

Across the world archives of photographs are disappearing, but does preservation pose its own problems?

Decolonizing the Archive The View from West Africa

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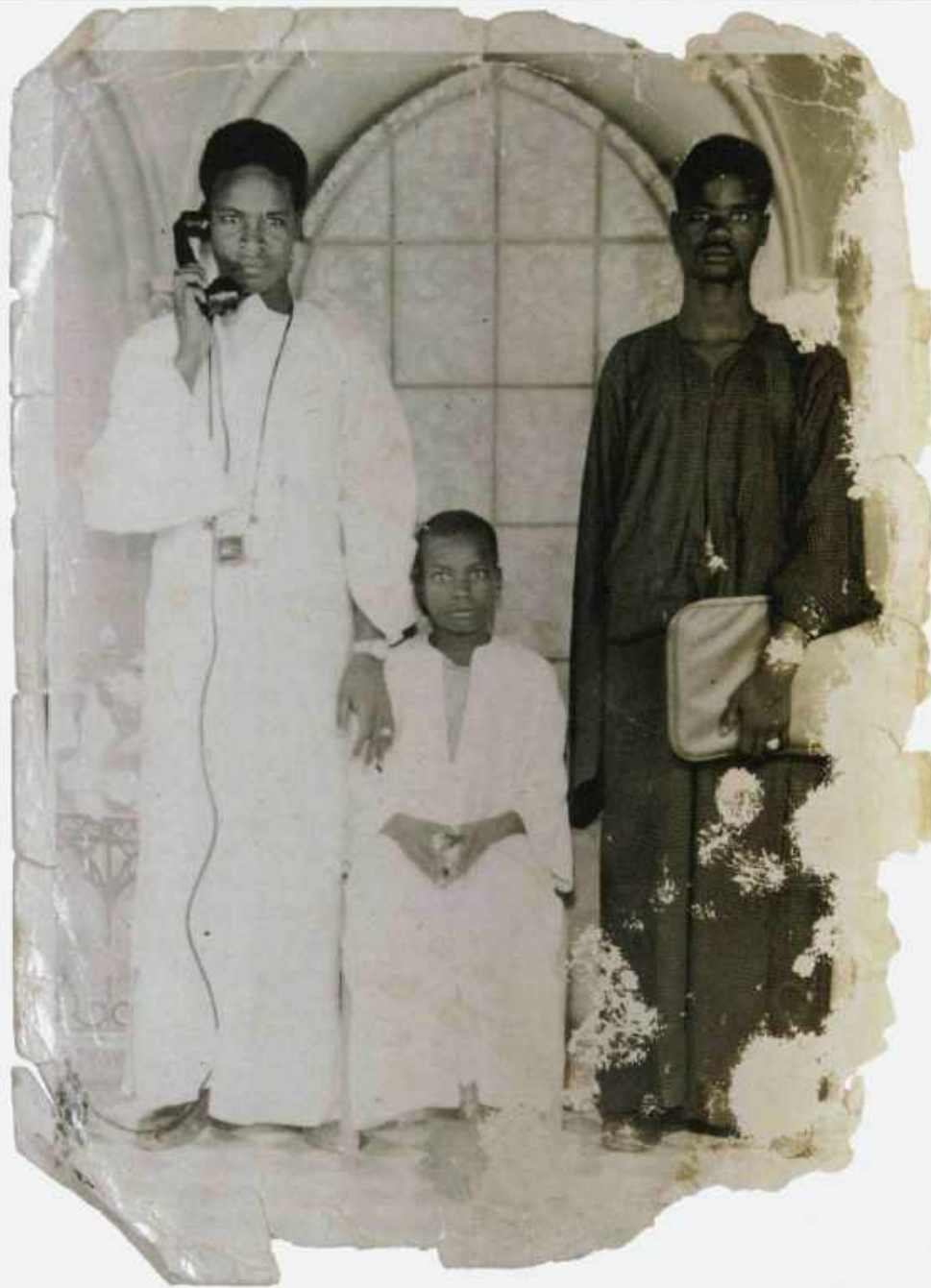
A museum director and friend in Saint-Louis, Senegal, once said to me when I asked her if it was true that large numbers of negatives had been dumped into the Senegal River: "Si ce n'est pas de poissons, c'est des clichés" (There may not be fish, but there are negatives). Her comment refers to the contemporary crisis in the local supply chain caused by overfishing in Atlantic coastal waters. It also refers to the fact that large numbers of negatives have been destroyed, or disposed of in ways that have led to their destruction, in this city, as in several other coastal West African cities, over the years. Owing to the particular geography of Saint-Louis, whose central districts are located on an island in the mouth of the Senegal River, negatives—including whole crates of glass-plate negatives—have become trapped in the mouth of the river, which is separated from the Atlantic by the island and by the long, thin sandbar known as La Langue de Barbarie. This sandbar, which has amassed what I sometimes refer to as the "submarine archive," has played an unexpected role in what we might call the archival situation in Senegal. In Ghana, by contrast, negatives disposed of in a similar fashion have simply washed out to the open sea.

