



In Possession: The Future of West African Archives and Librarianship

Emanuel N. Agbavitor

MS, Library & Information Science at Long Island University

MA, Archives & Public History at New York University

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ABSTRACT

A visit to Togo's national archives revealed what many researchers across West Africa have already experienced. The records that should be there are often not, and those that exist are rarely accessible to the communities they belong to. This paper examines archival silence in West Africa through personal experience, continental policy, and curatorial practice.

In 2022, I visited Togo's national archives — in part to better understand Togolese culture and history as well as my own heritage. Before my visit, I was unable to view an informational or even a broader statement on what was in the archives. I was going in blind. When I arrived, the archivist, apologetic but unsurprised, explained that many materials were political, and other cultural materials were not held in the building but rather at an institution abroad. These records existed, but not within a

local archive.

This experience was not mine alone to share. Across West Africa, archival silences, incomplete state records, and fragmented special collections complicate the work of librarians, researchers, and cultural workers. Readers familiar with restitution arguments may note a growing body of cases in Francophone nations. While global library discourse often frames African information services in terms of resource scarcity or technological deficit, such explanations obscure the archival and structural quagmire within the field of information science and librarianship (LIS).

Archival Silence and Interpretive Burdens

The concept of “archival silence” refers to the absence, distortion, or erasure of particular voices and records within an archive. In West African contexts, these silences are shaped by three structural and historical forces: legacies of previous colonial administrations that built archives as a method of control; post-independence bureaucratic restructuring; and the multilingual and multiethnic characteristics of modern West African nations.

These three forces do not operate independently. John Kelechi Ugwuanyi speaks directly to this in his work on *Coloniality and Decoloniality of Heritage Institutions in West Africa*, arguing that this is a singular inherited logic. In information science, the core function of acquisition and classification determines what is held in an archive. Ugwuanyi rather challenges its purpose by interrogating the structure itself. Who built it, in whose interest, and whose knowledge it was designed to receive? For many patrons of Western or well-resourced archives, these questions never arise. In much of West Africa, these concerns become the conditions for entry.

The cost of this condition becomes uneven and unjust additional labor. While at Togo’s National Archive, I never expected to encounter a unique classification system or to examine French material in Ewe, the most widely spoken indigenous language in Togo. In fact, I expected this labor of decoding, accommodating, and working around these archaic systems to be performed more by those with less institutional power — what David Graeber describes as “interpretive labor” in *Dead Zones of the Imagination*.^[1] It is

especially noticeable in francophone Africa, where archives were explicitly designed to serve colonial administrations' governance. The role of those separated from traditional archival institutions has become one of translating institutional silences into usable knowledge.

This environment shifts the silences described above from a strictly evaluative assessment of epistemic presentation to a tug-of-war between cultural patrimony and sovereignty. Why shouldn't communities from which these materials originate be able to govern their own materials? It is an argument Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr have been pushing regarding restitution and the archival landscape in West Africa that has caught my attention. The lack of advocacy and policy transformation starts to emulate Graeber's form of structural violence, where lack of leadership leads to responsibilities falling to community members.^[2] It is clear that the public is aware of this disconnect within libraries and archives. Still, as Savoy and Sarr have noted, it is not their responsibility to enact policy or governance. African academics such as Chinua Achebe, Frantz Fanon, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have long advocated for this, and we are only now seeing it reflected in the African Library and Information Associations and Institutions (AfLIA).

AfLIA Policy Language and Bridging Frameworks

The African Library and Information Associations and Institutions (AfLIA) aims to change this by representing the most ambitious attempt at continental coordination of library and information policy in Africa. Its Strategic Plan (2025–2030) and Quality Assurance Policy together constitute the closest thing the continent has to a unified professional framework and tighter cohesion of institutions in West Africa.

Although the Strategic Plan commits to digitizing indigenous knowledge, advocating for better library policies, and improving LIS scholarship, it lacks descriptions that address the perspectives of community stakeholders or guidelines centered on community contribution. The closest thing to this was the strategic goal to “Increase public awareness on the role of libraries in contemporary development”, with a rationale of increasing public / stakeholder support for initiatives.^[3] While aspects such as

developing multilingual resources that reflect Africa's linguistic diversity are critical to supporting LIS services in this context, there seems to be little room for community input and re-evaluating structures that may no longer serve them.

This is precisely the problem Karl Landström identifies in *Archives, Epistemic Injustice and Knowing the Past*. He argues that archives do not simply omit certain voices incidentally, but enact what Miranda Fricker terms epistemic injustice. Picture this: Despite community and generational shifts, your local library director has disregarded you and broader community comments, choosing to implement only what has worked “traditionally.” You and your fellow community members feel as if your lived experiences have little to no credibility. This is how Fricker describes a wrong done to someone, specifically in their capacity as a “knower” or otherwise described as a hermeneutical injustice that leads to a testimonial injustice.^[4] To Landström, the archive authorizes certain ways of knowing the past while rendering others inadmissible. This has become most evident in the kinds of special collections I tried to access, in which cultural material found abroad was available only for Western knowledge production.

