

Presidential Powers in Postcolonial Africa Deserve Historical Attention

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Abstract: African presidential powers fascinate: they have not only been extensively studied by political scientists, but they have also inspired novelists and filmmakers as much as they continue to attract the attention of journalists. Historians, however, have for a long time been rather disinterested in the issue. And yet, a question remains: upon independence, why did almost all African states adopt a presidential system of rule? This article reflects on the methodology and new questions a historical approach entails for the study of presidential powers in African postcolonial states. This article argues for the need to trace the origins of presidential powers, to depart from narratives of colonial legacies and exaggerated archetypes of African presidents, and to open new avenues for the conceptualization of both the decolonization process and the formation of postcolonial states in Africa.

Résumé: Les pouvoirs présidentiels africains fascinent: ils ont non seulement été abondamment étudiés par les politologues, mais ils ont aussi inspiré romanciers et cinéastes autant qu'ils continuent d'attirer l'attention des journalistes. Cependant, les historiens ont longtemps été plutôt désintéressés par la question. Et pourtant, une question demeure: à l'indépendance, pourquoi presque tous les États africains ont-ils adopté un régime présidentiel? Cet article réfléchit sur la méthodologie et les nouvelles questions qu'une approche historique implique pour l'étude des pouvoirs présidentiels dans les États africains postcoloniaux. Cet article plaide pour la nécessité de retracer les origines des pouvoirs présidentiels,

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de s'écarter des récits d'héritages coloniaux et d'archétypes exagérés de présidents africains, et d'ouvrir de nouvelles voies pour la conceptualisation à la fois du processus de décolonisation et de la formation d'États postcoloniaux en Afrique.

Introduction

The extent to which presidential powers in African countries fascinate is striking. Whenever an African president is elected, reelected, leaves power, or dies in office, the almost unlimited scope of presidential powers in African countries is, once again, on the agenda. While media reporters regularly publish lists of the longest-serving African presidents, political scientists have offered a myriad of tools to explore presidential systems in African countries (i.e., systems in which executive powers are concentrated in the hands of the president and overshadow all other state institutions). Media coverage, films, and literature portray African presidents as power-hungry at best or bloody megalomaniacs at worse. Novelists too have portrayed archetypes of African presidents. In *En Attendant le Vote des Bêtes Sauvages*, Ahmadou Kourouma paints a hypermasculine, violent president.¹ In *The Wizard of the Crow*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o depicts a president so infatuated with himself that his body expands to the point of being at risk of blowing up.² The success of a film such as *The Last King of Scotland* or the wide broadcasting of Trevor Noah's sketches of Donald Trump as "America's First African President" are but meaningful examples of popular representations of African leadership, which are meant to scare or to amuse a (White) audience.³

Seen through the eyes of a historian, these representations elude a central question: upon independence, why did almost all African states adopt a presidential system of rule? Put differently, what are the historical origins of presidential powers in postcolonial African countries? The paucity of historical research on this issue is not surprising: historians have long been discouraged from studying postcolonial African elites. The history of elites has suffered from the collusion between historians and national regimes after independence – this at a time when the Africanization of African history was the subject

¹ Ahmadou Kourouma, *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (Paris: Seuil, 1998).

² Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *The Wizard of the Crow* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

³ Dave Calhoun, "White Guides, Black Pain," *Sight & Sound* 17–2 (2007), 32–35.

For further critical comments on *The Last King of Scotland* and Trevor Noah's comic clip on Donald Trump as "America's African President," see Vanessa Walters, "Stereotypes That Will Sell," *The Guardian*, 18 January 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/jan/18/comment.uganda>, (accessed 16 September 2021).

of a lively debate.⁴ In the wake of subaltern studies and “history from below,” African elites came to be seen as mere neocolonial actors. Though some historians did explore the complexity of the strengthening of presidential authority in the face of division between elites, rivalries, and opposition, biases against exploring the history of elites still shape the field of African history.⁵ Frederick Cooper recently had to defend his work on how West African elites imagined a postcolonial future as one of not total rejection of colonial links and nationalism and, further, justify his claim that they were more than “an elitist sidelight to the inexorable currents of history.”⁶ Meanwhile, law researchers have pointed out that extensive executive powers do not operate in a legal vacuum but are entrenched in a complex constitutional framework, which itself has a history.⁷ There appears to be a missing link between the decolonization processes and the acknowledgment of extensive executive powers, and this points to the following question: how can historians contribute to the conceptualization of presidentialism in postcolonial Africa?

This article reflects on the methodology and new questions a historical approach entails for the study of presidential powers in African postcolonial states. Following scholars who demonstrated the importance of reconstructing the ways in which African political leaders imagined political futures, using the language of their time, this article emphasizes the necessity not to take presidential powers for granted but to ask, instead, why, when and how they emerged.⁸ I first show how an interdisciplinary dialogue between political science and history can open new avenues for research on African presidentialism. I then show how retracing the history behind presidential powers necessarily calls for a reconceptualization of narratives on decolonization and postcolonial state formation. In the third and final part, I consider the ways in which archives, despite their apparent unevenness or incompleteness,

⁴ Caroline Neale, *Writing “Independent” History: African Historiography, 1960–1980* (London: Greenwood Press, 1985); and Esperanza Brizuela-Garcia, “The History of Africanization and the Africanization of History,” *History in Africa* 33 (2006), 91.

⁵ Regarding studies on presidential powers, see in particular Mairi S. MacDonald, “A ‘Frontal Attack on Irrational Elements’: Sékou Touré and the Management of Elites in Guinea,” in Dülffer, Jost and Frey, Marc (eds.), *Elites and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 195–215; and Ernest Harsch, “The Legacies of Thomas Sankara: A Revolutionary Experience in Retrospect,” *Review of African Political Economy* 40–137 (2013), 358–374.