Although Saint-Louis boasts a history of photography that goes back to the nineteenth century (the first known daguerreotype studio opened in the city in 1860), most photographs of that vintage are long gone. The jettisoning of negatives—mostly studio archives from the mid-twentieth century—appears to have peaked in the mid-1980s. This is the same period that, not incidentally, saw the closure of hundreds of black-and-white studios owned and operated by African photographers, as a result of the transition to color.

Along with my work in Saint-Louis, I have in recent years been doing research in several other cities in coastal West Africa with rich histories of photography: Dakar, Senegal; and Porto-Novo and Cotonou, Benin. In all these places large numbers of photographs, dating from the first half of the twentieth century to the mid-1980s, are in advanced states of decay. Some are closer to dust than to photographs. But I am also very aware that photographs have been destroyed or are missing for other reasons. Some have been carried away to distant cities and other continents with relatives. Whole swaths of archives are missing because they have been sold to European collectors. Other images were deliberately destroyed in the years before the collectors came. My research has sought to frame what is called "archival loss" (the term favored by international archivists' associations and UNESCO) in a new perspective in Africa, where the practical protocols and infrastructures of the archive are fraught with colonial legacies. In a formal and institutional sense, they have been imposed largely by those in the West and North, who continue to control the purse strings even of projects initiated from Africa.

Not all instances of archival loss are the result of dramatic acts of destruction, but stories such as that of Saint-Louis's "submarine archive" add considerable nuance to our understanding of "loss." As my friend's sly reference to the contemporary geopolitical situation reminds us (the blame for overfishing off the coast of Senegal lies mainly with Europe and particularly Spain), the African studios that were forced to shut their doors in the 1980s were put out of business by foreign competition: new color labs, owned by Lebanese or Koreans. The outlays of cash required to buy color film-processing machines were beyond the reach of ordinary Africans. The submarine archive is, among other things, an allegory of the loss of cultural sovereignty. At the very moment that Africans were supposed to be seizing control of their destiny in the postcolonial period, photographers who had fought to maintain both creative and economic control of the photographic apparatus during the colonial period found that it could be suddenly taken away. Such stories are also, however, about the survival of photographic memory. They point to forms of resilience—and resources for writing, or transmitting, history—that have allowed these communities to remember their lost photographs, and an earlier period of photography history, even when the images are no longer visible or tangible as photographs. As such, the submarine archive encourages us to rethink the relationships among history, memory, and photography in ways that can seem downright prophetic or at least ahead of their time, given that twentieth-century photographic prints and negatives are disappearing all over the world today.

Portrait of three young men with wristwatches, briefcase, and telephone, Dakar (Médina), Senegal, early 1960s. Photographer unknown. Private collection of Diédé Ly, Dakar, Senegal. Rephotographed by Leslie Rabine



I was first drawn to West Africa by distinctively local aesthetic concerns that deliberately engage with the ephemerality of the photographic image. Longstanding notions about the fixity of the photographic reference have been challenged throughout the region from a very early date. Common practices—such as writing, drawing, and painting on photographs, with charcoal, graphite, and gouache, and the repeated reproduction of prints through serial rephotography over many generations—seem openly to address ephemerality and decay, aesthetically and conceptually, and to inscribe a conscious engagement with photographic materiality within the visual frame. Scholar Erin Haney has written beautifully about photographs in early twentieth-century Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) in which the image of a given individual would be carefully removed from a photograph, or a new one introduced—effecting the substitution, for example, of one wife for another within the photographic frame. Another widespread practice, also in Ghana, consists of marking an “X” on the surface of a photographic print above the head of anyone who has died. Several years ago, while looking through photographs in the archives of the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, I came across a photograph of a West African delegation

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to the United Nations, in which a delicate “X” had been discreetly marked, in black ink, above the head of the representative from Ghana—an indication that the man was dead, and that the photograph, which had been taken in New York and had very likely never left it, had passed through Ghanaian hands.

Such practices alert us to dormant material qualities of the photograph, and heighten our awareness of the photograph’s inherent capacity for modification, right on the surface of the print. If the hair or other features of the photographic subject have been inked in, it is often because the photograph was faded. In other cases, photographs have been repeatedly inked over many years, or various lines and features darkened with charcoal or redrawn, in open acknowledgment of fading and disintegration: actions that underscore both the photograph’s impermanence and its vulnerability to deterioration, and that engage with it in creative ways.

This same vulnerability is naturally a major preoccupation of the keepers and sponsors of photographic collections and archives. As a consequence of my research, I have also become involved in projects focused on creating, and funding, archives and other institutions for photography in Africa. Substantive reflection on the politics of the archive is, when it comes to these types of practical projects, urgently necessary—and sadly elusive. Digitization—which, it was widely thought, would make possible new modes of preservation, even if it cannot ensure a photograph’s survival—has offered few solutions here. International digital archival standards, explicitly imposed by Northern and Western grant makers, stipulate that archival masters should be produced from negatives, and that prints should be included only if they provide “contextual information” (writing on the verso, a name, date, or caption)—thereby disregarding concerns with both the ephemerality and materiality of photographs as objects that are central to African histories. The equipment essential to local management of a digital archive (servers, backup systems, and the generators needed to run them in the absence of a reliable electricity supply) is considered to be “infrastructure” by these same grant makers—and therefore not covered under their funding guidelines.

