IDENTITY IMAGE CLEANSING IN ARCHIVAL REPORTS: QUESTIONING THE TRUST IN ARCHIVES FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF CAMEROON'S PAST

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ABSTRACT

This paper situates archival material as largely self-written as they incorporate personal notes, inter-personal conversations, auto-biographical interviews, reports and other write-ups which quite often are written with the consent of the actor whose actions the historian seek to communicate. On this premise, this paper focuses largely on written archives to argue that the construction of Cameroon history is hardened by attempts of the archival reporter (maker) to edify certain identities over others. It contends that, archival repositories have generally excluded occurrences that will give another image of the actor than what the actor desires to expose. Further to this is the assertion that policy on archives has rendered partial service in making archives trust worthy for historical research. On account of this, the paper concludes that the trust in archives increasingly leave doubts following the close relationship between non-tangible sources and archives. This occasions the rising falsification of the history of Cameroon from colonial rule to independence and reunification. It intimates the verification of facts prior to classification of archival documents.

Introduction

Studies in archives as a resource for disciplinary work have attracted an array of scholarly engagements which generally focus on the archives as institutions that systematically promote, preserve and make accessible memory, culture and identity in the form of bureaucratic and social evidence. These endeavours largely converge at one principal issue: the value of archives to research. Along these lines of concern, there exist two principal premises; one being ejective and the other projective of archives as a source of research reliability. These scholars it must be noted, have come from diverse disciplines in the humanities and social sciences and therefore have each forcefully argued on the bases of disciplines of their domineering concern.

Pointing to the ejective premise; La Capra (1985) Spivak (1985), Moss and Mazikana (1986), Richards (1993) Greetham (1999), Steedman (2001), Darnton (2003), Manoff (2004), Cook (2010), Redman (2013) and Lee (2015) have all developed varying arguments for the

ejection of the imperative position that archives occupy as a research base without necessarily rejecting the use of archives. They intimate that archives are generally impaired in the process of creation as archival centres are known to make efforts that eliminate some traces of evidence. La Capra (1985: 92) has for example described the dangers of the archive as fetish,based on the believe that the archive is literally a substitute for truth about the past which is 'always already' lost for the historian".Manoff (2004:14) intimates that **"**whatever the archive contains is already a reconstruction—a recording of history from a particular perspective; it thus cannot provide transparent access to the events themselves". The outcome of this incompleteness of archives is that the historian's craft according to Steedman (2001: 1165) involves the ability to "conjure a social system from a nutmeg grater." By implication historical making on archival dependency gets disconnected from the expectancy that it reports the events as they occurred.

At tangent to the ejective premise is the projective argument that sees archives as central to research engagement. Foucault, (1972),Derrida (1995) Velody (1998), Geiger, Moore and Savage (2010) as well as Lang and Nyoh (2015) have from their diverse disciplinary views given a projective view on dependency on archives for research. In establishing the purposefulness of archives, Foucault (1972: 130) asserts that the archive is not "the library of libraries;" nor is it "the sum of all the texts that a culture has kept upon its person as documents attesting to its own past." The archive, to Foucault, is what he calls "the system of discursivity" that establishes the possibility of what can be said. What Foucault focalises on is the exploitation of archives as established evidence without regards to completeness. Derrida (1995) sees archives as purposeful in the guarantee of political power. According to him, there is no political power without control of the archives. Therefore, the political class need control over archives as a means of ascertaining the hold and exercise of power. This relates to the postmodernist stance according to which there is no truth outside of ideology. These scholars believe that it is in the absence of political and cultural coverings that pass as "truth" in each society that the will to power by hegemonic interest will be revealed (Wood, 2009: 134). From the backgrounds of political science and history, Velody (1998), Geiger, Moore and Savage (2010) as well as Lang and Nyoh (2015) converge to the fact that archives are central to scholarly research especially in the humanities and social sciences while recognising the weaknesses of archives in this role.