⁶ Frederick Cooper, “Routes Out of Empire,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 37–2 (2017), 407.

⁷ For an excellent discussion of this issue, see Henri Kwasi Prempeh, “Progress and Retreat in Africa: President Untamed,” *Journal of Democracy* 19–2 (2008), 109–123.

⁸ Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship Between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); and Emma Hunter, “Languages of Freedom in Decolonizing Africa,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 27 (2017), 253–269.

can reveal both a president's style of ruling but also the boundaries of presidential powers. Finally, I conclude by emphasizing the importance of writing the history of presidents and presidential powers: to further decolonize narratives of state building, to empower African elites as historical actors, and to enable African citizens to reclaim their own (presidential) history.

Where Is the History of African Presidents and the Presidency?

The historiography of African presidents is profoundly interdisciplinary, lying at the crossroad of political science, history and the more popular genre of literary biography. The literature first emerged with the biographies of African presidents published in the 1960s, following the enthusiasm for the "fathers of the nation" who freed their nations from colonial oppression.⁹ The enthusiasm raised by the so-called "fathers of the nation" upon independence forged the myth of the male liberating hero who dominated elite rivalries and conflicts inherited from decades of divisive colonial rule. The early publications dedicated to African presidents are therefore strongly marked by biographical narratives that legitimated new and still fragile native leadership, and which sowed the idea that African politics were dominated by a few influential individuals – not institutions.¹⁰

The enthusiasm of independence was short lived and the late 1960s, the 1970s, and the 1980s saw the rise of authoritarian regimes. Biographies of internationally infamous dictators such as Idi Amin Dada in Uganda, Jean-Bedel Bokassa in Central Africa, or Mobutu Sese Seko in the Congo not only met the demand of a general readership avid for tales of bloody dictators, but they also paved the way for interpretations of presidential powers centered on personal rule and neopatrimonialism. Though some historians expressed doubts about interpretations which conferred too great a role on African elites,¹¹ the political instability favored interpretations emphasizing colonial legacy, neocolonialism, bureaucratic chaos, and, unsurprisingly, the overarching roles of a few individuals. In 1980, political scientists Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg introduced the concept of "personal rule" in their book, *Personal Rule in Black Africa: Prince, Autocrat, Prophet, Tyrant*. They argued that African postcolonial politics "do not conform to an institutionalized system" but are dominated by individuals and that their passions

⁹ For a review of the historiography on African state power until 1963, see Jacques Boyon, "Pouvoir et autorité en Afrique noire: état des travaux," *Revue Française de Science Politique* 13–4 (1963), 993–1018.

¹⁰ See, for example, David Birmingham, *Kwame Nkrumah: The Father of African Nationalism* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1998) or Ernest Milcent and Monique Sordet, *Léopold Sédar Senghor et la naissance de l'Afrique moderne* (Paris: Seghers, 1969).

¹¹ William G. Clarence-Smith, "For Braudel: A Note on the 'Ecole des Annales' and the Historiography of Africa," *History in Africa* 4 (1977), 279.

are caught up in “clientelism and patronage, factionalism, coups, purges, pots, succession crises.”¹²

In the 1990s, researchers showed that institutions do in fact matter in African politics, but that the fundamental ideas underpinning personal rule did not vanish. They were still encompassed in the widely used concept of “neopatrimonialism,” a political system defined by abuse of power, corruption, personal alliances, and private interests.¹³ Yet, as the late Thandika Mkandawire brilliantly explained, neopatrimonialism is but an arbitrary concept based on stereotypical representations of African politics.¹⁴ The concept fit a preconceived perception of African politics as irrational and unbureaucratic to the point that “the language of neopatrimonialism has permeated news coverage of African affairs.”¹⁵ While African presidencies were becoming the almost exclusive territory of (European and North American) political scientists, the general public was familiarized with a caricatured vision of African presidential powers.

It is perhaps fair to say that the idea of governance which dominated political discourses throughout the 1980s and 1990s – epitomized by the World Bank’s Structural Adjustments Programs (SAP) – was meant to counterbalance this idea of volatile leadership. The failure of the SAP to foster political stability and development certainly encouraged scholars to refine the conceptual and theoretical analysis of political leadership and authority in African countries.¹⁶ Still, the literature did not fundamentally refresh historical knowledge about the personalization of African leadership. For example, Jean-François Médard popularized the concept of the African “big man,” a new figure of authority whose political power was defined by the concentration and accumulation of economic resources.¹⁷ The “politics of

¹² Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg, *Personal Rule in Black Africa: Prince, Autocrat, Prophet, Tyrant* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 1, 6.

¹³ For a criticism of personal rule and neopatrimonialism, see Daniel N. Posner and Daniel J. Young, “The Institutionalization of Political Power in Africa,” *Economic and Policy Review* 13–1 (2007), 15–24.

¹⁴ Thandika Mkandawire, “Neopatrimonialism and the Political Economy of Economic Performance in Africa: Critical Reflections,” *World Politics* 67–3 (2015), 563–612.

¹⁵ Mkandawire, “Neopatrimonialism.”

