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Open secrets: the British 'migrated archives', colonial history, and postcolonial history

by Tim Livsey

In 2011, the British government revealed that it held an irregular archive of thousands of files from thirty-seven former colonies. British authorities had covertly removed these documents around the time of transfers of power, from the later 1940s to the 1980s. The disclosure was prompted by a legal action brought against the British government by five Kenyans – Ndiku Mutwiwa Mutua, Paulo Nzili, Wambugu wa Nyingi, Jane Muthoni Mara, and Susan Ngondi – who had suffered horrific abuse by British forces during the 1950s.[1] The British government at first denied holding any records relevant to the so-called 'Mau Mau case', but on 5 April 2011 the Foreign Office minister Lord Howell admitted to parliament that it had been 'general practice' for British authorities to remove documents from colonies, and that the Foreign Office still held these records.[2]

This article considers the British 'migrated archives' to reassess their secrecy, and its implications for colonial and postcolonial history.[3] After Howell's statement to parliament, journalists described the files as a 'secret Foreign Office archive'.[4] Around April 2012, when the first tranche of the papers was opened to the public at the British National Archives in Kew, west London, historians including Richard Drayton and Calder Walton wrote about what they also called the 'secret archive'.[5] Yet other historians were more sceptical about the secret-archive narrative. Stephen Howe warned in 2011 that 'we should perhaps beware of fetishizing "secret" documents', and Philip Murphy in 2016 cautioned against a 'new mythology' emerging around the migrated archives.[6]

This article argues that British authorities intended the migrated archives' removal to be a racialized secret, that would maintain colonial-era hierarchies amidst the political changes of late colonialism. It questions melodramatic, under-theorized narratives of secrecy, however, exploring how in practice the migrated archives' removal was never entirely concealed. It was instead an ambiguous 'open secret': neither completely open, nor hidden.

The article then considers the implications of seeing the migrated archives as an open secret for future work on migrated and postcolonial archives, focusing particularly on Africa. It argues that efforts to uncover hitherto unsuspected secrets in the migrated archives are unlikely to be successful,

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advocating instead research into questions raised by the migrated archives themselves, including how they were collated and represented as secret, and how they were shaped by colonized people. The article, finally, argues against othering postcolonial archives in the Global South. They have been seen as fragmentary and inaccessible, but the British migrated archives affair highlights the similarities between colonial and postcolonial archives. Although the article focuses on the British case, migrated colonial archives raising similar questions are held in other European countries, including France, Belgium, and the Netherlands.[7] The British migrated archives are an artefact of a wider history of European late colonialism and its legacies.

This analysis is informed by the social science of secrecy. Since the pioneering work of Georg Simmel and Max Weber over a century ago, social scientists have considered the relationships between secrecy, community, and hierarchy.[8] Secrecy implies communities whose members may legitimately know a secret, and hierarchies of those who are included and excluded. British officials' efforts to conceal the removal of colonial archives sought to maintain their hierarchical position in relation to nationalist politicians who would soon lead independent countries.

Nevertheless, anthropologists in particular have dissected the inherent ambiguity of secrecy. Katherine Verdery has suggested that secrecy and disclosure are intimately interrelated, forming a 'dialectic of concealment and revelation'.[9] Anthropologists have used the concept of the open (or 'public') secret to explore how secrets are often in practice widely known. Beryl L. Bellman has considered how many non-initiates in fact knew the initiation secrets of the Poro society in West Africa, for example, and Hugh Gusterson has argued that the American state secrets exposed by Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden were accessible to thousands of US government employees and contractors, and were suspected even more widely.[10] Similarly, the British migrated archives were for decades known to thousands of people, and the British government sometimes admitted holding them. At the same time, though, many other people did not know about them and could not access them.

* * *

The covert removal of colonial archives to Britain continued from the later 1940s, with the transfer of power to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), through to the 1980s.[11] It formed one aspect of wider processes that saw British officials sort, remove, and destroy archives across the late colonial empire.[12] British officials generally represented these practices in terms of the proper administration of transfers of power. Instructions issued in Kenya in 1961, for example, emphasized that officials should leave '*as much material as possible for the unimpaired functioning of the succeeding independent Government, and for the proper recording of the past*', removing only documents that might

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pose a security risk, endanger intelligence sources, or be used unethically. Yet British officials were also instructed to remove papers that might 'embarrass' colonial authorities.[13] This suggested a wider remit to remove documents that, for example, included derogatory assessments of nationalist leaders or evidence of British colonial abuses.

This sorting, removal, and destruction of documents was intended to be a racialized secret. Colonial regulations made it clear that only white British officials were supposed to know about these practices. Significantly, new regimes of secrecy were introduced with the first election of 'local' ministers in a given colony, which meant that senior administrative posts were no longer occupied exclusively by white British officials.[14] Across the empire, when this was imminent, British officials created dual filing systems. One set of files labelled 'Personal' could be consulted by white British officials only and 'should not be sighted by local eyes'.[15] Variants were introduced in some colonies, such as the 'DG' system in Uganda (from 1961), and the 'Watch' systems in Kenya (1961) and Northern Rhodesia (1963, now Zambia).[16] The regulations in Uganda, for example, stated that DG files could be viewed only by 'a civil service officer who is a British subject of European descent'.[17] These files would be removed or destroyed before transfers of power, rather than being passed to indigenous successor governments. The other set of files, sometimes called 'legacy' files, could be viewed by nationalist politicians as well as white British officials, and would be left after independence.

