

REFIGURING the ARCHIVE

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The Power of the Archive and its Limits

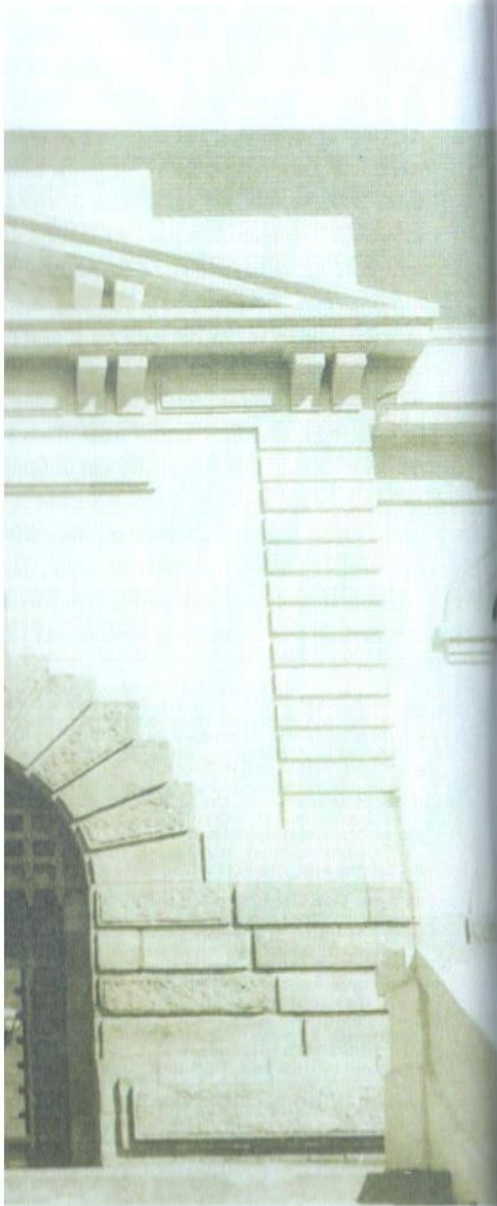
Achille Mbembe

The term 'archives' first refers to a building, a symbol of a public institution, which is one of the organs of a constituted state. However, by 'archives' is also understood a collection of documents – normally written documents – kept in this building. There cannot therefore be a definition of 'archives' that does not encompass both the building itself and the documents stored there.

FROM DOCUMENT TO ARCHIVE

The status and the power of the archive derive from this entanglement of building and documents. The archive has neither status nor power without an architectural dimension, which encompasses the physical space of the site of the building, its motifs and columns, the arrangement of the rooms, the organisation of the 'files', the labyrinth of corridors, and that degree of discipline, half-light and austerity that gives the place something of the nature of a temple and a cemetery: a religious space because a set of rituals is constantly taking place there, rituals that we shall see below are of a quasi-magical nature, and a cemetery in the sense that fragments of lives and pieces of time are interred there, their shadows and footprints inscribed on paper and preserved like so many relics. And so we arrive at the inescapable materiality of the archive as well as at its resulting role, as this essay will endeavour to show, as an instituting imaginary.

In terms of the rituals involved, we might look at how an archive is produced, that is, at the process which culminates in a 'secular' text, with a previously different function, ending its career in the archives – or rather, becoming an archive. We often forget that not all documents are destined to be archives. In any given cultural system, only some documents fulfil the criteria of 'archivability'. Except for private documents (church documents, documents from private institutions, families, companies . . .), the majority of documents deemed archivable are related to the general work of the state. Once they are received, they have to be coded and classified. They are then distributed according to chronological, thematic or geographical criteria. Whatever criteria are used at the time of coding,



classification and distribution, these procedures are simply a matter of creating order. Documents are thus immediately placed in a system that facilitates identification and interpretation. More seriously, the documents are then placed under a seal of secrecy – for a period of time, which varies according to the nature of the documents and local legislation. The process that results in a document becoming ‘archivable’ reveals that there are only products which have been deliberately stripped of what would make them simply ‘secular’ documents; thus there are no archives as such.