¹⁶ See, for example, Howard Stein, *Beyond the World Bank Agenda: An Institutional Approach to Development* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

¹⁷ Jean-François Médard, “Le ‘Big Man’ en Afrique: esquisse d’analyse du politicien entrepreneur,” *L’Année Sociologique* 42 (1992), 167–192; and “Charles Njonjo: portrait d’un ‘Big Man’ au Kenya,” in Terray, Emmanuel (ed.), *L’Etat contemporain en Afrique* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1992); Richard Banégas and Jean-Pierre Warnier, “Nouvelles figures de la réussite et du pouvoir,” *Politique Africaine* 2 (2001), 5–23; Jean-Pascal Daloz and Patrick Chabal, *Culture Troubles: Politics and the Interpretation of Meaning* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006); Anne Pitcher, Mary H. Moran, and

the belly,” as Jean-François Bayart put it, was the essence of African politics: consumption (or the “eating of political and economic resources”) became the symbol of authority and domination.¹⁸ Narratives about presidential powers were, once again, reduced to the idea of a few individuals abusing state prerogatives and privileges.¹⁹

Since the beginning of the 2000s, while political scientists have steadily continued to explore African presidential powers, historians have revisited the field of African politics, developing innovative approaches.²⁰ Narratives on the processes of decolonization and state formation have been complicated by refined studies of nationalist discourses, biography writing, and elite politics. The makings of the “fathers of the nation” are increasingly deconstructed, with scholars highlighting the strategic, yet not less divided politics behind the myth.²¹ The ideas and ideologies put forward by African presidents have been further scrutinized, while some have questioned the makings of state powers from a legal perspective.²² Meanwhile, biography writing

Michael Johnston, “Rethinking Patrimonialism and Neopatrimonialism in Africa,” *African Studies Review* 52–1 (2009), 125–156.

¹⁸ Jean-François Bayart, *L'État en Afrique: la politique du ventre* (Paris: Fayard, 1989).

¹⁹ For an interdisciplinary discussion on African politics in the early 1990s, see the special issue directed by Jean Copans, “L'Histoire face au politique,” *Politique Africaine* 46 (1992). For arguments underlying the need to reconceptualize African political history, see Stephen Ellis, “Writing Histories of Contemporary Africa,” *The Journal of African History* 43–1 (2002), 1–26.

²⁰ An exhaustive review of the ways studies on presidential powers developed in political sciences falls outside of the field of this research. On the lack of historical perspective on postcolonial African political history before the mid-2000s, see the introduction to Jan-Bart Gewalt, Marja Hinfelaar, and Giacomo Macola's edited volume *One Zambia, Many Histories: Towards a History of Post-colonial Zambia* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2008), as well as the conclusion in Giacomo Macola, *The Gun in Central Africa: A History of Technology and Politics* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016).

²¹ Hélène Charton and Marie-Aude Fouéré, “Héros nationaux et pères de la nation en Afrique,” *Vingtième siècle Revue d'histoire* 2–118 (2013), 3–14; Wunyabari O. Maloba, *Kenyatta and Britain: An Account of Political Transformation, 1929–1963* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), chapter 6.

²² See, for example, Harcourt Fuller, *Building the Ghanaian Nation-State: Kwame Nkrumah's Symbolic Nationalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Jeffrey S. Ahlman, *Living with Nkrumahism: Nation, State, and Pan-Africanism in Ghana* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017). On legal approaches to state powers, see Robert M. Maxon, *Kenya's Independence Constitution: Constitution-making and End of Empire* (Lanham, MD: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011); and George Hamandishe Karekwaivanane, *The Struggle over State Power in Zimbabwe: Law and Politics since 1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

regained legitimacy within academic history.²³ At the same time, arguments in favor of gendering the history of the decolonization struggle and early postcolonial politics have become more prominent and biographies of influential female leaders have gained visibility.²⁴ Analyzing the hyper-masculinity of the Ugandan President Idi Amin Dada, Alicia Decker specifically argued for getting away from archetypes of blood-thirsty presidents and for understanding their performance of violence and abuse of power as political strategies.²⁵

Nevertheless, the origins of presidential powers still constitute a marginal theme in African political history. Historians seem reluctant to engage with concepts directly borrowed from political science, such a presidentialism, while political scientists tend to leave archival research to historians. The history of the presidency as a new institution, created upon independence, and the political negotiations surrounding the making of a new constitution and allocating executive, legislative, and judiciary powers are still under researched. Political biographies of influential leaders have come closest to studying African presidents; but the origins of presidential powers are systematically avoided. In turn, historical analyses are centered on the concepts of colonial legacy. Ali Mazrui's seminal article on "The Monarchical Tendency in African Political Culture" is a good example of the limits of comparisons between colonial and postcolonial leadership when based on little historical evidence.²⁶ The concept of colonial legacy is certainly useful to emphasize the artificial nature of the transition to independence, as well as the political, administrative, and economic continuities between colonial and postcolonial states.²⁷ But the logic of continuity places the emphasis on colonial actors and says very little about the agency of African elites in designing, negotiating, and appropriating executive powers

²³ See, for example, Thomas Molony, *Nyerere: The Early Years* (Oxford: James Currey, 2016); and Issa G. Shivji, Saida Yahya-Othman, and Ng'wanza Kawat, *Development as Rebellion: A Biography of Julius Nyerere* (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania: Mkuki na Nyota, 2020).

²⁴ For a recent review of the historiography on gender decolonization, see Emmanuelle Bouilly and Ophélie Rillon, "Relire les Décolonisations d'Afrique Francophone au Prisme du Genre," *Le Mouvement Social* 2–255 (2016), 3–16. On biographies of prominent leaders, see in particular Christine Messiant and Roland Marchal, "Premières dames en Afrique: entre bonnes oeuvres, promotion de la femme et politiques de la compassion," *Politique Africaine* 3 (2004), 5–17; and Pamela Scully, *Ellen Johnson Sirleaf* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016).

²⁵ Alicia C. Decker, *In Idi Amin's Shadow: Women, Gender, and Militarism in Uganda* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014).

²⁶ Ali A. Mazrui, "The Monarchical Tendency in African Political Culture," *The British Journal of Sociology* 18 (1967), 231–250.

