

Call for Papers for the Interdisciplinary Workshop

**From Archival Pasts Towards Archival Futures:
Epistemologies, Decolonization and (Dis-)Placement**

Institute of African Studies (IAS), University of Ghana, November 7–11, 2022

Felwine Sarr and Benedicte Savoy's 2018 report on the restitution of African cultural heritage directed Europe's political gaze toward a new relational ethics regarding the future of the colonial past. While momentum grows across Europe regarding the postcolonial afterlives of cultural objects, archives are largely missing from the discussion. This contrasts the situation in Africa, where the displacement of archival collections during the end of colonialism engendered claims for restitution almost immediately upon independence. In 2019, the Nairobi-based political cartoonist Patrick Gathara argued that "the path to colonial reckoning is through archives, not museums" (Gathara 2019). Suspicious that the return of objects such as the Benin Bronzes can be "spun as an act of benevolence" that maintains European paternalism, Gathara stated that only "returning colonial archives would make Africans the curators of their own history." While Gathara's argument points to the political dimension of archival restitution, it also raises the fundamental questions that this workshop seeks to address about the relationship between the understanding, ownership and location of colonial archives on the one hand and the making of history on the other.

This workshop explores the entangled archival legacies of colonialism in Africa and Europe and studies the complex ways in which archives connect present-day societies to the past and the future. It wants to discuss 'the archive' in dialog between scholars and practitioners from Europe and Africa and to reflect on key questions for historical research in a postcolonial, globalized and digitizing world. More particularly, the workshop seeks to study archival histories and futures in relation to three major themes. First, it questions the material and epistemological legacies of colonialism in archival contexts, paying close attention to the epistemological challenges produced by (specific) archives and reflecting on the ways in which their classification, shape, location, setup etc. structure or at least pre-configure particular historical narratives. Second, the workshop engages with the specific roles of archives and archival practices in more general demands for the decolonization of scholarship and memory. Third, it addresses the issue of archival (dis)placement and thereby engages with questions relating to both the removal of documents in the past and present claims to repatriate them to their original contexts. In order to discuss these themes from different geographical and disciplinary perspectives, we invite proposals for past, present, and/or future-oriented papers by international scholars and practitioners in history, archival studies, heritage, postcolonial studies and anthropology. The proposed papers should address one or more of following sets of questions:

- **What is 'the archive'?** In what ways are our present conceptions of archives a result of colonial heritage? What other forms of long-term preservation pre-existed, ran in parallel with, and succeeded colonial rule across Africa? How did the establishment of private

archives intersect with historical and present-day understandings of the nature, function and meaning of (specific types of) archives?

- **Why and how does archival placement matter?** How does the location of archives, as institutions and records, impact their accessibility and use? How does this influence the production of historical knowledge? What are, and what have been the politics of colonial and Afro-archival mobility? How might the significance of location influence archival-futurism, i.e., through restitution, reproduction, or otherwise?
- **How is archival access determined and how does this affect historical scholarship?** How have policies/practices developed that govern and/or influence access to archives in Africa and African archives elsewhere? What legal, political, economic and circumstantial factors continue to determine archival access? How does archival access shape historical work?
- **How can we decolonize archives?** What are the roles and potentials of archives in historical processes of decolonization? What might decolonization of the archive and history-writing mean, entail, and produce? What are its opportunities in terms of entering a new dialogue or redefining the relationship between Europe and Africa?
- **What shapes African archival preservation?** In what ways have foreign ‘assistance’ and/or local contexts shaped preservation practices in Africa and facilitated or subverted colonial continuities? In what ways do transnational digitization projects open familiar yet distinct questions about archival extraction and ownership? We invite practical and theoretical reflections on power dynamics at work in African archival preservation.
- **What about alternative archives?** To analyze the past, African(ist) historians have long used a wide range of sources and methods beyond the analysis of written texts. Recently, there has been a turn towards ‘community archives,’ by archival scholars and activists redressing under- and misrepresentation. How does African archival praxis inform the development of ‘community archives’ elsewhere? In what ways have alternative archives emerged across Africa, recording often marginalized lives and voices?

Please send a proposal of no more than 300 words and a short CV **by March 5, 2022 to archivalpastsandfutures@gmail.com**. Participants will be notified by the end of April 2022. The workshop will be held in English and focus on the discussion of pre-circulated papers of about 3,000 words (submission due by October 16, 2022).

The workshop is organized in the framework of the “Programme Point Sud” of the German Research Foundation (DFG). Costs for travel and accommodation will be covered.

Convenors:

Edwina Dei Ashie-Nikoi (Accra), Samuël Coghe (Berlin), Riley Linebaugh (Mainz), Bettina Severin-Barboutie (Giessen) and Katharina Stornig (Giessen), “Programme Point Sud” of the German Research Foundation (DFG).