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, where they can be consulted according to well-established procedures and regulations. As a result, they become part of a special system, well illustrated by the withdrawal into secrecy or ‘closing’ that marks the first years of their life. For several years, these fragments of lives and pieces of time are concealed in the half-light, set back from the visible world. A ban of principle is imposed upon them. This ban renders the content of these documents even more mysterious. At the same time a process of despoilment and dispossession is at work: above all, the archived document is one that has to a large extent ceased to belong to its author, in order to become the property of society at large, if only because from the moment it is archived, anyone can claim to access the content. Over and above the ritual of making secret, it seems clear that the archive is primarily the product of a judgement, the result of the exercise of a specific power and authority, which involves placing certain documents in an archive at the same time as others are discarded. The archive, therefore, is fundamentally a matter of discrimination and of selection, which, in the end, results in the granting of a privileged status to certain written documents, and the refusal of that same status to others, thereby judged ‘unarchivable’. The archive is, therefore, not a piece of data, but a status.

THE STATUS OF THE DEBRIS

What status are we actually talking about? First of all, it is a material status. The material nature of the archive – at least before digitalisation – means that it is inscribed in the universe of the senses: a tactile universe because the document can be touched, a visual universe because it can be seen, a cognitive universe because it can be read and decoded. Consequently, because of its being there, the archive becomes

something that does away with doubt, exerting a debilitating power over such doubt. It then acquires the status of proof. It is proof that a life truly existed, that something actually happened, an account of which can be put together. The final destination of the archive is therefore always situated outside its own materiality, in the story that it makes possible.

Its status is also an imaginary one. The imaginary is characterised by two properties already mentioned above: the architectural nature and the religious nature of the archive. No archive can be the depositary of the entire history of a society, of all that has happened in that society. Through archived documents, we are presented with pieces of time to be assembled, fragments of life to be placed in order, one after the other, in an attempt to formulate a story that acquires its coherence through the ability to craft links between the beginning and the end. A montage of fragments thus creates an illusion of totality and continuity. In this way, just like the architectural process, the time woven together by the archive is the product of a composition. This time has a political dimension resulting from the alchemy of the archive: it is supposed to belong to everyone. The community of time, the feeling according to which we would all be heirs to a time over which we might exercise the rights of collective ownership: this is the imaginary that the archive seeks to disseminate.

This time of co-ownership, however, rests on a fundamental event: death. Death to the extent that the archived document *par excellence* is, generally, a document whose author is dead and which, obviously, has been closed for the required period before it can be accessed. The rest represented by this closure, this extension of the period of time and the resulting distance from the immediate present, adds to the archive content of the document. Other than in exceptional cases, it is only at the end of this period of closure that the archived document is as if woken from sleep and returned to life. It can, from then on, be ‘consulted’. The term ‘consulted’ shows clearly that we are no longer talking about just any document, but of this particular document, which has the power, because of a legal designation, to enlighten those who are engaged in an ‘inquiry’ into time inherited in co-ownership.

On a more basic level, the archive imposes a qualitative difference between co-ownership of dead time (the past) and living time, that is, the immediate present. That part of its status falling under the order of the imaginary arises from the fact that it is rooted in death as an architectural event. A death has to occur to give rise to a time charac-

terised by not belonging to a private individual, precisely because this time, from that moment on, founds or institutes something. The power of the archive as an 'instituting imaginary' largely originates in this trade with death. There are three dimensions to this trade. The first involves the struggle against the fragments of life being dispersed. In fact, death is one of the most radical attempts to destroy life and to abolish all debt in relation to it. The act of dying, inasmuch as it entails the dislocation of the physical body, never attacks totally, nor equally successfully, all the properties of the deceased (in either the figurative or the literal sense). There will always remain traces of the deceased, elements that testify that a life did exist, that deeds were enacted, and struggles engaged in or evaded. Archives are born from a desire to reassemble these traces rather than destroy them. The function of the archive is to thwart the dispersion of these traces and the possibility, always there, that left to themselves, they might eventually acquire a life of their own. Fundamentally, the dead should be formally prohibited from stirring up disorder in the present.