²⁷ Jean-François Bayart and Romain Bertrand, "De quel 'legs colonial' parle-t-on?" *Esprit* 12 (2006), 134–160.

upon independence.²⁸ Against the logic of inheritance, reproduction, or continuity, arguments of reinvention, re-appropriation, and fabrication so often put forward in African political history should be placed at the center of the historical analysis of presidential powers.

Writing the history of African presidential powers in Africa must be an interdisciplinary endeavor, inspired by various historiographies, conceptual approaches, and research methods across disciplines – political science and history in particular.²⁹ What is at stake is to retrieve the agency and political intelligence of African elites in imagining, negotiating, appropriating, and strengthening political structures (executive powers in particular) and political ideas in a context of uncertain political futures. As such, the duty of historians is to explore the formation of the postcolonial state from a new angle, breaking with simplistic narratives of continuity and change and investigating both the political and institutional crises that national independence brought about.

Challenging Historical Sources

The main challenge is of course one of sources: what kind of archival material can historians use to break into the highest, and perhaps most secret, sphere of state power? The ambivalent status of archives in African postcolonial states has long been discussed. Achille Mbembe noted that, though archives might threaten state affairs, their material destruction provides them with

²⁸ On the issue of reconceptualizing the concept of colonial legacy to bring forward various forms of political agencies, see Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 17–18, 52. Regarding the main limits of studies which compare colonial and postcolonial leadership in authority, see, for example, Anthony H. M. Kirk-Greene, “His Eternity, His Eccentricity, or His Exemplarity? A Further Contribution to the H.E. the African Head of State,” *African Affairs* 90–359 (1991), 163–187; Andrew Burton and Matthew Jennings, “Introduction: The Emperor’s New Clothes? Continuities in Governance in Late Colonial and Early Postcolonial Africa,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 40–1 (2007), 1–25; Henning Melber and Roger Southall, “African Presidents-of Despots and Democrats Continuity and Change in Leadership,” *African Renaissance* 5–1 (2008), 19–27.

²⁹ For recent interdisciplinary reflections of African state power, see, for example, Daniel Branch, Nic Cheeseman, and Leigh Garnder (eds.), *Our Turn to Eat Politics in Kenya since 1950* (Berlin: Münster Lit, 2010); Jonathan Fisher and David M. Anderson, “Authoritarianism and the Securitization of Development in Africa,” *International Affairs* 91–1 (2015), 131–151. Beth S. Rabinowitz’s latest book *Coups, Rivals, and the Modern State: Why Rural Coalitions Matter in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) is another example of the importance of integrating historical narratives into the analysis of authority and power in African politics.

additional content.³⁰ Jean Allman called for chasing the “phantoms of the archives,” and Luise White advocated transnational archival research to fill the apparent blanks of postcolonial African history.³¹ More recently, Katherine Bruce-Lockhart highlighted the hidden “human dimension” of archival texts, showing how bureaucratic power relations and aspects of daily life were entangled in the “paper works” of Ugandan prison officers during Idi Amin Dada’s regime.³² Similarly, historians of African women’s history have provided many alternatives to bypass the apparent lack of written sources to document women’s contribution to decolonization, nationalism, and state building.³³ Although the postcolonial state is made of “phantoms,” “paper cadavers,” and “spectres” whose lives are at once rendered legible yet remain elusive in archival spaces,” as Bruce-Lockhart aptly wrote, it does not resist archival traces.³⁴ As Alexander Keese forcefully argued, post-independence archives held in African documentation centers have been (for various reasons) underestimated and too often disregarded, and they need to be more closely explored.³⁵

These reflections have revived the writing of postcolonial African political history, refreshing in particular the conceptualization of politics and political agency and shedding light on many more actors, women in particular, and more complex forms of politic engagement. They also have come very close to presidents – Allman wrote on Kwame Nkrumah, White on Robert Mugabe, and Decker and Bruce-Lockhart on Idi Amin Dada.³⁶ Yet, there has not been a comprehensive discussion on the state of African presidential archives – perhaps because the question tends to be seen more as a concern for political scientists.

³⁰ Achille Mbembe, “The Power of the Archive and its Limits,” in Hamilton, Carolyn et al. (eds.), *Refiguring the Archive* (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 23.

³¹ Jean Allman, “Phantoms of the Archive: Kwame Nkrumah, a Nazi Pilot Named Hanna, and the Contingencies of Postcolonial History-Writing,” *The American Historical Review* 118–1 (2013), 104–129; and Luise White, “Hodgepodge Historiography: Documents, Itineraries, and the Absence of Archives,” *History in Africa* 42 (2015), 309–318.

³² Katherine Bruce-Lockhart, “The Archival Afterlives of Prison Officers in Idi Amin’s Uganda: Writing Social Histories of the Postcolonial State,” *History in Africa* 45 (2018), 245–274.

³³ See, for example, Susan Geiger, “Women’s Life Histories: Method and Content,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 11–2 (1986), 334–351.

³⁴ Bruce-Lockhart, “The Archival Afterlives,” 271.

³⁵ Alexander Keese, “Just Like in Colonial Times? Administrative Practice and Local Reflections on ‘Grassroots Neocolonialism’ in Autonomous and Postcolonial Dahomey, 1958–1965,” *Journal of African History* 60–2 (2019), 263–266.

³⁶ Allman, “Phantoms of the archive”; Decker, *In Idi Amin’s Shadow*; Luise White, *Unpopular Sovereignty: Rhodesian Independence and African Decolonization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); and Bruce-Lockhart, “The Archival Afterlives.”