That being said, I wondered: why is there a lack of community outreach? AfLIA's existing framework seems to engage those already embedded within professional and academic networks, constituencies that would advocate for LIS development with or without reaching beyond their walls. Community participation requires institutions to meet them on entirely different terms. This is where civil society emerges, forming community-focused collectives to fill this gap. This year (2026) in Ghana, emerging organizations such as *Si Hene* and the *Dikan Center* have begun hosting fellowships and workshops, directly training community members to become the next generation of practitioners. While AfLIA's goals are admirable, situating policy around broader growth without centering community risks reproducing the same exclusions the plan aims to solve.

Community, Trust, and the Archive

What community-centered outreach actually requires was the question I posed to Rosemary Esinam Damalie, an artist-curator and cultural practitioner currently at the

Foundation for Contemporary Art–Ghana. With training in fine art painting and sculpture, as well as museum and heritage studies, her work spans community-based programming, decolonial curatorial practice, and institution-building across West and Central Africa. Given her experience facilitating community-based initiatives and frequent visits to archives on the continent, her experience and perspective brings clarity and direct contact with curatorial practice into the conversation.

Her research in Yikpabongo in 2019, in Ghana’s North East Region, illustrates this concretely. She recounts that multiple excavations were carried out in the village by different groups and organizations across 20+ years, uncovering bronze, terracotta, and ivory objects. Many of these objects are now housed in the archaeology department at the University of Ghana in Accra.

Despite years of research, collections, and data gathering, the community still does not have a center, archive, or library through which this knowledge and memory can be shared locally. To access information or view these objects, one must travel to the capital city, Accra. Meanwhile, several scholars, including Hans Scheutz, a German archaeologist, have published work (e.g., *The Forgotten Culture: Terracottas from North Ghana / Die Vergessene Kultur: Terrakotten aus Nordghana*) on the community and the objects found there, yet the community itself has not benefited from these publications in any meaningful way.

After the objects were moved to the University of Ghana, many villagers who once knew the stories surrounding them never saw them again. Through the village prince, who invited Esinam and her colleagues, she and her team have been negotiating to organize an exhibition of these objects and all information on them in the region and in the community in order to broaden archival access. “To date,” Esinam said, “we have not been able to realize that exhibition.”

This is the practical form of what Landström identifies as epistemic injustice. An archive that receives community material without receiving the community itself has not solved

the problem. “How to truly make it accessible to locals is the big question,” Esinam adds. There is no question that the cost of hosting an exhibit far north would be expensive, but this is a small price for custodianship granted by a community. She further explains, “Meanwhile, in their acquisition or excavation, one may ask what value did they give the people? That’s where I believe they have failed.”

“Many of us love the idea of coming from or belonging to a village but no one wants to be called a villager,” she explained. “Working with a community, by contrast, means that the community shapes the process and feels genuinely involved in its outcomes therefore no one person can claim to be the saviour of a community archive or collection.” Esinam noted that the advent of digital alternatives within preservation and exhibition practices gives hope for more ways for cultural heritage to live on equitably. Think about this through exhibition spaces, education curricula, animation, and even theater. These expansions can help meet communities where they are and redefine where the archive can exist.

Sadly, this does not change the institutional issue at hand. As we arrived at the question of stakeholders in AfLIA’s policy, Esinam was direct: “Many archives and institutions just like the ambiguity of it—to be safe... Once people hear stakeholders, there is an assumption that the community is included. When you get on the ground, you find the local community is not the target audience and is [un]intentionally excluded.” To be truly in possession of one’s heritage, there must be authority placed upon community members. If not, West African institutions will continue ceding custodianship and the trust it requires to the community-run organizations already building what AfLIA’s formal frameworks have not.

Author Bio:

Emanuel Agbavitor is a Dual Degree student in the History department with a background in Film. He is interested in cultural heritage, migration studies, and community-centered preservation practices.

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- [1] David Graeber, “Dead zones of the imagination,” *HAU Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2, no: 2 (2012): 17, <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau2.2.007>.
- [2] Graeber, “Dead zones of the imagination,” 112-113.
- [3] The African Library and Information Associations and Institutions, “Strategic Plan 2025-2030,” AfLIA Strategic Plans, <https://web.aflia.net/strategic-plan/>.
- [4] Karl Landström, “Archives, Epistemic Injustice and Knowing the Past,” *Ethics and Social Welfare* 15, no: 4 (2021): 381, doi:10.1080/17496535.2021.1961004.

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