These guidelines are based on a utopian vision of industrial modernity that is, at best, irrelevant to contemporary African realities. They are furthermore incapable of grasping the intention of a photograph such as the one in these pages of Oumou Khady Guèye. What archive, analog or digital, in existence or imaginable today has the protocols of preservation, the equipment, and indeed the infrastructure in place that would allow us to valorize ephemerality, transience, and decay in a way that would be faithful to this photograph? How do we archive a photograph that in turn archives the progress of its own decay, and that chronicles a quintessentially photographic experience of ephemerality and loss? Rarely does one find in West Africa a photograph of great value that has not been rephotographed, and in which cropping, retouching, or other postproduction manipulation after multiple episodes of rephotography have been used to *conceal*, rather than to highlight, the fact of decay. As for the idea that the equipment necessary to the archive is “infrastructure,” and is therefore the responsibility of the state, this assumes a certain understanding of state sovereignty, and of the state’s responsibility to its citizens—an understanding that is regrettably narrow.

Visual anthropologist Liam Buckley directs us to an important crux in this discussion. Buckley has argued eloquently for what he calls “the right to allow for decay,” a right that is, he maintains, central to the cultural practice of archiving. Buckley is responding to the anxieties of (mostly non-African) researchers regarding the conditions of advanced decay that they have found



Edouard Méhomey, unknown sitter, Porto-Novo, Benin, mid-1960s. Photograph overpainted with gouache and ink. Private collection of Ida Méhomey, Porto-Novo, Benin. Rephotographed by Ida Méhomey.

in African photography archives, even in formal institutional settings. While they may be unsettling, Buckley's arguments are exemplary of a series of more radical decolonial strategies, and they become clearer when we consider the complicated relationships among photographic archives and colonialism from a postcolonial vantage point.

Whereas in most of Europe, the birth of the modern nation-state took place before the invention of photography, in most of Africa, photography predates the implantation of the state form by more than a century. Not only was photography witness to the birth of the postcolonial state in Africa (1960 in francophone West Africa, where my own research is focused), it was deeply bound up with it. Collections connected with the rise of African liberation movements and with the inaugural moments of decolonization nonetheless remain squarely outside official and state-sponsored institutional spaces—in washtubs, under beds. The situation is vexed by the fact that the official or state-sponsored archive is in most of these places a colonial institution, inaugurated by Europeans as part of their colonial projects.

As Buckley astutely observes, in voicing their anxieties, foreign researchers often continue these projects unwittingly when they collude with the ruses of development discourse and other discourses calling for the "modernization" of African states. Buckley suggests that letting certain things go—literally, letting them rot—in the existing institutional contexts may itself be a sign of modernization, and the supreme expression of sovereignty.

In those rare cases in which postcolonial African states have taken a more active interest in curating their own archives and shaping an explicitly postcolonial archival legacy, further questions about the materiality of the archive crop up. Political scientist Achille Mbembe, in his 2002 essay "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," writes compellingly about the attempts on the part of states to destroy or suppress certain archives—for example, of myriad liberation movements or, in South Africa prior to the transition to democracy, of the struggle against apartheid. Such gestures are, in a sense, the flipside of the right to allow for decay. They are not identical to the exercise of state sovereignty, yet they cannot be wholly separated from its conditions. Mbembe notes that, all too often, when these states have succeeded in destroying the material support of the archive (by destroying actual photographs or documents), they have ended only by strengthening the power of collective memory, which lives on in, and defines, a community. These attempts demonstrate, again, that more general questions about the exercise of state sovereignty are essentially bound up with the *materiality* of the archive even more than with its contents. "The final destination of the archive is," Mbembe writes, "[...] always situated outside its own materiality."

The image of the world's waterways clogged with discarded photographs is a haunting one. But it is not possible for me or any other scholar or theorist to prescribe when, or whether, a given archive should be preserved, or conversely left to rot, or deliberately destroyed. On the contrary, to take it upon myself (or to leave it to any other foreign researcher) to decide which photographs should be preserved and which merely remembered would be to further the loss of cultural sovereignty discussed at the start of this essay. It would also be to ignore the more nuanced picture of the materiality of the archive, and of photographic memory, that emerges in the West African case. Few could deny that we now have both the historical distance and practical experience to know that images, like technologies, are neither culturally nor politically neutral. It follows that "archival loss" does not have the same meaning in all places. Nor should it. It remains an open question of what it will take to decolonize the archive in this context, and one that we are just beginning to explore.



Portrait of Oumou Khady Guèye, Dakar, Senegal, early 1930s (first vintage print); 1958 (print that was rephotographed, using a digital camera, in 2007). Photographer unknown
Private collection of Ibrahima Faye and Khady Ndiaye, Dakar, Senegal. Rephotographed by Leslie Rabine

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