Of what are a president's archives made? What are the similarities and differences across archival repositories in African countries – and, of course, among various African presidents? There seem to be great disparities as to the primary sources tracing the lives and careers of African presidents. Reflecting on biography as historical sources, Richard Rathbone pointed out, for example, the lack of available visual material to trace the early life of Olusegun Obasanjo.³⁷ John Lonsdale noted that Jomo Kenyatta's private papers disappeared when he was arrested by British administrators in 1952;³⁸ in contrast, Barthélemy Boganda's private diaries constitute a very informative source on the latter's turbulent career, as Klaas van Walraven showed.³⁹ Similarly, Carolyn Hamilton noted the richness of Nelson Mandela's prison archive, highlighting its unabated potential despite the already very large literature dedicated to Mandela.⁴⁰ Daniel Branch has shown it is possible to zoom in on the Office of the President in Kenya using Kenyan, British, and American public political files and the detailed information they provide – not so much on the president himself, but on the many men of influence who surrounded him, including their regular correspondences.⁴¹ Samuel Fury Childs Daly has valued the importance of global archival research to write Nigerian political history.⁴² The recently released Foreign and Commonwealth Office “migrated archives” from the collections of the British National Archives have already provided historians with the means to document the political rise of president-to-be politicians.⁴³ Last but not least, ongoing doctoral research dedicated to presidential history also shows the potential of archival research to situate African presidents' politics within rapidly changing societies, retracing their educational trajectories and their social interactions during the decolonization period.⁴⁴

³⁷ Richard Rathbone, “African Biography,” *Contemporary Review* 293 (2011), 336–345.

³⁸ John Lonsdale, “Jomo Kenyatta, God and the Modern World,” in Deutsch, Jan-Geor, Probst, Peter, and Schmidt, Heike (eds.), *African Modernities: Entangled Meanings in Current Debate* (Oxford: James Currey, 2002), 34–66.

³⁹ Klaas van Walraven, “Barthélemy Boganda between Charisma and Cosmology,” in van Walraven, Klass (ed.), *The Individual in African History. The Importance of Biography in African Historical Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

⁴⁰ Carolyn Hamilton, “Archives and Public Life,” in Cowling, Lesley and Hamilton, Carolyn (eds.), *Babel Unbound: Rage, Reason and Rethinking Public Life* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2020).

⁴¹ Daniel Branch, *Kenya Between Hope and Despair (1963–2011)* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

⁴² Samuel Fury Childs Daly, “Research Note. Archival Research in Africa,” *African Affairs* 116–463 (2017), 311–320.

⁴³ Maloba, *Kenyatta and Britain*, chapter 6; Angelo, *Power and the Presidency*, chapter 2.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Christian Hadorn's doctoral research, currently in progress, on “The First Heads of State of 51 African Countries and their Milieu,” Universität Bern.

Archives are not static; lost archives may be found again, and traces of destroyed documents may resurface in unexpected places. As Carolyn Hamilton powerfully put it: “Archival collections are reframed and refashioned over time, both affected by and resistant to the ebb and flow of reinterpretation, and in turn affecting interpretation.”⁴⁵ It appears therefore even more important to transfer the political scientists’ concern for institutional analysis to historians’ desks and archival rooms. This is the approach I took in my research on Jomo Kenyatta’s presidential trajectory, albeit unconsciously at first. When I started my research on Jomo Kenyatta’s political biography in 2012, I had freshly graduated in political science: I was new to the field of history and had no experience in archival research. My interest in the historical origins of presidential powers was shaped by my personal background as well as by the materiality of archival resources, and it is fair to say that the nature, richness, and sound preservation of British and Kenyan archival resources made it possible for me to embark on a project dealing with state power.⁴⁶ I was not working in a space of physical chaos (as that shown in the pictures of the United National Independence Party Archives in Lusaka, provided by Luise White, or that of the archives of local governments in Uganda, as presented by Derek R. Peterson).⁴⁷ I was able to retrieve files covering extensive formal bureaucratic processes directly hinting at the functioning of the presidential institution.

Trained as a political scientist and new to history, I was looking for traces of the president as an actor but had not thought of the presidency as an institution with its own political history. Rémi Dewièrè and Silvia Bruzzi emphasized that historians act as (creative) intermediaries between archival sources and historical narratives, and the archives themselves rapidly showed me that the two were inseparable: one could not research the history of the president without studying the history of the presidential institution.⁴⁸ I unexpectedly stumbled on material documenting the negotiations on the

⁴⁵ Hamilton, “Archives and Public Life.”

⁴⁶ On the question of subjective knowledge and archival research, see Kirsten Rùther, “Asking Appropriate Questions, Reconsidering Research Agendas: Moving Between London and Lusaka, In- and Outside the Archive,” *Administrative Journal for the History of Public Administration* 4–1 (2019), 110–124.

⁴⁷ White, “Hodgepodge Historiography,” 314; and Derek R. Peterson, “Archives Catalogues,” <https://derekpeterson.com/archive-work/>, (accessed 28 November 2019). On the Kenyan national archives, see Matthew Carotenuto and Katherine Luongo, “Navigating the Kenya National Archives: Research and Its Role in Kenyan Society,” *History in Africa* 32 (2005), 445–455.

⁴⁸ Rémi Dewièrè and Silvia Bruzzi, “Paroles de papier. Matérialité et écritures en contextes africains,” *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines* 236 (2019), 949–966. English translation available online: “Words of Paper. Materiality of Writing and its Discourses in African Contexts,” *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines* 236 (2019), <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/27751>, (accessed 4 December 2019).

strengthening of presidential powers in Kenya upon independence. My book, *Power and the Presidency in Kenya: The Jomo Kenyatta Years*, reconstructs the ways in which Jomo Kenyatta achieved and maintained power in post-colonial Kenya.⁴⁹ My argument emphasizes that extensive presidential powers not only have a complex constitutional history, but also a long political history and require the reconstruction of how they were imagined, shaped, and negotiated at a time when nothing predicted that presidential regimes would take over the whole African continent.