From the forgoing, variations in the consideration of archives for scholarly research are largely disciplinary; characterised by varying degrees of mistrust in archives especially developing from what these scholars think archives should do as well as the purpose of their creator. From the perspective of imperialist protection, there is for instance the view that colonial records are evidence of the consolidation and justification of colonial dominance (Manoff, 2004: 14; Ballantyne, 2001: 90). From these strides, colonial archives are judged to be representative of colonial interest and therefore may not be of significant input to recalling the customs of the colonised people as they were. As such it is evident that the archive has flaws in serving as a veritable image representative to the humanities and social sciences.

Focusing on historical science therefore, this paper joins the ejective premise to argue that in the process of archive creation and management, archives have served in projecting the image of some identities over others and in this process have marred the possibility of traditional historical reporting. This paper argues that selective declassification, uncontrolled filing and failed management mechanisms have orchestrated instances of identity image cleansing on the part of archive creators.

Archives creation and conservation flaws

The strength of archives as an unreliable source of research for the humanities and social science disciplines especially history has been developed from varying perspectives. La Capra (1985: 92), Manoff (2004:14) and Steedman (2001: 1165) establish mistrust on account that archives are characteristic of historical source selections which generally imped realness in historical information. They argue that, for the purpose of space, search for relevance and the need to ensure secrecy as dictated by societal laws, archival institutions filter archival material and in this way quite often either erroneously or intentionally conceal portions of data that blur research. In the case of oral historical resources or oral tradition, Moss and Mazikana (1986:48) intimate that, records produced by oral history and oral tradition is not, properly speaking, records of past events until the archivist can understand and maintain the perspective of these records in their management and administration to ensure that they are not influenced. Lang and Nyoh (2015: 33) with emphasis on Christian denominational archives, observe that there is a problem of improper conservation of archival resources in Cameroon. According to them, this has occasioned instances of lost files and

sometimes pages that frustrate archival research. The interest of this paper is the bases of these lapses and their implications on historical research outcomes.

The use of archives for identity image cleansing

Drawing from the ejective premise discussed above, flaws in archival records, be them erroneous or intentional, have blurred historical research and in some instances resulted in false historical conclusions likely to counter the goal of historical science; that of enhancing the positive development of society. As Gilderhus (1987:8) puts it; "history has a useful application because it helps us to better calculate the anticipated consequences of our own acts". The fact that "history provides a way to study the identity of people both individually and collectively" (Gilderhus, 1987:7), archives as a historical resource have been exploited to protect or project the image of societies and individuals for varying purposes including; power security, corrupt practices.

Colonial identity image cleansing

The urge for power protection whether religious, political or economic power has at varying degrees influenced the information found in archives with one identity ensuring an image edge over others through documentation that usually find themselves in archival shelves. Lee, (2015: 9) has argued that to portray superiority and have effective control over subjects, there is a tendency for archives to record instances in which government power was exercised successfully, rather than areas in which it was ineffective. Using the colonial apparatus to expatiate this view, Lee states that:

> A colonial government, for instance, may record in some detail its attempts to tax and control local chiefs, but will have little to say about chiefs who pay it no taxes, or about whom it has little knowledge. Casual readers of archives thus tend to gain a somewhat exaggerated impression of the power and efficacy of the agencies that produce then.

The general view point is that the archive is seen as reflecting those institutions that had the power (and resources) to articulate through written records and visual images their view of the world, and that, not surprisingly, they use these recording tools to order, control, name, map, depict, count, and classify that world in ways that reflect their own assumptions and values and that reinforce their own power, status, and control, and at the same time marginalize or silence those groups that disagreed with them (Cook, 2010: 2).

In the case of Cameroon, British colonial reports imposed some pejorative insinuations on the people of Esimbi in the Menchum Valley of the North West Region. A proposed reorganizational report of the Wum Native Authority Area, Bamenda Division, contained in File Ad/1934, No 3435 of the National Archives of Buea (NAB) indicated that the people of the area (Esimbi) were cannibalistic. This was controversial to an assessment report contained in File Ad/14 No 772/22 of the NAB according to which the people of Esimbi saw murder as taboo and punishable with a penalty measured in goats and even exile. It therefore sound contradictory that a people who punished for different sorts of human killing practiced cannibalism. This could be a conclusion drawn from their use of "man eater" which to the Esimbi literally mean witchcraft which is practiced till date. It is difficult to identify the purpose for which these controversies were established. One thing is however glaring that through history; the people of Esimbi have lived with the social stigma of cannibals and have had no opportunity to counter this in a broad perspective since they have no control over the archives. Two questions emerge from this:

