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Why Researchers Should Publish Archive Inventories Online: The Case of the Archives of French Equatorial Africa

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Why Researchers Should Publish Archive Inventories Online: The Case of the Archives of French Equatorial Africa

Vincent Hiribarren

Abstract: This short report gives the rationale behind the creation of the website <https://archivescolonialesbrazzaville.wordpress.com/>, dedicated to the colonial archives of French Equatorial Africa in January 2015. It is argued that researchers and archivists can build highly useful websites in Africa even with a limited Internet connection.

Résumé: Ce court rapport explique comment un site web dédié aux archives coloniales de l'Afrique Équatoriale Française a été créé en janvier 2015: <https://archivescolonialesbrazzaville.wordpress.com/>. Il cherche à montrer que chercheurs et archivistes peuvent construire de très utiles sites web en Afrique même avec une connexion Internet limitée.

Introduction – Origins of the AEF Archives

Compared to other parts of the continent, the history of central Africa has not been the subject of much scholarly attention. One could blame the fact that many non-African researchers tend to focus on areas where they can speak their mother-tongue, be it English, French, Portuguese, or Spanish. In French-speaking Africa, most historians have so far focused on West Africa and not Equatorial Africa. Replicating a colonial preference for

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French West Africa,¹ historians of Francophone Africa have always seemed to gloss over French Equatorial Africa and, as a result, the archives of this area have been left in relative oblivion. Finally, and quite logically, the accessibility of the archives themselves can be responsible for a relative unbalance in the historiography of French colonial Africa. For example, one can find detailed studies of the history of Senegal, Kenya, or South Africa but not much on the regions which used to be occupied by the French in Equatorial Africa. The fact that countries that have been studied in detail have well developed centres of archives is certainly not a coincidence.

Coined by the French in 1910, the administrative phrase “Afrique Equatoriale Française” (AEF) is a colonial term which has officially ceased to be used in 1960. The AEF was a federation that consisted of the colonies of Moyen-Congo, Oubangui-Chari, Tchad, and Gabon and the mandate of French Cameroons (after the First World War). Consulting the archives created by the Gouvernement Général of the AEF is relevant for historians of these territories as numerous decisions were taken in Brazzaville, the capital of the federation. For example, decisions about education, justice, or police were taken at federation level. The documents dealing with these decisions can thus be found in Brazzaville. Local administrative centres such as Pointe-Noire, which was the main port of the colony of Moyen-Congo, kept records for the administrative subdivisions of the federation.²

An Archive in Transition

Contrarily to what happened in Algeria,³ “administrative collections” remained in Brazzaville when the colonies of the AEF became independent.⁴ In theory, the colonial files were split into two distinct parts in 1960 when Congo became independent. On the one hand, the more sensitive “political” or “sovereign” collections were to be transferred to France while on the other hand, the “administrative collections” were supposed to remain in Brazzaville. This division was not as rigorous as it should have been and many documents which should logically be found in Aix-en-Provence were actually retained in Brazzaville in 1960. In addition, the files that remained in Brazzaville were divided into two sections during the 1960s. The first and

¹ Jean-Pierre Bat, “Les archives de l’AEF,” *Afrique & Histoire* 7 (2009), 301–311.

² There are colonial archives in Pointe-Noire but the state of the material is still uncertain. A future mission led by Alexander Keese for the British Library Endangered Archives Programme should shed a new light on this question. See: http://eap.bl.uk/database/overview_project.a4d?projID=EAP844;r=14181 (accessed 20 December 2015).

³ Todd Shepard, “‘Of Sovereignty’: Disputed Archives, ‘Wholly Modern’ Archives, and the Post-Decolonization French and Algerian Republics, 1962–2012,” *American Historical Review* 120 (2015), 869–883.

⁴ Bat, “Les archives de l’AEF.”

second sections were respectively “rediscovered” in 1974 and 1976 in two buildings of the University of Brazzaville and became an integral part of the Congolese national archives created in 1971.

The building of the Congolese national archives was located in the presidential area before being demolished at the beginning of the 2010s. The national archives have since then been housed in the building where the conference of Brazzaville took place in 1944, and where the Congolese Centre of Dramatic Arts is also located now. Whereas a large section of the collection (mainly the archives of the Gouvernement Général of French Equatorial Africa) is preserved in a relatively safe environment, some documents (mainly from the 1960s) are currently rotting in the basement of the building along the collection of books which were part of the library of the government of the AEF. Only temporarily housed in this building, the archives are supposed to be relocated in a new edifice reconstructed on the very place where the archives used to be housed before the demolition of the building. The plans have already been drawn and the foundations laid but political support seems to be the missing ingredient.⁵

More publicity is thus needed in a situation where a part of the archives is endangered and the other files forgotten. The logic is quite simple: now that the archives of Senegal (and French West Africa) in Dakar are closed without an official re-opening date, more Francophone researchers should be made aware of the content of the files available in Brazzaville.

The Initiative: A Static Website

This is why Jean-Pierre Bat (curator at the French National Archives and researcher at the University of Paris I Pantheon-Sorbonne) and I have created in January 2015 a website dedicated to the archives of the AEF in the Congolese national archives in Brazzaville. Our first aim was to give details on access conditions for potential researchers of AEF history who need to contact the director of the archives. We have also added a map showing the precise location of the archives centre next to the presidential palace in Brazzaville. With the help of the *Institut français*, we also digitized the inventories of the Gouvernement Général (1886–1959) and the Inspection Générale de l’Enseignement (1920–1962). We also chose a few sample documents and created different pdf files with for example the fascinating case of a native court judging workers on the Congo-Ocean railway. Readers can also find police reports concerning Albert Schweitzer, who had founded a hospital in Lambaréné (Gabon) in 1913 and who was suspected of German during the First World War because of his Alsatian origins.

⁵ Personal conversation with Brice Owabira, Directeur du Centre National des Archives et de la Documentation, and Raoul Ngokaba, Directeur des Affaires Administratives et Financières à la Direction Générale du Patrimoine et des Archives.

The idea to create a static website stems from my personal experience with Digital Humanities but also the realization that many researchers do not actually undertake research in Africa because they do not know what to expect when they arrive in an archive centre. As many funding bodies tend to provide grants if the candidates can prove that the feasibility of their research, this website will hopefully convince many researchers and research councils alike. As research time is precious, a couple of hours in front of a screen might save time while physically *in situ*.

This initiative is arguably rudimentary but that is exactly its point. By allocating few resources to the creation of a free website, most archive centres or researchers should elaborate plans to upload inventories online. As most state archives are located in large African cities, the Internet connection is good enough for such a small-scale initiative. Clearly, our objective is to create a virtuous circle. If more researchers are aware of the existence of these documents, the past of this region will be uncovered more easily. The files available in Brazzaville will not revolutionize our understanding of the French colonial past, but they will at least provide important details on this period. Scholars willing to send material to add to the website would be, of course, most welcome.

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