Retracing Jomo Kenyatta's Rise to the Presidency

The numerous intelligence and diplomatic reports written on Kenyatta portrayed him as an enigma.⁵⁰ Authors who explored his political imagination drew a similar conclusion: Kenyatta was a solitary figure, and both his career and political ideas were marked by the search for opportunities to gain both attention and political support.⁵¹ In his recent biography of Kenyatta, W. O. Maloba pointed out that Kenyatta's rise to prominence shortly before Kenya became independent was nonetheless an uncertain process. This did not mean that Kenyatta had not constructed a complex political ideology, as John Lonsdale noted. Though most of the literature dedicated to Kenyatta's political and intellectual biography does not explore his political career after independence in detail, it seems relevant to ask how this combination of political hazards and well-constructed political imagination affected the makings of Kenyatta's presidential powers.⁵²

The biggest challenge of my research was to write the history of the president with virtually none of President Kenyatta's written trace. His personal papers disappeared; he was known for disliking the nitty-gritty of bureaucratic procedures, and he left no memoir or autobiography to posterity. And yet, the apparent incompleteness of the archives has proven central to grasping Kenyatta's political strategy upon independence. More importantly, it forced me to look at the question of presidential power in

⁴⁹ Anaïs Angelo, *Power and the Presidency in Kenya: The Jomo Kenyatta Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁵⁰ Lonsdale, "Jomo Kenyatta," 32–33.

⁵¹ See in particular Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, "The Labors of 'Muigwithania': Jomo Kenyatta as Author, 1928–45," *Research in African Literature* 29–1 (1998), 16–42; and Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, "Custom, Modernity and the Search for Kihooto: Kenyatta, Malinowski and the Making of Facing Mount Kenya," in Tilley, Hellen and Gordon, Robert (eds.), *Ordering Africa!: Anthropology, European Imperialism and the Politics of Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 173–198.

⁵² See in particular Jeremy Murray-Brown, *Kenyatta* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1972); Maxon, *Kenya's Independence Constitution*; Maloba, *Kenyatta and Britain*.

order to attempt to locate Kenyatta's decision-making within complex institutional and personal power struggles in postcolonial Kenyan politics.⁵³

The move away from too strong a focus on individuals first required a questioning of the narrative of the "father of the nation," so entrenched in Kenyan political discourse over national history.⁵⁴ While the notion of the "father of the nation" has been increasingly criticized, this shift of analysis was also inspired by the literature on the biographical turn, which questions why and when an individual dominates the tide of history to the point that he or she becomes the only possible alternative to lead political change.⁵⁵ The British Migrated Archives proved essential to show the dissent and divisions that surrounded Jomo Kenyatta's rise to power, as well as the deep uncertainty and distrust that dominated the decolonization process.⁵⁶ The correspondence of British colonial administrators, telling of their personal discussions with prominent Kenyan leaders from all political sides, exposed the rumors, the corridor conversations, and the extent to which personal politics dominated the decolonization process. In capturing this uncertainty, I gained a more complex understanding of the political scene within which Kenyatta was acting. Far from being one of unity and solidarity, it was one of mutual distrust, and Kenyatta was clearly a relatively isolated player.

Furthermore, archival records show that nothing predicted that Kenyatta would become president in/of an independent Kenya. By the time of Kenya's independence negotiations, Kenyatta was an old man (about seventy years old) and had spent eight years under restriction, as the British administration

⁵³ Daniel Branch and Charles Hornsby have brilliantly mapped Kenya's most salient postcolonial political issues and influential actors. See Branch, *Kenya Between Hope and Despair*; and Charles Hornsby, *Kenya: A History since Independence* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013).

⁵⁴ This discourse has been mediated, for example, by an ever-growing body of political autobiographies. See, for example, Hervé Maupeu, "Les Autobiographies au Kenya : La production d'un genre littéraire," in Albert, Christiane, Kouvouama, Abel, and Prignitz, Gisèle (eds.), *Le statut de l'écrit. Afrique, Europe, Amérique Latine* (Pau: Presse Universitaires de Pau, 2008), 171–189.

⁵⁵ For a critique of the concept of "father of the nation," see Charton and Fouéré, "Héros." On the biographical turn, see, for example, Hans Renders, Binne de Haan, and Jonne Harmsma (eds.), *The Biographical Turn: Lives in History* (London: Routledge, 2016).

⁵⁶ On the history and constitution of the migrated archives see in particular Anthony Badger, "Historians, A Legacy of Suspicion and the 'Migrated Archives,'" *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 23–4–5 (2012), 799–807; David M. Anderson, "Guilty Secrets: Deceit, Denial, and the Discovery of Kenya's 'Migrated Archive,'" *History Workshop Journal* 80–1 (2015), 142–160; and Michael Karabinos, "Archives and Post-Colonial State-Sponsored History: A Dual State Approach Using the Case of the 'Migrated Archives,'" in Bevernage, Berber and Wouters, Nico (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of State-Sponsored History After 1945* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 177–190.

was convinced he was the leader of the violent Mau Mau movement. Though he had been informed of political developments throughout this time, he had little connection to the new and younger Kenyan elite which took center stage in political negotiations with the British. When he was released in 1961, virtually no one foresaw that Kenyatta would or could become a prominent political player. On the contrary, many Kenyan politicians attempted to prevent him from occupying influential political positions in Kenya. Kenyatta, in contrast, was patiently and cautiously biding his time. To British officials who tried to sound his political plans he said: "I have something cooking and I don't wish to spoil it."⁵⁷ The historiography dedicated to Kenyatta's political ideas gives us a sense of Kenyatta's intelligence in a moment of unprecedented political transition; far from being cut off from Kenyan politics, Kenyatta had developed, over the years, a profound understanding of both colonial and indigenous politics. He knew, certainly like no one else at the time, that political (and economic) divisions were deep in the country, that he himself was surrounded by many enemies, and that even his friends were divided.⁵⁸

