piecemeal nature of Biafra's legal record precludes a rigorous quantitative or cliometric analysis of the incidence of different types of crime. There is no town or court for which I have anything like a complete set of cases, and so the approach that I take to these materials is to treat them narratively, as individual stories of how Biafrans and ex-Biafrans acted and adapted to the times. That said, there are some ways of looking at the incidence of crime in a wider frame. For example, in 1980 a sociologist at the University of Ibadan conducted a study of the incidence of armed robbery throughout the Nigerian federation in the 1970s. In 1970, the year the war ended, in the core of the former Biafran territory there were six hundred and fifty cases of violent armed robbery. In all of northern Nigeria in that year, there were only seven. This study showed that over the course of the 1970s, the incidence of armed robbery increased everywhere, so that by 1980 the incidence of armed robbery was roughly the same in all states of the federation. There are various reasons to contest this and other similar studies, but broadly it supports the notion that crime was closely related to the experience of the war.¹⁷

What does it mean if all that remains of Biafra's state archive is a smattering of court cases and a handful of propaganda? That this is what survives suggests that the Biafran government placed a high value on legal process, and was fixated on how it was perceived by the outside world. But neither of these conclusions can be made from Biafra's archives alone, and the risk of a confirmation bias is great when the archival record is so narrow. The first conclusion is substantiated by an extensive oral historical project, and the second by materials in foreign archives that can be used to triangulate the history of Biafra's international relations. Writing post-colonial history exclusively from records that survive in state repositories may warp our perceptions of their priorities. The files that are most likely to be kept are those which have use value (like the records of land ownership), or are too banal to threaten or incriminate. Neither of these types of documents are likely to be the ones that reveal the intimate life of

17. Tekena Tamuno, 'Trends in policy: The police and prisons', in Tekena Tamuno (ed.), *Nigeria since independence: The first twenty-five years, Vol. IV* (Heinemann, Ibadan, 1989), pp. 87–109.

the state. Historians must therefore cast a wider net to understand how independent African states governed.

New sources and methods for post-colonial history

The sources for post-colonial history often take a form that is 'global' and extraverted to a greater degree than projects on the deeper past. Historians of the period after independence are as likely to seek their sources in the records of foreign governments, humanitarian organizations, and the international press as in the African state (or states) they study.¹⁸ These transnational archives are especially important for Biafra since its fate was so tied to international humanitarianism and diplomacy, but they are likely to be useful for more localized questions as well. The well-worn routes of colonial history leading to London, Paris, Lisbon, and elsewhere may remain fruitful for historians of the post-colonial period. Since former colonial powers remained involved, or at least interested, in what was going on in their former colonies, intelligence reports and diplomatic materials from the last fifty years may be of value to social scientists of the present. Historians also have turned to records from the United States, the former USSR, and other states with extensive involvement in African politics.¹⁹ The archives of humanitarian groups, non-governmental organizations, newspapers, and other institutions also contain materials produced by African governments.²⁰ Some intentionally gathered materials, while others accreted them indirectly over the course of their work.

I make use of some of these outside sources. The United Kingdom, France, the United States, and the Republic of Ireland, among other foreign governments, were keenly interested in what was going on in Biafra for various reasons. Their diplomatic and intelligence records help to flesh out the internal story of the war, but even the most detailed reports were usually made from a distance, and with very partial information. For example, diplomats, journalists, and 'observers' of various types who visited the war front were often shown Potemkin villages by their Biafran or Nigerian guides. Only a few seemed to be aware that what they were

18. See Stephen Ellis, 'Writing histories of contemporary Africa', *Journal of African History* 43, 1 (2002); Gabrielle Hecht, *Being nuclear: Africans and the global uranium trade* (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2012); and the contributors to the roundtable on 'Writing the history of Africa after 1960,' *History in Africa* 42 (2015), pp. 265–318.

19. See Priya Lal, *African socialism in postcolonial Tanzania: Between the village and the world* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015).

20. See for example Gregory Mann, *From empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The road to nongovernmentality* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015); Abou B. Bamba, *African miracle, African mirage: Transnational politics and the paradox of modernization in Ivory Coast* (Ohio University Press, Athens, OH, 2016).

seeing might not be indicative of general qualities of life there. This illustrates the danger in using transnational archives to tell local and national stories. The commitments and preoccupations of humanitarian organizations, journalists, and foreign governments are often different from the people who are their objects, and writing African history from external sources presents the danger of confusing their motivations. The international context of the Nigerian Civil War is necessary but not sufficient to understand Biafra's inner life.