Firstly, was there an intention on the part of the colonial reporter to diminish the identity of the Esimbi people? There are actually no traces of uncomfortable relations between the Esimbi and the colonial authorities that can be used to expand this debate. But could it be that such traces were eliminated in the archive creating process? Drawing from what archives are; "the product of a process which converts a certain number of documents into items judged to be worthy of preserving and keeping in a public place" (Mbembe, 2014: 20) these traces might have been eliminated for varying reasons. Of course, current notions about the influence wielded by those who control the flow of information echo the imperial belief that control of the archive is a form of political power (Manoff, 2004: 15).

Secondly, was the reporter immature to conduct evidential interviews to ascertain the socio-cultural attributes of the people of Esimbi? In one of the documents described by Spivak to sustain the problematic nature of records in British India titled: "Statistical and Geographical Memoir of the Hill Countries Situated between the Rivers Tamas and Sutlej", Spivak (1985:263) claims that an Australian in his early twenties, with little knowledge of the area, wrote it in about 1811 "out of hearsay and interpreted conversations." Yet, the resulting document became part of the authoritative colonial record and was treated as an objective and accurate account. There is therefore the possibility that the reporters on the Esimbi cultural identity were not well grounded to make a clear judgement of what they heart, understood

and what was. Thus irrespective of the usefulness of government documents, they are not always accurate or objective and therefore can be exploited to superimpose one identity over the other. From these controversies it is difficult yet to determine if the British had not intended to justify a brutal transition in cultural systems. Where this is not that case, the controversy in archival repositories widen the lack of trust in history as representative of truth based on the exploitation of sources and establishment of conclusions that may just be a result of absence of continuing evidence.

Identity image cleansing for self-projection

The cleansing of identity image is not always intended to protect the authority with the power to control the archives. This is to say that identity image cleansing does not always develop as a goal of information falsification through archival repositories. It has also occurred in the power tussle process. In this way, individuals, institutions or even authorities fighting over political prerogatives have exploited letter writing or petitioning to establish their point and make intimated gains. Through this exchanges and whether or not the developments in the written communications are all true, they sometimes end up in archives either in their completeness or partial after a sorting process for filing and become sources for historical writing.

From a political science point of view, Lee (2015: 2-3) has argued that: historical techniques, which emphasize an inductive and descriptive approach to archival material, can produce biases when used to test hypotheses. These approaches use archival sources as a mine for confirmatory quotes without considering the incompleteness and complexity of the source material. These failings have led many scholars to conclude that archival materials are useless for serious hypothesis testing. This problem is sometimes exacerbated by the archive producing process. Considering for instance the fact that an archive typically acquires the materials that the owner of the papers chose to donate, in addition to the ability to select which papers go into the collection, many archives will allow the donor of personal records to restrict or "seal" either all or parts of the collection(Redman, 2013: 33). This leaves an incomplete personal record which may not stand the substance of establishing a critical view of the donor's activities especially in biographical reporting as there is established bias.

More typically, writers of complaints seem to conceal those facts that contradict their argument and in this manner can tilt information in the repositories to their desires rather than truth. This self-projecting attitude is seen for instance in a petition written by some chiefs of

the Aghem Federation of Chiefdoms to the Governor of the North West Province titled: From Aghem chiefs Concerning the Name "Fon", found in file GNW, S.5/S.3, Chieftaincy Matters Menchum Division, 1984, of the Regional Archives of Bamenda (RAB). In an effort by these chiefs to earn equal prerogatives like their paramount ruler, Chief WallangMbong, from the state machinery, chiefs AchuoNjei, NghaEzagha, Simon Buanja, E. K. Nchia, TeghaNsen and Chu of Kesu, Magha, Waindo, Zongefu, Cheregha and Bu villages respectfully submitted that in the Aghem political strata there existed no paramount ruler following the address of Chief WallangMbong as "fon" in a radio broadcast.