The best way to ensure that the dead do not stir up disorder is not only to bury them, but also to bury their 'remains', the 'debris'. Archives form a part of these remains and this debris, and that is why they fulfil a religious role in modern societies. But – always remembering the relationship between the document and the architectural design in which it is stored – they also constitute a type of sepulchre where these remains are laid to rest. In this act of burial, and in relation to sepulture, is found the second dimension of the trade between the archive and death. Archiving is a kind of interment, laying something in a coffin, if not to rest, then at least to consign elements of that life which could not be destroyed purely and simply. These elements, removed from time and from life, are assigned to a place and a sepulchre that is perfectly recognisable because it is consecrated: the archives. Assigning them to this place makes it possible to establish an unquestionable authority over them and to tame the violence and cruelty of which the 'remains' are capable, especially when these are abandoned to their own devices.

THE ARCHIVE AS A TALISMAN

Up to now, we have treated archives on the basis of their power as a relic, and their capacity to function as an *instituting imaginary*. We have deliberately left aside two aspects: the subjective experience of the archive by individuals, and the relationship between the archive

and the state. As far as the first is concerned, it is enough to state that however we define archives, they have no meaning outside the subjective experience of those individuals who, at a given moment, come to use them. It is this subjective experience that places limits on the supposed power of the archives, revealing their uselessness and their residual and superfluous nature. Several factors are involved in this subjective experience of the archives: who owns them; on whose authority they depend; the political context in which they are visited; the conditions under which they are accessed; the distance between what is sought and what is found; the manner in which they are decoded and how what is found there is presented and made public.

The relationship between the archive and the state is just as complex. It rests on a paradox. On the one hand, there is no state without archives – without its archives. On the other hand, the very existence of the archive constitutes a constant threat to the state. The reason is simple. More than on its ability to recall, the power of the state rests on its ability to consume time, that is, to abolish the archive and anaesthetise the past. The act that creates the state is an act of 'chronophagy'. It is a radical act because consuming the past makes it possible to be free from all debt. The constitutive violence of the state rests, in the end, on the possibility, which can never be dismissed, of refusing to recognise (or to settle) one or another debt. This violence is defined in contrast to the very essence of the archive since the denial of the archive is equivalent to, *stricto sensu*, a denial of debt.

This is why, in certain cases, some states have thought that they could do without archives. They have therefore attempted, either to reduce them to silence, or, in an even more radical manner, to destroy them. By doing this, they thought they could defer the archive's ability to serve as proof of a suspect fragment of life or piece of time. More interested in the present and the future than in the past, they thought that they could shut down the past for once and for all so that they could write as if everything was starting anew. Because, in the end, such methods affect the materiality of the archive more than its dimension as an instituting imaginary, they have, on occasion, run into trouble.

The power of the archive for all that has not been abolished. On the contrary, it has, rather, been displaced. Material destruction has only succeeded in inscribing the memory of the archive and its contents in a double register. On the one hand, in fantasy, inasmuch as destroying or prohibiting the archive has only provided it with additional content. In this case that content is all the more unreal

because it has been removed from sight and interred once and for all in the sphere of that which shall remain unknown, therefore allowing space for all manner of imaginary thoughts. On the other hand, the destroyed archive haunts the state in the form of a spectre, an object that has no objective substance, but which, because it is touched by death, is transformed into a demon, the receptacle of all utopian ideals and of all anger, the authority of a future judgement.