All new files were assigned to one of these two categories, and many existing files were sorted and categorized in astonishingly labour-intensive operations. These arrangements aimed to maintain colonial-era hierarchies amidst the political changes of late colonialism. White British officials wanted to retain the initiative to decide who should know what during transfers of power. They regulated the circulation of information to preserve their own leading position, and excluded others from access to selected files, even elected ministers who would soon lead their countries.

British officials went to considerable lengths to keep these arrangements secret. The existence of parallel filing systems was to be 'scrupulously protected', according to 1962 Colonial Office instructions.[18] Despite frequent staff shortages, only officials regarded as white and British were allowed to sort files. In Uganda in 1961, for example, one Mrs De Souza, a Portuguese national from Goa who had acquired British nationality, was barred from categorizing files, apparently on racial grounds.[19] The British also sought to conceal the destruction of documents. In 1957, for example, British officials covertly removed five lorry loads of files from Malaya (now Malaysia) to the British naval base in Singapore in unmarked trucks, where they were burned in an incinerator. This was intended to prevent Malayan civil servants from finding out, and to avoid the transfer of power being literally overshadowed by smoke from the last-minute burning of documents, as had apparently happened in India in 1947.[20]

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Yet anthropologists have highlighted the ambiguities of secrecy, which were exemplified in the number of British officials engaged in manipulating archives. As one reported, 'in many hundreds of offices throughout Uganda [...] we have had to leave it to the British Officers of European descent [...] to carry out the job'.[21] Hundreds were involved in Uganda alone. Across the empire, thousands of British officials must have participated, and even more must have known. For the Personal system and its variants to work, officials had to know what the designations Personal, DG, and Watch meant. The removal and destruction of documents was an open secret amongst white British officials.

They also tended to view the need for racialized secrecy as a short-term consideration. Little effort was made to conceal the holes left in archives passed to successor governments. The 1961 instructions about the covert Uganda DG series stated that in legacy files passed to the successor government, any mention of '"DG" folio numbers does not matter, nor does the fact that files will be missing, as we are not attempting to cover up the fact that some files and papers have been removed'.[22] References to missing files were left in those that remained. The 1961 Kenya instructions treated the removal of files as obvious. 'While in some cases the alteration of folio numbers, and other track-covering devices, may be simple enough and waste little time', they read, 'elaborate pains are not called for [...] No sensible person would expect the transition to independence to be unaccompanied by the destruction or removal of some paper'.[23] In addition, evidence was sometimes unintentionally left behind. The British accidentally left documents in Kenya giving a detailed account of the removal and destruction of files.[24] British efforts to conceal the removal and destruction of documents were elaborate, but also short-termist and incomplete.

British officials' efforts towards secrecy were further compromised by discussions about the removal of documents with unauthorized white British people, who were not serving colonial officials. These interactions contravened the regulations around the Personal series and its variants and suggest that British officials understood them, irrespective of their exact wording, as chiefly intended to exclude colonized people. Some British academics with links to the colonial establishment knew files were being removed. Margery Perham, the Oxford specialist in colonial administration, in 1961 suggested that documents removed from Kenya could be deposited at the Bodleian Library.[25] Around this time, John J. Tawney, a former colonial official who was the director of the Oxford Colonial Records Project, corresponded with Gordon Hector, a senior British official in Basutoland (now Lesotho), about plans to remove colonial records to the Bodleian. Hector sent these files from Basutoland to Oxford via the Colonial Office in London in 1965 (see Fig. 1), but the Colonial Office retained the files, refusing to pass them to Tawney.[26]

British authorities even sometimes partially informed nationalist leaders. The last British High Commissioner of colonial Malaya, Sir Donald

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Fig. 1. The removal of files from the colonial Secretariat to the new office of the British representative in Maseru, Basutoland. The photograph shows the use of prisoners' labour to move a filing cabinet in 1965. The documents being moved here may have been among those that Gordon Hector sent to Britain, intending them to be received by the Oxford Colonial Records Project. Photograph reproduced courtesy of Kit Bird.

MacGillivray, wrote to Tunku Abdul Rahman in July 1957 that 'before Independence, we shall remove certain documents, mostly the property of Her Majesty's Government, which it is not possible to hand over to the independent Federation Government'.[27] MacGillivray suggested a false analogy with British procedures for dealing with Cabinet papers following a change of government, which however did not, as in Malaya, involve burning truckloads of documents.[28] As one British official reflected, the Tunku 'probably did not know on what a scale the removal was to take place'.[29] In Kenya too, British officials realized that they could not completely conceal the removal of documents. By November 1963, the British governor noted that 'Kenya Government Ministers are showing curiosity about papers' that were held in his office.[30] That month, the British informed the incoming Kenyan government that 'certain documents' had been removed to Britain, without giving any indication of how many.[31] Successor governments were never given the opportunity to advise on, or participate in, the sorting of documents for removal, but in these cases it was not entirely unknown to them.