Reacting to this petition, the DO of Wum subdivision, EbotNtuiOgork, after a detailed narration of Aghem oral tradition to the SDO of Menchum noted that:

> …the petitioners are apprehensive not so much because they doubt that chief Wallang is their paramount chief or clan head but because they fear that the Governor's special recognition of chief Wallang might end in the other chiefs losing to enjoy the allowances government now gives to traditional rulers.

In this case, the position of the DO contradicts that of the petitioners as he made emphasis on the existence of a paramount ruler in the Aghem Federation of Chiefdoms. These divergent views will obviously paralyse archives as a veritable source of truth given that a researcher will have to go through the different expressions and exploit interviews for confirmation. There is however a problem which can arise in a situation wherein the correspondence of the DO for instance is missing in the file either by way of exclusion in the sorting process, misplacement or unethically pulled out by an individual for one reason or the other. In this case there is the likelihood that a researcher not so verse with the history of the federation of chiefdoms and probably unconcerned about details will content with the submissions of the petitioners. These submissions, I dare to declare were largely untrue and capable of distorting the history of the entire society because the actors were interested more in protecting their gains through self-projection.

Economic bases of identity image cleansing

Archival repositories have also suffered from efforts of historical actors to protect economic gains. In this struggle, they perpetuate false information that end up in archives in different forms. A case in point is related to the management of the Oil Palm Plantation Project put in place by the Menchum-Boyo Presbytery – Goppingen partnership in 1996. Reports on this project have varying degrees of contradictions that actually make interpretation of data

difficult. To express the falsification of information as a means of making economic gains, minutes of two meetings both declassified and at the Menchum-Boyo Presbyterian Archives, Wum, are herein exploited. These are: Minutes of the consertation [*sic*] Meeting between the Goppingen Partners and the Menchum/Boyo Partners Held on Thursday 12th January 2006 in the Women's CenterNaikom and Minutes of the emergency meeting of the Menchum-Boyo-Goppingen partnership, held on 8th September 2007.

In the minutes of 12 January 2006, the project manager Hon. Simon Kucha, disclosed that the first oil production was expected on 12th January 2006 and later handed tins of palm oil to the partners from Goppingen purportedly coming from the partnerships Oil Palm Plantation Project. In the meeting of 8th September 2007 the same project manager disclosed that the oil distributed to the partners was not coming from the palm plantation. These contradictions have left great confusion on which of the statements is truth. For the arguments in this paper, recourse has been found in the Ph.D. thesis of Michael Kpughe Lang who investigated profoundly on the partnership's activity and concluded that the declaration that the farm was already yielding, supported by the distribution of palm oil as evidence "motivated the donors anew who before leaving left behind CFA 4500.000francs for the OPPP" (Lang, 2011: 291).

What however sustains the intent to secure economic gains here is that after a later investigation conducted following a fire incidence that damaged the farm in 2007, it was reported that this farm was not cleared throughout 2006. This can lead to the conclusion that the 4.5 million FCFA was never invested in the project. By implication, the declaration that the farm was already yielding was used by Hon. Kutcha Simon to project an image of him and the project in order to secure resources for possible embezzlement. The ensuing issue here is that for a researcher who stumbles on the minutes of the first meeting alone, the assumption will be that the Oil Palm Plantation Project in Benakuma was mature and already producing in 2006. This could impair any historical assessment of developments in Benakuma thereof.

A view in Cameroon Archives: policy versus functioning

As it has so far been established, the functioning of archives depend on established policy usually aimed at avoiding duplication, falsification, violation of individual and organisational rights to privacy among others. In this regard, the organisation of archives in Cameroon is guided by international and local laws aimed at protecting national patrimony. According to