The question, therefore, is not only how Kenyatta *understood* or *conceptualized* these divisions but how he was able to overcome them and hold them together in a presidential system. The focus on the history of institutions highlights that no one, Kenyatta included, predicted that Kenya would transition to a presidential political system. As archival records show, the negotiations on presidential power came late (in 1963) in the decolonization process. Two sets of very different British colonial files alerted me to that question. First, and perhaps more unexpectedly, were the land files. These were extremely large files, retracing in detail the economic matters related to the decolonization of land.⁵⁹ The economic aspects of the history of the

⁵⁷ British National Archives, Kew (BNA), FCO 141/6364, "Press visit to Mr. Kenyatta at Maralal," District Commissioner Maralal R. A. Hosking to F. W. Goodbody, Under Secretary of Information and Broadcasting Nairobi, 28 June 1961.

⁵⁸ This was, to a certain extent, not a new situation for Kenyatta. In the mid-1930s, Kenyatta had enrolled in a PhD program in anthropology and started writing an anthropological history of the Kikuyu (his ethnic group). He found himself at odds with both the white anthropological experts of the Kikuyu and an older generation of Kikuyu elders. In the introduction of his book (purportedly based on his dissertation) *Facing Mount Kenya*, Kenyatta took great care to reward his "enemies" with the following words: "I owe thanks also to my enemies, for the stimulating discouragement which has kept up my spirits to persist in the task. Long life and health to them to go on with the good work!" See Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (London: Mercury Books, 1965), xvii.

⁵⁹ In the British national archives (Kew), I consulted the following files covering the period from 1961 to 1965: DO 214/40, DO 214/41, DO 214/104, DO 214/105, DO 214/106, DO 214/107, FCO 141/6911, FCO 141/6917, FCO 141/6918, FCO 141/6919, FCO 141/6923, FCO 141/6924, FCO 141/6925.

decolonization of land in Kenya have been well researched.⁶⁰ So I concentrated my attention on the political aspects involved in the process, and, more particularly, on the fact that the British had designed a bureaucratic structure that centralized access to land resources before the question of a central or federal state was settled.⁶¹ The question of the centralization of power took on a new dimension when I stumbled on an archival file in Kew entitled “Discussions on question of head of state at time of independence.”⁶² The file documented Kenyatta’s personal talks with the British Commissioner and the tensions, within the Kenyan elite, over the issue: very few politicians wanted Kenyatta to become president; even fewer wanted him to be granted extensive executive powers.

Clearly, the making of presidential power has a complex history. It was, most importantly, an unexpected issue, which explains why little could be found in the records of the negotiations of independence in Lancaster between 1961 and 1963. This black hole not only showed that the negotiations on independence were highly personalized (cutting across political parties and institutions) but, perhaps more importantly, that the question of executive powers had not been foreseen by any of the politicians of the time. In Kenya, the issue emerged late in the year 1963: the independence negotiations were already coming to an end as parliamentarians discussed the draft constitution for an independent Kenya. Parliamentarians contested the provision that “the President has power to make any appointment or make any order *or do any other thing*.”⁶³ Though the debate was extremely divisive, it came too late in the decolonization process for any significant renegotiated. Such very vague wording torpedoed all efforts to strengthen counter powers by giving extensive, almost unlimited, executive powers to the president.

Do Archives Reflect Presidential Styles?

It is certainly not enough to point out that presidential powers in postcolonial Africa have a history. One should further caution that the establishment of presidential powers should not be seen as an event (that of independence) but rather as a process. As the Kenyan case shows, the legal wording of executive powers in the independence constitution was so vague that it was

⁶⁰ See in particular John W. Harbeson, “Land Reforms and Politics in Kenya, 1954–70,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 9–2 (1971), 231–51; Colin Leys, *Underdevelopment in Kenya* (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1975); Gary Wasserman, *Politics of Decolonization: Kenya Europeans and the Land Issue, 1960–1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

⁶¹ Angelo, *Power and the Presidency*, chapter 3.

⁶² BNA, CO 822/3117, “Discussions on Question of Head of State at Time of Independence”.

⁶³ Emphasis is mine. “The Constitution of Kenya (Amendment) Act,” 28 of 1964, 189.

still unclear what shape a presidential regime would take. This question necessarily calls for further reflection on the president's style of ruling. Exploring the issue was all the more challenging as, as I already mentioned, Kenyatta appeared to be untraceable.

Where could the president's comings and goings be located? Browsing through the inventories of the Kenyan National Archives, one is struck by the unevenness of the records. The papers of the Office of the President offered no more than a collection of speeches (though very useful).⁶⁴ The archives of the Eastern Province were the richest to work with – the post-independence files of other provinces had been oddly decimated. Besides working extensively on files from the Eastern Province (in particular the personal papers of the provincial commissioner for Eastern Province, Eliud Mahihu, as well as the security files related to the Meru district, which enabled me to write on the post-independence history of the Mau Mau movement), the records of the Ministry of Lands and Settlements proved to be an incredibly rich source.⁶⁵ These archives provided firsthand information not so much on Kenyatta's personal commitment to political affairs, but on his timely interferences or withdrawals in strategic affairs. In other words, they were about the particular matters on which Kenyatta did not want to be traced.