Given the ambiguous secrecy surrounding the removal of documents, it is not surprising that some archivists in newly independent countries soon realized that files were missing. In 1967, less than four years after the transfer of power, the Kenyan government requested that the British 'consider returning all such documents back to Kenya with immediate effect'.[32]

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In 1969, and again in 1974, the East and Southern Africa Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives called for the return of documents.[33] By 1981 Lesotho, Swaziland, Botswana, Malta, and the Bahamas, as well as Kenya, had made enquires with the Foreign Office about their migrated archives.[34]

Remarkably, the British did not deny having removed records. London instructed the British High Commission in Nairobi in 1967 to inform the Kenyans that 'it was the general practice for the administration of the Dependent Territories to withdraw, shortly before Independence, certain documents [...] which it was not possible to hand on to the successor Government', and claimed that such documents were 'the property of H.M.G.'.[35] Similarly, when the Labour MP Andrew Faulds asked a series of parliamentary questions from 1970 to 1971 about the archives missing from Kenya, the Foreign Office minister Anthony Kershaw admitted that the 'pre-Independence governmental records of the Executive Council of Kenya from 1939 to 1958 were returned to this country'.[36] Philip Murphy has described the answers to Faulds' questions as 'thoroughly evasive', but Kershaw's comments were at once frank, admitting that British authorities had removed and still held such documents, and evasive, obfuscating the scale of such removals.[37]

From the 1940s to the 1980s, then, the British removal and destruction of colonial archives was neither completely secret, nor open. British officials sought to maintain racialized secrecy, but these efforts were inconsistent and short-termist. Thousands of colonial officials were involved in sorting, removing, and destroying documents, and British authorities sometimes partially admitted these practices. The migrated archives were an open secret, but most of the people who knew about them were white British officials.

* * *

The migrated archives retained this ambiguous status while they were held by the British government from the 1980s until 2012. The Foreign Office continued earlier efforts to keep the migrated archives covert. It did not advertise that it held this material. The migrated archives were excluded from the review system by which British government documents were passed to the National Archives.[38] When foreign archivists enquired about the migrated archives, the Foreign Office did its best to be unhelpful. One Foreign Office official hosting a delegation from Kenya in 1980 noted, for example, that she 'professed when questioned to know little about the material returned to the UK'.[39] British officials maintained in public that the migrated archives belonged to the British government, although in private they disagreed over their ownership and legal status.[40]

Right up until 2011, Foreign Office officials generally tried to keep the migrated archives quiet. One commented in 1995 that 'we continue to have 2000 boxes of files gathering dust, some of the contents of great interest, but

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which cannot be seen by researchers etc, in case the cat is let out of the bag'.[41] After the 2000 Freedom of Information Act, the migrated archives were not consistently searched in relation to freedom of information requests.[42] A former Foreign Office retrievals officer said in 2011 that the officials who managed the files 'tried to ignore the fact that we had them. We weren't really supposed to have them so it was thought best to ignore them for the purpose of requests'.[43]

But the secret remained open. Some African archivists still knew that material was missing from their collections. Kenya undertook sustained investigations into archives held in Britain during the later 1970s and 1980s, which, as we have seen, Foreign Office officials sought to obstruct. In 2003, African ministers responsible for archives issued a joint statement referring to records 'transferred [. . .] during the colonial era'.[44] Some historians noted in passing the late colonial destruction of documents. Caroline Elkins observed in 2005 that many documents regarding British detention camps in Kenya were missing from British and Kenyan national archives, stating that 'the colonial government had intentionally destroyed many of these missing files in massive bonfires'.[45]

In addition, more information about the migrated archives was made available at the British National Archives, as formerly closed British government files were opened to researchers. In 1999, a file dealing with the 1967 Kenyan request for the return of migrated documents, which contains extensive details about the Kenyan archives held in Britain, was made available.[46] The historian David Anderson used this file to compose his 2010 expert witness statement for the Mau Mau case, which prompted the British government's 2011 admission that it held the migrated archives.[47] In 2006, a file detailing at length the removal and destruction of archives in Malaya and Nigeria was also opened at Kew.[48] Information about the migrated archives, albeit scattered, was in the public domain.

Above all, many now retired British colonial officials knew about the removal and destruction of files, and were increasingly prepared to discuss these events. A retired colonial official told David Anderson at an Oxford garden party in 2011 that she had been involved in burning documents in Kenya, for example.[49] The racialized secrecy around the migrated archives from the later 1940s to the 1980s meant that many of the people who knew most about them from the 1980s to 2012 were either white British retired colonial officials, or officials at the Foreign Office, who were also British and largely white.[50] The open secret retained a racialized quality.

This was reflected in the researchers who managed to access the migrated archives. Despite rebuffing Kenyan enquiries in the early 1980s, Foreign Office officials actually permitted a few external researchers to use the migrated archives while they were held at Hanslope Park, which – despite its bucolic name – is a large, campus-like government site near Milton Keynes, surrounded by razor wire. An important example here is that of Colin Murray, a British anthropologist, and Peter Sanders, a historian and

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retired British colonial official who had worked in Lesotho. Murray and Sanders were in the later 1990s and early 2000s researching a book on ritual murder in colonial Lesotho. When Gordon Hector, a former colonial service colleague of Sanders, died in 2001, his widow, Mary Hector, asked Sanders to sort through his papers. Sanders found a list of files that Hector had sent from Lesotho to the Oxford Colonial Records Project in 1965.[51] Murray and Sanders were keen to view these files in relation to their research. Their enquiries revealed that the documents never arrived at Oxford as Hector had intended, so they contacted the Foreign Office to ask if they held this material. The initial reply from Hanslope Park in May 2002 noted 'no mention of the return of these files'.[52] Murray and Sanders persisted, until the Foreign Office admitted in August 2002 that 'we do have the Basutoland files in our custody but they are not open to the public'.[53] Murray and Sanders emphasized their 'scholarly, thorough, and responsible' approach, however, and the Foreign Office eventually granted them access.[54] They visited Hanslope Park and viewed some of the Lesotho migrated archives in February 2003.