In addition to broadening the scope of archival research to the international, I approached Biafra's sparse state records with a greater attention to form, affect, and context than is usually accorded to contemporary state records. Biafra's history is revealed as much by the materiality of its archive as by the words that it contains. Towards the end of the war, trials were held in the shells of bombed-out buildings or in the shade of trees, and proceedings were recorded by hand, often in repurposed children's exercise books.²¹ It is affecting to read these accounts of lives destroyed by warfare that are recorded on pieces of scrap paper – or on the back of a love letter, as was one criminal case. Beyond the words that these records contain, their increasingly idiosyncratic production shows how Biafra and its legal system buckled during the course of the war. On the versos of court cases are traces of other kinds of records – like military orders and diplomatic correspondence, or invoices issued to the Biafran government marked 'unpaid'. One ledger bears damage from an air raid. Historians of the deeper past have long understood that part of a document's meaning is in its materiality; in how it was made, where it is held, how it has been annotated, and the way in which it decays. But those who study the late twentieth century, accustomed to typewritten pages and the standardized bureaucratic logic of the modern state, tend to have less interest in the physicality of their sources. Historians of post-colonial Africa may find that research practices like paleography and the book arts, methods rarely employed in contemporary history, can serve them in interpreting partial or damaged records.

Digitization is not a panacea. What remains of Biafra's records are not digitized and likely never will be, and the fetishization of the digital may end up making historians less likely to seek out materials that are scattered or difficult to access. Digitization liberates some types of information, but it makes documents that remain only on paper seem even more inaccessible than they already are. Moreover, some of a document's meaning is contained in its physical location and in the negotiations that go into accessing it. While digitization may make the text itself accessible, it can elide its context. Moreover, since many African archives have become

21. Sampson, *The path of Justice Chike Idigbe*, p. 75.

financially dependent on the researchers who use them, making their materials broadly accessible – digitally or otherwise – can threaten their institutional survival. What appears as intellectual gatekeeping or ‘corruption’ is often what keeps the lights on.

In the end, oral histories and the personal papers of former Biafran administrators revealed more about Biafra’s state administration than its archival record did. The records of individuals – diaries, unpublished memoirs, and ‘tin-trunk’ collections of personal papers – were often rich, though they required a deep engagement with local politics to locate and access them.²² Memoirs, which are a critical genre of historical writing in Nigeria, provided versions of events not captured elsewhere.²³ Local history and other forms of ‘homespun’ scholarship provided empirical detail and shaped the ways in which I framed my research questions.²⁴ The conspicuous absence of state archives in this history of Biafra, and others like it, suggest that these types of sources increasingly will be the ones through which historians can understand the workings of the post-colonial African state.

Conclusion

I never found Ojukwu’s papers. A handful of them are held by a small political party in Owerri, and a few folders survive in a back room of the National War Museum in Umuahia, but whether the rest are extant is an open question. Writing on the possibilities of the digital humanities, Lara Putnam writes that ‘for historians, borders are not what they used to be’.²⁵ From the perspective of many African archives, this promise of a borderless world of historical knowledge looks somewhat too sanguine. If anything, the figurative and literal borders that divide researchers from archives and from one another are sharper now than ever before. Not only are many African repositories excluded from a mainstream of historical research that is increasingly digital and transnational, but African scholars themselves remain subject to highly restrictive regulations that stem the flow of people and ideas outwards. For historians of contemporary Africa, archival research remains as ‘bordered’, analogue, and embedded in local and national dynamics as ever.

22. See for example the contributions to Karin Barber (ed.), *Africa’s hidden histories: Everyday literacy and making the self* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 2006).

23. For a treatment of the memoir as historical source see Luise White, *Unpopular sovereignty: Rhodesian independence and African decolonization* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2015), p. 17.

24. See the introduction and contributions to Derek R. Peterson and Giacomo Macola (eds), *Recasting the past: History writing and political work in modern Africa* (Ohio University Press, Athens, OH, 2009).

25. Lara Putnam, ‘The transnational and the text-searchable: Digitized sources and the shadows they cast’, *American Historical Review* 121, 2 (2016), p. 380.