In contrast, other states have sought to 'civilise' the ways in which the archive might be consumed, not by attempting to destroy its material substance but through the bias of commemoration. In this framework, the ultimate objective of commemoration is less to remember than to forget. For a memory to exist, there first has to be the temptation to repeat an original act. Commemoration, in contrast, is part of the ritual of forgetting: one bids farewell to the desire or the willingness to repeat something. 'Learning' to forget is all the easier if, on the one hand, whatever is to be forgotten passes into folklore (when it is handed over to the people at large), and if, on the other hand, it becomes part of the universe of commodification. Thus we pass from its consumption by a Leviathan seeking to liberate itself of all debt (that is, to acquire the right to exercise absolute violence) to its consumption by the masses – mass consumption.

By democratising the act of chronophagy and returning to an order where the consumption of the archive becomes a communal tool of the state and of society, two possibilities arise which repression alone does not allow. On the one hand, the urge that would have meant a desire to repeat, in a different time and with other actors, the original act is attenuated. In those cases where such an act involved murder, an assassin or a massacre, it is not difficult to see the benefit a society might gain from such a severance. On the other hand, by making such a severance a part of the universe of merchandise thanks to mass consumption, the archive is removed from the sphere of 'remains' and 'debris' and transformed into a talisman. A pagan cult then results, at the heart of which can be found numerous other institutions and artefacts (for example, museums).

The transformation of the archive into a talisman, however, is also accompanied by removing any subversive factors in the memory. In giving those who carry it (in this case those who consume it) a feeling of being protected or of being co-owner of a time or co-actor in an event, even if in the past, the talisman softens the anger, shame, guilt, or resentment which the archive tends, if not to incite, then at least to maintain, because of its function of recall. Thus the desire for

revenge is removed just as the duty of repentance, justice and reparation is withdrawn. The commodification of memory obliterates the distinction between the victim and the executioner, and consequently enables the state to realise what it has always dreamed of: the abolition of debt and the possibility of starting afresh.

CONCLUSION

Examining archives is to be interested in that which life has left behind, to be interested in debt. However, it is also to be preoccupied with debris. In this sense, both the historian and the archivist inhabit a sepulchre. They maintain an intimate relationship with a world alive only by virtue of an initial event that is represented by the act of dying. This being the case, writing history merely involves manipulating archives. Following tracks, putting back together scraps and debris, and reassembling remains, is to be implicated in a ritual which results in the resuscitation of life, in bringing the dead back to life by reintegrating them in the cycle of time, in such a way that they find, in a text, in an artefact or in a monument, a place to inhabit, from where they may continue to express themselves.

Dealing with dying also evokes the possibility of the spectre. The archive could not have a relationship with death without including the other remnant of death – the spectre. To a very large extent, the historian is engaged in a battle against this world of spectres. The latter find, through written texts, a path to an existence among mortals – but an existence that no longer unfolds according to the same modality as in their lifetime. It may be that historiography, and the very possibility of a political community (*polis*), are only conceivable on condition that the spectre, which has been brought back to life in this way, should remain silent, should accept that from now on he may only speak through another, or be represented by some sign, or some object which, not belonging to any one in particular, now belongs to all.

This being the case, the historian is not content with bringing death back to life. S/he restores it to life precisely in order better to silence it by transforming it from autonomous words into a prop on which s/he can lean in order to speak and write beyond an ordinary text. It is by the bias of this act of dispossession – this leaving out of the author – that the historian establishes his/her authority, and a society establishes a specific domain: the domain of things which, because shared, belong exclusively to no one (the public domain).

And this is why the historian and the archivist have long been so useful to the state, notably in contexts where the latter was set up as an appointed guardian of that domain of things that belong exclusively to no one. In fact, both the historian and the archivist occupy a strategic position in the production of an instituting imaginary. One might ask what their role from now on may be, especially in contexts where the process of democratising a chronophagic act – that is, the abolition of the archive – is at an advanced stage.

The curious thing is the long-held belief that the state rested on something other than on this desire to abolish the archive, to free itself of debris. What could be more noble? But perhaps it is a condition for the existence of all societies: the need permanently to destroy the 'debris' – the taming, by violence if necessary, of the demon that they carry.

(Translated from the French by Judith Inngs)