Murray and Sanders were not the only researchers who managed to see migrated archives. According to a 2011 Foreign Office report on the migrated archives affair, a member of the Hanslope Park staff reviewed files on behalf of another scholar researching a 'cargo cult' in Vanuatu, and sent him copies of relevant documents.[55] Nor were the migrated archives the only collection at Hanslope Park with an ambiguous status. From the 1990s until 2002, it also housed the Western Pacific Archive, which British authorities removed from Fiji in 1978.[56] The Foreign Office treated the Western Pacific Archive as a separate collection to the migrated archives. It was better known – archivists in the Pacific region and Britain had protested when it was removed – but like the migrated archives, the location of the Western Pacific Archive was not publicized, and there was no regularized method for researchers to access it at Hanslope Park.[57] The Canadian anthropologist Margaret Critchlow Rodman managed to consult the Western Pacific Archive in 1994 and 1995 thanks to the assistance of Will Stober, a retired British colonial official who had worked in Vanuatu. Rodman wrote that Stober 'threaded our way through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office bureaucracy which, along with the Government of Vanuatu, finally granted us permission to work in archives that no researcher on Vanuatu had seen for more than fifteen years'.[58] Like the migrated archives, the existence and location of the Western Pacific Archive, and how to access it, was an open secret known mostly to retired colonial officials.

These examples make clear that even after the dissolution of the British empire, white British former colonial officials retained privileged access to the files removed by British colonial authorities. They were more likely to know about them, could navigate the bureaucracy necessary to access them, and the Foreign Office was likely to view them as suitable people to consult the files. The 'ready and cheerful assistance' eventually enjoyed by Murray

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and Sanders at Hanslope Park contrasts with the obstructive treatment accorded to the delegation from Kenya in 1980.[59] To be clear, I am not accusing Murray and Sanders, or Rodman and Stober, of any impropriety. These researchers had to show extraordinary persistence to gain access to Hanslope Park. Rather, I am interested in understanding how the racialized circulation of information about the migrated archives, together with Foreign Office decision-making, resulted in some researchers accessing these collections, but not others.

These scholars' publications made further information about the Hanslope Park archives publicly available, although historians at the time showed limited interest. Books by Rodman (published in 2001) and Murray and Sanders (2005) plainly described the sources they had used. Murray and Sanders, for example, wrote:

> many sensitive files had been removed from Basutoland [...] in 1965, shortly before internal self-government, in order to protect them from scrutiny by the incoming government of Lesotho. In 2002 we traced them to a repository of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office [...] at Hanslope Park, in Buckinghamshire, where we were able to examine them.[60]

Murray wrote to David Anderson about his visit to Hanslope Park in May 2003, and Sanders remembers that he mentioned it to several researchers.[61] Strikingly, reviews of the book, including one by Anderson, did not flag up Murray and Sanders' revelations about the Hanslope Park files.[62]

From the 1980s to the 2000s, then, the migrated archives remained a classic open secret. The British government was not open about holding them, but many people knew something about them, fragments of information about them were in the public domain, and it was even possible for some researchers to access them. In ways Simmel and Weber would have recognized, the migrated archives' secrecy perpetuated communities and hierarchies from the late colonial years into the period from the 1980s to 2012. Significantly, the open secret remained racialized. While many people knew that the British government held the migrated archives, access to them required detailed knowledge of their history, and the blessing of the Foreign Office. White British retired colonial officials proved especially well positioned to secure access. The migrated archives affair raises the issue of, as Caroline Elkins put it in 2011, 'whether or not previous historical probings, and positionalities, afforded the analytical and intellectual space to process publically available documents'.[63] The publicly available information about the migrated archives affair posed questions about British late colonialism, and its legacies, that few were willing or able to ask.

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Secreted information, as social scientists have acknowledged, is often associated with privileged insights which can appear more mundane on closer inspection.[64] Since the migrated archives were opened at Kew from 2012, much of their *content* has turned out to be an open secret as well. The day after the first batch of files was made available to researchers, Richard Drayton acknowledged that 'historians have been quite disappointed, so far, by what they have found'.[65] In hindsight, this should not have been a surprise. Scholars who had worked on the migrated archives before their transfer to Kew had offered carefully measured conclusions. Murray and Sanders wrote in their 2005 book that they 'gleaned fascinating additional detail' from the Lesotho migrated archives, but that 'they did not lead us to change our interpretation of events'.[66] Caroline Elkins was given access to the migrated archives as an expert witness in the Mau Mau legal action. 'In the case of Kenya, the Hanslope Disclosures [...] will not fundamentally alter what we already know', she suggested in 2011. Rather, they offered 'further, voluminous documentation and details' on British abuses and decision-making during the emergency.[67]