Law No 2000/010 of 16 December 2000, archival material in Cameroon is classified in three categories: Current archives which constitute documents that are still under frequent administrative exploitation by the generating institution, intermediary archives which constitute documents that are no longer current but cannot yet be eliminated and historic archives which constitute documents preserved for the purpose of historical exploitation. This classification aimed at ensuring the avoidance of material unduly reaching the hands of researchers who could publish what could impair the image of the archive creating or generating organisation or individual is in itself impaired. This is because the archive creator does not leave the files with the archivist for sorting, rather, the creator is involved in the selection process and determines directly what goes to archives and what is conserved at provenance. In the case of state generated archives, Cook (2010: 6) points out that; state officials not archivists, decided which modern records would survive by a process of winnowing the wheat from the chaff, according to administrative and political needs; when the old "wheat" was no longer needed for even internal government reference purposes, these surviving records were transferred over to the archival institution. Such legislative applications have actually contributed to image cleansing considering that some archive creators will largely desire to expose their success and quite often conceal their failures. Such winnowed archives blur the process of objective historical writing and exposes the researcher to what has been referred to as conjuring a social system from a nutmeg grater (Steedman, 2001: 1165). When this happens, the work of a historian, fails in the attainment of the objective of reporting the events as they occurred.

There are also lapses emanating from the functioning of the archival system. Article 11(1) of Law No 2000/010 of 16 December 2000 prohibits the elimination of public archival documents within less than ten years from the date of creation. While Article 11(2) establishes that it is only on the expiration of this period that public documents can be sorted and separated for conservation either for administrative exploitation or historical purposes. In this way, documents classified as of historical importance are according to Article 11(4) submitted to the organisation in charge of archives. While this law effectively ensure the preservation of archival material, the tendency on the field is that there is no effective control of government archives. Divisional, regional and other governmental services simply abandon their archives in the secretariats of their service departments and discriminately allow direct access to the archival stock to researchers. This is likely to exacerbate the

problem of archives as some researchers can use this access to inject false information into files that are still open to consultation for administrative purposes. There is for instance File GNW S5/S3, Chieftaincy Matters Menchum, 1984 which constantly mingles between the office of the governor and the Regional Archives of Bamenda. This mal-application of the law on treatment of archival documents expose the file to the possibility of injection when it is known that the service of the governor still exploits the file for the making of administrative decisions.

From these dual perspectives, legislation on archives seems to have rendered quite partial service to strengthen trust in archives. In addition to the lack of direct provision of resources for the management of archives, there is also the problem of sharing responsibility between the archive creating point and the repository. In the first instance, human and material resources are lacking in the archival generating centres as well as the repositories. This creates problems of dumping rather than classification of archival documents since quite often it is the responsibility of the administrative assistant or office clerk to clear the table from "undesired material" on the desk. With no knowledge on archives, these documents are "simply thrown off"; a visit of service archives leaves a researcher with the frustration of having parts of files floating on the ground. These limitation in itself create room for image cleansing in these structures

Conclusion

The focus of this paper has been to question the extent of truth in archival repositories in view of repositioning the impact of archives on the construction of Cameroon's past. The central argument adopted in the paper is the fact that archive creators either voluntarily or accidentally falsify archival records. Where this was the case, the paper argue, that archive creator's desired to make a better image of themselves than they actually were. In the course of this argument, two paradigms were established; the ejective and the projective paradigm. According to the projective paradigm, archives are reliable and inescapable in historical research. While the ejective paradigm, without denying the imperative of archives to historical research holds that for varying reasons, archives are not always authentic reporters of the events as they occurred and therefore should not be trusted. It is in line with the ejective paradigm that this paper has sustained the argument that archival creators either individuals, organisations or government for varying interest directly or indirectly falsify

archives. These falsifications generally are protective of the negative image and projective of the positive image of the archive generator. Through this process of image cleansing, the process of historical construction is often marred as the historian in search of what he cannot obtain is tempted to indulge in conjuncture thereby making history suppositional rather than affirmative. Government regulation on the subject was also visited to ascertain the role of government in image cleansing be it for or against. The observation in Cameroon is that much has been done in terms of legislation but quite little of this legislation has survived in terms of application. The consequence has been the widening of loopholes through which identity image cleansing rather extrapolate and consequently worsen the degree of trust worthiness in Cameroon archives for historical research. Thus the paper opines that rather than concentrate archival resources (human and material) at the national and regional levels, archival repositories with qualified staff should be established at the divisional levels. Meanwhile for the long run and within the context of sorting as a means of creating space, Archives should be kept electronically.

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