Whereas the general understanding of presidential powers in postcolonial Africa entails the idea of unlimited prerogatives, my research led me to reflect on where presidential powers end, so that the president remains politically unexposed. This was clearly the case when it came to repressing resurgent Mau Mau fighters after 1965, a part of postcolonial Mau Mau history which has, surprisingly perhaps, been little studied.⁶⁶ Kenyatta was, apparently at least, completely missing from the archival records. Yet his name was mentioned at two strategic moments: before independence, colonial archives showed Kenyatta was aware of the issue of Mau Mau resurgence in Kenya; after independence, Kenyatta had ordered his ministers to bring back order in the district where Mau Mau resilience was the most problematic – a correspondence between top officials of Kenyatta's government shows how the president instructed them both to ensure loyalty within his government, but also freed their hands when it came to taking action.⁶⁷ The absence of firsthand material on Kenyatta was not necessarily a missing link. This was a clear case of retrieving the phantoms of the archives: Kenyatta's invisibility in the archives reflected his desire to remain unexposed in politics.

⁶⁴ See in particular the KA/4 files in the Kenyan National Archives, Nairobi (KNA).

⁶⁵ See in particular the files from the following records: BN/81, BN/84, and BN/87, KNA.

⁶⁶ Angelo, *Power and the Presidency*, chapter 5.

⁶⁷ KNA, BB/1/158, letter from Jackson Angaine to Eliud Mahihu, 17 June 1965.

The question of how archival material may inform our understanding of presidential styles needs to be more thoroughly examined. While many scholars have highlighted the ways presidents' style affect the functioning of postcolonial states and their bureaucracies, more research should be done to reflect on the variety of presidential styles across African countries and their unique histories.⁶⁸ Erik Kennes's depiction of Laurent Désiré Kabila as "secretive" and someone who "rarely gave interviews" is reminiscent of Jomo Kenyatta. Writing about the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kennes not only noted that "much of the politically incorrect documentation and writing of the period" was destroyed but that access to potential sources was also difficult (sometimes because of security reasons, an issue which is far from being a detail!).⁶⁹ Despite these difficulties, his argument is still one that engages with historical gaps and loopholes and takes unpredictability seriously. By mixing secondary and primary sources, Kennes shows us the possibility to locate a leader's agency, to identify his "political persona" as well as his "conception of rule."⁷⁰ Similarly, Klaas van Walraven emphasizes the potential of bringing biography writing and political history closer to one another, to show "the unexpected twists and turns of a life and, indeed, of the political history of his country and its failed turning-points."⁷¹ Klaas' defense of biography writing further shows that when it comes to the history of African political elites, the incompleteness of sources and historical speculation may also enhance historical analysis.⁷² This observation directly resonates with Kenyatta's apparent absence from the postcolonial archives, which remains no less useful and essential to retracing the makings of presidential powers in Kenya.

Conclusion

An understanding of the origins of extensive, almost limitless presidential powers can help to explain why presidential powers continue to define contemporary African politics. Once again, the Kenyan case is significant. In 2010, a new constitution was introduced in Kenya, decentralizing powers to reinforce the inclusion of regional and local authorities and to foster

⁶⁸ See, for example, Bruce-Lockhart, "The Archival Afterlives"; Paul Bjerk, *Building a Peaceful Nation: Julius Nyerere and the Establishment of Sovereignty in Tanzania, 1960–1964* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2015); Ahlman, *Living with Nkrumahism*; and Rabinowitz, *Coups, Rivals, and the Modern State*.

⁶⁹ Erik Kennes, "A Road not Taken? The Biography of Laurent Kabila (1939–2001)," in van Walraven, Klass (ed.), *The Individual in African History* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 276–277.

⁷⁰ Kennes, "A Road not Taken?," 292–293.

⁷¹ Klass van Walraven, "Prologue: Reflections on Historiography and Biography and the Study of Africa's Past," in *The Individual in African History* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 38.

⁷² Van Walraven, "Prologue," 8.

national cohesion. A senate was re-introduced (it had been first suppressed in 1966), and the powers of the regional governors and county assemblies were increased. The reforms were also meant to reinforce the separation of legislative and executive powers, to guarantee democratic popular representation at the national level. Six years later, an audit report noted that far from fostering institutional balance and cooperation, the reforms intensified competition between members of parliament (MPs), senators, governors, and county representatives over political agendas and access to state funding.⁷³ More importantly, it noted that the parliament was still not fully emancipated from the executive powers. The old “institutional culture” that tied parliament to the office of the president continued to prevent the legislature from checking and balancing executive decisions in full independence. The devolution reforms had failed to reform the presidential powers at the roots of the formation of the independent Kenyan state.

While the question of the structure of presidential powers has long been the field of political scientists, the study of the historical makings of both the president and his/her presidential powers in postcolonial Africa opens new avenues for historians to contribute to a subject that has clearly not lost its contemporary relevance. This article has shown that thorough archival research on presidential powers can refine the conceptualization of the decolonization process, which not only appears to be highly personalized but which was certainly not as linear as previous approaches or concepts have suggested. Furthermore, reflection on the interaction between personal power relations and institutional processes can foster the debate on how personal style influences or shapes power relations within a presidential regime. In this regard, further research into the making of presidential institutions and presidents could be a fruitful addition to political biographies, encouraging historians to reflect on the way personal power relations have been eventually institutionalized. Finally, writing the history of presidents and of presidential institutions in Africa would not only fill an important chronological gap in the history of state formation, but would also contribute to locating the agency of African politicians in negotiating power institutions. The latest developments of African political history have clearly shown that heroic narratives can be questioned, and even documented in new ways. No matter its challenges, the history of presidential powers has potential to show the connections between unstable individual lives and the makings of a new and complex political machine.

⁷³ Office of the Auditor General, “Report of the Working Group on Socio-Economic Audit of the Constitution of Kenya, 2010,” September 2016, <https://africacheck.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/SocialAudit2010.pdf>, (accessed 13 January 2020).

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