Historians who have made more dramatic claims about the migrated archives since 2012 have struggled to back them up. Calder Walton wrote at the start of his 2013 book on British intelligence and the end of empire that the 'secret archive' revealed 'a number of previously unknown horrific stories', although later in the book he conceded that they 'are unlikely to change fundamentally the existing historical narrative'.[68] Katherine Bruce-Lockhart's 2014 article on Mau Mau women used the migrated archives to explore British officials' gendered approaches to Kenyan detainees in unprecedented detail, but also claimed that 'the existence of Gitamayu', a detention camp for women, 'has only recently come to light through the release of newly uncovered archival evidence in the Hanslope Park Disclosure'.[69] Bruce-Lockhart acknowledged later in the article, however, that the camp was in fact named in a 1959 House of Commons answer.[70] It was only ever an open secret. Similarly, Chase Arnold argued in a 2020 article that research on police intelligence in Ghana has been limited 'largely due to the precautions of British policymakers' in removing or destroying relevant files.[71] His article made important points about Special Branch officials' attitudes to colonial government policies. However, while emphasizing the migrated archives' importance, it drew heavily on MI5 files at Kew opened in 1999, 2005, and 2014 under routine procedures, and other sources which were not part of the migrated archives. The migrated files allowed Arnold to mobilize useful extra detail, but he would have been able to advance similar arguments using alternative sources. Bold claims about the migrated archives' significance have been unpersuasive.

Many researchers using the migrated archives have made more cautious claims to originality. A range of scholars have drawn on the migrated archives to consider established research areas in more detail, offering an incremental rather than revolutionary advance in historical knowledge.

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David Anderson and Julianne Weis, for example, in their 2018 article on sexual violence during the Kenyan emergency, used the migrated archives to reconsider this history, while acknowledging the importance of memoirs and oral testimony from Kenyans that have long been available.[72] Many scholars have used the migrated archives alongside a range of evidence that was available before 2012, or which has recently been made available from other sources. James Brennan's 2021 article on Dennis Phombeah, a Tanganyikan nationalist who worked for British intelligence, assessed the significance of Phombeah's career using the migrated archives alongside diverse other sources, including MI5 files recently opened at Kew.[73] Much of the most revelatory work using the migrated archives has historicized the processes of sorting, removal, and destruction that created the migrated archives themselves.[74] Even here, though, as we have seen, fragmentary information was available in the public domain before the migrated archives were opened.

The migrated archives have so far supplied historians with useful new detail rather than evidence which would support radical historical revisionism. Paradoxically, the opening of the migrated archives has highlighted just how much information was already available to researchers. Little significant information in the migrated archives was recorded in only one place. Alternative sources, including documents already available at Kew, oral histories, Africans' memoirs, and documents at African national archives, have been as important as the migrated archives in recent books and articles. As the historian Samuel Daly pithily commented, 'Mau Mau's victims had described its excesses long before evidence from the British government itself was revealed through court cases and freedom of information requests'.[75] The same is true of British policies towards Mau Mau: the dirty secrets of British late colonialism were open secrets. New critical approaches have been as significant as new evidence in illuminating these histories.

* * *

So how, then, should we approach the migrated archives? They have been open at Kew for around ten years: it is tempting to think that there is little more to say about them. But historians have generally approached the migrated archives in relation to their own particular research questions, drawing on a relatively small proportion of the migrated files. As a result, our understanding of the migrated archives as a corpus is still relatively limited.

A clearer understanding of the migrated archives, and their contents, as an open secret clears the way for new approaches to these documents. It suggests that historians may be misguided in searching the migrated archives for hitherto unsuspected revelations. I would like to suggest the potential for study along the archival grain, to use Ann Stoler's phrase, to address questions raised by the migrated archives themselves.[76] We perhaps should attempt a more ethnographic approach, that treats the migrated files as an

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artefact to be interpreted and explained, rather than just mined for their written content. This section outlines two possible approaches.

First, an along-the-grain study of *all* migrated archives from a particular territory, seeing them as a unit. This project has not yet been undertaken, but is essential for understanding the migrated archives in a way that acknowledges both their variety, and what they have in common. It would, crucially, allow for a better appreciation of the processes that created the migrated archives, and permit more fully contextualized analyses of smaller groups of files.

Along-the-grain study demonstrates the migrated archives' diversity. Even the files from a single territory can be various. For example, the 413 migrated files from Nigeria are presented at Kew today as a single collection, catalogued in sequential numbers from FCO141/13348 to FCO141/13760, but are not a homogenous group. Some were created by the central colonial government, some by regional governments.[77] Most date from the 1950s, but some are from around 1900.[78] Some files, concerned with the 1961 Northern Cameroons plebiscite, even date from after the October 1960 transfer of power to Nigeria.[79] The dates and routes of their removal to Britain vary. Some were removed directly to Britain in 1960.[80] Others were passed to the new British High Commission in Lagos, or the Deputy High Commissions in the regional capitals of Ibadan, Kaduna, and Enugu, and were eventually removed to Britain around 1967.[81] Indeed, the Nigerian files are so various that two selected from the 413 can be from quite different times and places. This collection of files was created by the processes that saw colonial officials remove them to Britain, and the Foreign Office and then the National Archives store them together.

The migrated archives also vary from colony to colony. Caroline Elkins suggested in 2015 that 'we can reasonably assume a similar scale of erasure throughout the empire at the time of British colonial retreat' to Kenya.[82] As the Nigerian files suggest, however, the destruction of archives and their removal to Britain was informed by the specific politics of the transfer of power in each colony. In Nigeria, this was characterized more by constitutional negotiations and electoral politics, as suggested by the files on the Northern Cameroons plebiscite, while the selection of archives for removal from Kenya reflected the horrific war that preceded independence. While 2,636 files in total were removed from Kenya, fewer, as we have seen, were taken from Nigeria.[83] The migrated archives' heterogeneity results from the variety of forms assumed by British late colonialism from colony to colony, changing instructions from London about the removal and destruction of documents, and even individual British officials' varying approaches to categorizing documents.[84]

Despite this variety, there *is* an overarching logic to the migrated archives. They were all removed to Britain by white British officials who deemed them suitable to be seen only by people like themselves. Both their content and removal were intended to be a racialized secret. This is the migrated archives'

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defining characteristic. Yet, as Achille Mbembe has argued, attempts to conceal archives merely add to them.[85] This insight belongs at the heart of analyses of the migrated archives. To understand them, we should ask why British officials deemed racialized secrecy necessary, or even possible, for these documents. Instructions were issued in Kenya and elsewhere to remove documents containing evidence of colonial racism, for example, surely the ultimate open secret after decades of rule by white British colonial administrations.[86] To interpret the migrated archives, we need to historicize rigorously this intended racialized secrecy. Engagement with the social science of secrecy will be essential, helping us to move beyond secret-archive narratives to explore how the British attempted to employ secrecy to maintain colonial-era hierarchies, and the results of these inevitably incomplete efforts. Understanding the processes that created the migrated archives, their logics and contingencies, will in turn illuminate the practices and ideologies of British late colonialism generally.

A second approach to the migrated archives stresses colonized peoples' role in shaping late colonial archives, and late colonial states. We generally – and rightly – think of colonial archives as contaminated by the politics of their production, full of white colonial officials' prejudiced misrepresentations of colonized societies. Stephanie Newell has recently observed how colonial archives often 'whited-out and wrote over local people's opinions and perspectives', documented 'few African speaking subjects', and thus pose major methodological challenges for historians.[87] Much of the most interesting recent research in African history has deliberately minimized the use of colonial archives by focusing, for example, on African print cultures.[88] These concerns about colonial archives have deep historiographical roots, exemplified by Africanist historians' decades-long interest in oral sources as more Afrocentric forms of evidence.[89]

Colonial archives do not, however, form an unchanging, homogenous corpus. The political and constitutional changes of late colonialism, including the election of indigenous ministers, created distinctively *late* colonial archives, that are often more polyvocal than earlier colonial archives. Africans had always shaped colonial archives to some extent. 'Colonial archives are no more independent of "the colonized" than oral traditions are independent of "the colonizer"', Frederick Cooper has suggested; while Chima J. Korieh has observed that that the presence of Africans' petitions in colonial archives 'challenges the notion of colonial authorities as a hegemonic force in the making of colonized societies'.[90] These arguments can be made even more forcefully for late colonial archives. If the central message of the last forty years of archive studies is that archives' form and content are shaped by the politics of their production, we should not be surprised that the major political shifts of late colonialism produced distinct archives.

Many of the migrated archives are from the late colonial years, and embody a distinctively late colonial politics. We can consider this with reference to a single 1956 migrated file from Nigeria. It concerns the African

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Continental Bank affair, which saw the leading nationalist politician Nnamdi Azikiwe, then premier of Eastern Nigeria, accused of misusing public funds. It is a late colonial file, from the era of African ministers. The creation of the file itself was a British response to a Nigerian initiative: the effort by Azikiwe's Eastern Region government to diversify the banks it used to include Nigerian-owned banks.

The file is notably polyvocal. It documents Africans vigorously engaging with British authorities, for example in Azikiwe's remarkable 1956 telegram to the secretary of state for the colonies, Alan Lennox-Boyd. Azikiwe wrote that he would 'never compromise with the devilish colonial system', advised Lennox-Boyd to 'be careful not to mess up affairs of Eastern Nigeria as is the case in Cyprus and Singapore', and reminded him that 'being black people does not mean that we are impervious to justice'.[91] The file also documents the arguments of Azikiwe's Nigerian political opponents, including Eastern Region opposition politicians such as Eyo Ita, who alleged that Azikiwe had 'grossly abused and corrupted his office', and Azikiwe's federal-level rival Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, who reportedly told a British official that 'Azikiwe had got into such a mess with the running of affairs in the Eastern Region that he could never recover in any normal way – he would therefore seek [...] a major row with the Governor'.[92] Nigerian politicians' position as ministers, and the nature of their engagements with British authorities, make this a specifically late colonial file.

Like older colonial files from, say, the 1920s, much of the correspondence is written by British officials. But this late colonial file forms a bricolage that juxtaposes a variety of voices and media, including documents written by Nigerian politicians and British officials, as well as references to reports in the Nigerian and British press. The British officials who compiled the file sought to present a coherent narrative privileging their own perspectives, but the effect of reading the file is more unruly. It documents competing voices, and a shifting politics in which British colonial officials struggled to manage Nigerian politicians and preparations for the looming transfer of power. The file has obvious omissions. It includes mostly the voices of elite men, expressed entirely in English, but nevertheless documents Africans' formative engagements with a late colonial state.

Late colonial migrated files, when compared with earlier colonial archives, document how the political initiative swung from British officials towards Africans, offering powerful perspectives on Africans' role in forging late colonialism. Writing about 'the colonial archive' tends to imply a homogenous corpus, but the migrated archives testify to Africans' increasing capacity to reshape both the late colonial state, and its archives. Late colonial politics produced a distinct late colonial archive.

* * *

Finally, viewing the migrated archives as an open secret allows us to reappraise *postcolonial* archives. Historians have often seen colonial and

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postcolonial archives as fundamentally different, with postcolonial archives frequently described as fragmentary or inaccessible. For Luise White, the question for postcolonial Africa is 'how to find any archive at all', while Jean Allman has emphasized 'the dispersed, destroyed, fragmented, and accidental nature of independent Africa's documentary archive'.[93] This section considers the implications of the British migrated archives affair for postcolonial archives. It focuses on Africa, although similar arguments about the inaccessibility of postcolonial archives have been advanced about other regions, including the Middle East.[94]

There is no doubt that postcolonial documents have been destroyed: whether intentionally, during coups or civil wars, or unintentionally, through the under-resourcing of archival institutions.[95] Samuel Ntewusu has noted that Ghanaian government records have even been unofficially sold to street vendors and used for wrapping food.[96] Other sensitive documents are inaccessible to researchers, often because they have been retained in ministry buildings by governments wary of their political significance, rather than being passed to national archives.[97] 'In postcolonial Africa, the past encroaches aggressively on the present', the historian Moses E. Ochonu has observed.[98]

Ochonu is right. But the British migrated archives affair shows that the past weighs heavily on the present in postcolonial Europe as well, highlighting that the destruction and inaccessibility of postcolonial African archives is not unique. British authorities, as we have seen, destroyed many colonial records. Others remained in a British government ministry building – Hanslope Park – until 2012, with access regulated by an arbitrary, uncodified system informed by legacies of racialized secrecy. Some of the British migrated archives still have not been opened to researchers.[99] Even Ntewusu's account of the use of Ghanaian documents by street vendors is not unique to postcolonial Africa. As the German army neared Cairo in July 1942, British authorities hurriedly tried to burn sensitive documents. The fires sucked some restricted papers whole into the air. When they returned to earth, street sellers used them to wrap peanuts.[100]

In other words, there is the danger of pathologizing and othering postcolonial African archives as uniquely problematic, by judging them according to standards of archiving devised in the western world, to which western countries like Britain have nevertheless not adhered. Jean Allman has come uncomfortably close to this in asking of Ghana, 'whether the primary symptom of what eventually becomes a "failed state" *is* its inability to deploy archiving technologies'.[101] Leaving aside the usefulness of the term 'failed state', there is little evidence of African states' inability to deploy archiving technologies. As the British migrated archives affair shows, the destruction and arbitrary retention of files are *themselves* archiving technologies. Allman suggests 'the very illusion of a postcolonial "national archive"' for Ghana, while acknowledging in a footnote that 'there are truckloads of files in the

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various ministries' that 'have not yet made their way into the government archival repository': just like the British migrated archives prior to 2012.[102]

The migrated archives saga suggests that there is no fundamental difference between colonial and postcolonial archives. Neither are necessarily more complete or accessible than the other. Where there is a difference, it tends to lie in the relative resourcing of archival institutions, with some national archives in Africa hard pressed to conserve the documents they hold, although European national archives are not necessarily well funded either.[103] A curious side effect of the fatalistic discourse on postcolonial African archives is that, while European states' destruction and retention of colonial records has been widely condemned, many scholars have effectively accepted African governments' destruction and retention of postcolonial archives as inevitable, despite the efforts of some scholars based in Africa, such as Professor Olutayo C. Adesina in Nigeria, to generate public debate about archives.[104]

The essential similarities between colonial and postcolonial archives for Africa suggest that we do not need radical new methods to write postcolonial history, as Allman has suggested, so much as the well-established historical practice of imaginatively seeking out relevant source material wherever it may be found. As Samuel Daly has noted, historians of contemporary Africa have embarked on 'a return to the broad and omnivorous approach to sources taken by earlier generations of Africanist historians'.[105] The migrated archives affair highlights that many significant issues are likely to be documented in multiple forms of historical evidence. If some sources, like the files held by Ghanaian government ministries, are not currently available, then we need to turn to alternate forms of evidence, such as oral history, memoirs, and the press.

These similarities between colonial and postcolonial archives suggest the advantages of bringing them into the same analytical frame. This kind of study could help illuminate the relationships between colonial and postcolonial forms of archives and statehood. It is not necessarily true, as Daly has suggested, that the available postcolonial files are 'too banal to threaten or incriminate', and unlikely to 'reveal the intimate life of the state'.[106] Files at the Lagos State Records and Archives Bureau in Nigeria, which holds documents covering the period from the establishment of Lagos State in 1967 until the 1990s, reveal striking similarities in form between Lagos State records from the period of 1970s military rule and late colonial records. The 1970s Lagos State files look like late colonial files. Papers are held in titled and numbered folders by treasury tags. Similar documents and minutes are included. Colonial-era practices of senior officials using different coloured inks to write minutes, including the use of red ink by governors, were continued by the postcolonial military governors of Lagos State.[107] Similarly, the Sierra Leone Public Archives holds some fascinating files that were in active use across colonial and postcolonial periods, from the 1940s to the 1980s.[108] They document continuities in the operation of

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bureaucratic machinery – with minutes and records of meetings being typed and filed – across the late colonial and postcolonial years. These files' continuing use suggests that postcolonial bureaucrats were referring back to colonial-era documents. They have the potential to refresh our view of the relationships between colonial and postcolonial statehood.

Documents from postcolonial archives also allow the comparative study of how Africans engaged with colonial and postcolonial states. Postcolonial petitions in the Lagos State Records and Archives Bureau often used strategies similar to those from the colonial era, including avowals of the petitioners' humbleness, assertions of their rights, and detailed accounts of the backgrounds of their grievances.[109] Some made stronger claims on the postcolonial state. A 1977 petition by H.O.M. Folami about the demolition of houses in Lagos argued that the evictions 'presented a pseudo-apartheid situation in a Nigeria "where no man is oppressed" [...] How could we be proud to say we are Nigerians when we were treated as if we were in South Africa [...] my heart bleeds to see and hear about our commitment to the liberation of Africans from bondage at all cost, yet we get ourselves in bondage at home'.[110] This postcolonial petitioner made claims as a citizen, comparing the military government's treatment of Nigerians to its pan-African rhetoric. Bringing colonial and postcolonial archives into the same analytical frame promises deeper insights into how Africans understood relationships between colonial and postcolonial statehood.

* * *

Seeing the British migrated archives as an open secret offers a compelling alternative to narratives about secret archives. It opens the way to considering new research questions raised by the migrated archives themselves, and to reassessing postcolonial archives' apparently unique dysfunctionality. While we contemplate these possibilities, we should acknowledge that the opening of the migrated archives from 2012 does not mark the end of this story. The British government's commitment to openness remains questionable. A bleakly comic example of this is the 2011 Foreign Office report on the migrated archives affair. Intended to showcase its new spirit of openness, the published report was peppered with redactions. We learn, for example, about the Foreign Office's searches of files in relation to the Mau Mau case: 'Having exhausted every avenue she could think of (█████████████████) she concluded that they had perhaps never come to Hanslope Park' – an inadvertently telling comment on the Foreign Office's approach to glasnost.[111] Not all of the Foreign Office's irregular archival holdings have been opened. In addition to migrated archives apparently lost by the Foreign Office, comprising over seventy-five linear feet of documents, there is the issue of around 600,000 'non-standard files' the Foreign Office holds.[112]

Even the migrated archives now open to researchers at Kew remain effectively inaccessible to many researchers in the countries from which

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they were removed. These scholars' work can be hampered by limited research budgets, as well as Britain's arbitrary and harsh visa regime.[113] The racialized politics of the migrated archives' removal from the later 1940s to the 1980s therefore still shapes access to these documents decades later, in ways that disadvantage researchers from the Global South.

The British government's present attitude to openness is clearly inadequate. Its avowed commitment to transparency should extend to making the migrated archives accessible to scholars in the countries from which they were removed. Not all affected African national archives have the resources necessary to deal with the immediate return of their files.[114] The first step should therefore be the digitization of the migrated archives held at Kew, funded by the British government.[115] This would improve the migrated archives' accessibility, and allow scholars to continue to study them as a unit once the collection is broken up. After digitization, the migrated archives should be returned at the request of their countries of origin.

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1 *Mutua and others* v. *Foreign and Commonwealth Office* [2011] EWHC 1913 (QB).

2 Hansard, HL (series 5) vol. 726, col. WS144 (5 Apr. 2011). For brevity, I refer to the 'Foreign Office' throughout. It was formally called the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 2011, and at the time of writing is called the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office.

3 The term 'migrated archives' is a problematic euphemism, but has become the most commonly used term to describe the files that British authorities removed from colonies, and is thus used here. See Stephen Howe, 'Flakking the Mau Mau Catchers', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (hereafter *JICH*) 39: 5, 2011, pp. 695–6.

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11 This article focuses on archives removed from British colonies between the later 1940s and the 1980s that were held at a depository in Hayes, west London, and later at Hanslope Park in Buckinghamshire. Most are now held by the British National Archives, under the reference FCO141. British authorities in addition removed files from colonized territories before this period, including from the Ionian Islands in 1864 and Ireland in 1922, and after it, such as from Hong Kong in 1997.

12 Important works include David M. Anderson, 'Mau Mau in the High Court and the "Lost" British Empire Archives: Colonial Conspiracy or Bureaucratic Bungle?', *JICH* 39: 5, 2011, pp. 699–716; Caroline Elkins, 'Alchemy of Evidence: Mau Mau, the British Empire, and the High Court of Justice', *JICH* 39: 5, 2011, pp. 731–48; Mandy Banton, 'Destroy? "Migrate"? Conceal? British Strategies for the Disposal of Sensitive Records of Colonial Administrations at Independence', *JICH* 40: 2, 2012, pp. 321–35; Edward Hampshire, '"Apply the Flame More Searingly": the Destruction and Migration of the Archives of British Colonial Administration: a Southeast Asia Case Study', *JICH* 41: 2, 2013, pp. 334–52; and Shohei Sato, '"Operation Legacy": Britain's Destruction and Concealment of Colonial Records Worldwide', *JICH* 45: 4, 2017, pp. 697–719.

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14 See for example, Colonial Office, 'Protection and Disposal of Classified and Accountable Documents and Records Generally', September 1962: TNA FCO141/6998, p. 1.

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