



Memory of the World Register - Nomination Form

Benin - Colonial archives

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Abstract

The proposed element of the documentary heritage, or most of it, dates from the colonial period. The history of this period is that of a brief (scarcely one century) but none the less decisive episode: the meeting between colonizers and colonized, between Western culture and African culture caused major political upheavals in Africa, economic disintegration, the dislocation of social structures, the disorganization of traditional bonds and the reshaping of modes of cultural expression and authentic standards of civilization.



Identity and Location

Name of the Documentary Heritage: Colonial collection - political affairs

Country: Republic of Benin

State, Province or Region: Département of Ouémé

Address: Directorate of National Archives BP 629 Porto-Novo - Benin Tel.: (229) 21-30-79

Name of Institution: Directorate of National Archives



Legal Information

- **Owner:** State of Benin
- **Custodian:** Directorate of National Archives - BP 629 Porto-Novo - Benin
Tel.: (229) 21-30-79

Legal Status:

- **Category of ownership:** Public
- **Details of legal and administrative provisions for the preservation of the documentary heritage:** Provisions contained in Decree No. 90-384 of 4 December 1990 defining attributions, organization and functioning of the National Archives
- **Accessibility:** Free access without charge
- **Responsible administration:** The proposed element of the heritage is the complete set of documents in series E of the old collection conserved at the Directorate of National Archives of Benin. That Directorate is the administration responsible for a large collection of documents of which the most interesting component is related to political affairs. The Directorate of National Archives is a governmental institution responsible for managing the archivist heritage of the nation represented, inter alia, by documents inherited from the colonial period and documents conserved by the state in connection with its activities, and for the supervision of archives conserved by local authorities, public services or private bodies.
The main activity of the institution is to conserve, preserve, sort, classify, index and make available in accordance with the technical and legislative principles in force the documents for which it is responsible, including those forming part of the proposed element of documentary heritage.
To carry out this task, it is organized into technical and administrative services whose respective fields of competence are clearly defined.



Identification

- **Description:** Series E concerns political affairs and groups together all the reports and correspondence arising from the political activity of European (especially French) colonizers in Dahomey, in certain countries of West Africa and, occasionally, in Africa as a whole or elsewhere in the world. It contains documents relating to general policy, native policy, Muslim policy, relations with foreign powers and colonies, the defining of frontiers and religious matters (Catholic and Protestant churches, religious ceremonies).
- **History:** The contacts between Africa and Europe reach back to before the seventeenth century. These contacts intensified in the mid-nineteenth century as a result of a policy of colonial expansion and subjection of the indigenous black peoples. This is also what happened to the kingdom of Dahomey which, at the end of the nineteenth century, became a French colony. The exploitation and administration of the established territories and empires were based on principles and regulations defined in legislative and administrative texts and on correspondence resulting from the application of government rules and procedures for the new entities brought into being by the colonial wars of conquest. The documents reflecting the vicissitudes of colonial history in Dahomey (present-day Benin) and sometimes elsewhere, created in 1914 the need for an archives department, which was set up by the local governor at the time. The element of the heritage concerned is a part of the collections of that repository and covers the period 1843-1960.
The beginnings of the colonial conquest of Africa were marked by the sending of reconnaissance missions to the area. These geopolitical and military missions produced a large number of protection treaties with traditional chiefdoms and gave rise to a mass of reports and correspondence dealing with struggles for influence and the political and territorial rivalry of the European colonizing powers. Reactions of the local populations to these missions of conquest were not slow to come. Resistance to the colonial occupation was long and fierce, one example being the powerful kingdom of Abomey (Benin) which, at the end of the nineteenth century, constituted an indomitable obstacle to French penetration. King Behanzin, whose palace was recently included in the world cultural heritage by UNESCO, led desperate resistance from 1890 to 1893. The local rulers were subsequently vanquished and their territories annexed and turned into colonies. This situation of conflict between rival powers on the one hand and between white invaders and rebelling indigenous populations of Dahomey and of neighbouring colonies on the other (the German colony of Togo, the British colony of Nigeria and the French colonies of Niger

and Upper Volta) is still a living memory through the major facts and events of history recounted in richly informative documents contained in the files making up the proposed element of the heritage. Once the era of conquest had ended, there were detailed internationally negotiated readjustments of the frontiers between the French, British and German colonies. The continual conflicts between Germans, British and French were succeeded by reciprocal official recognition of the territories. In bipartite, tripartite or multipartite negotiations, concessions and arrangements and through the intricate work of the joint frontier commissions, the frontiers were established on a more or less permanent basis and the colonies were organized into administrative and political divisions. The resurfacing of the question of international frontiers, which are contested by certain African states, lies behind many of the armed conflicts that tore the continent apart.

- **Bibliography:** International Council on Archives* - 60, rue des Francs-Bourgeois, 75004 - Paris



Management Plan

- **Statement of significance:** The resurfacing of the question of international frontiers, which are contested by certain African states, lies behind many of the armed conflicts that tore the continent apart. The proposed element of the heritage is of undeniable usefulness for the peaceful settlement of frontier disputes. Lastly, the proposed element is likely to contribute to research on the expansion of Christianity and Islam in the world and in particular on the origin, expressions and evolution of the major religions in the West African subregion. Studies on Islam and Christianity in the colonial and pre-colonial period are to be found in the rich archives of the proposed documentary heritage.

- **Access policy:** Access to the proposed collection is public, free and without charge.

- **Preservation procedures:** Each civil year a lump sum is allocated in the budget for conservation activities.

Procedures and policy aimed at providing satisfactory conservation : construction of a modern repository complying with international standards of lighting and protection from humidity. It is equipped with an appropriate air-conditioning system, two floors of metallic shelving, thermo-hygrometric apparatus, aspirators, extinguishers, trolleys, etc. The repository is maintained by a storekeeper who also does other work. The documents are kept in archive boxes lined up shelves. The collection is in a vulnerable condition: the paper that serves as the medium for the information conserved is yellowing and crumbles at the slightest handling. Documents in an advanced state of decay may be consulted in the form of copies. The conservation staff is made up of four professional archivists, an archive technician and support, maintenance and administrative personnel.

A programme of further training for the archivists is under study.



Assessment against the Selection Criteria

- **Influence:** The bitterness of the resistance to the colonial power, the rapid development of the press campaign of the intellectual élite against the colonial regime, the energetic expression of political demands and the more or less conscious determination of the African peoples to gain their independence were affirmed with greater conviction and intensity in Dahomey, the cradle of certain forms of anti-colonial struggle that subsequently awoke nationalist impulses in other territories under the colonial yoke.

- **Time:** 1860-1960

The proposed element of the documentary heritage, or most of it, dates from the colonial period. The history of this period is that of a brief (scarcely one century) but none the less decisive episode: the meeting between colonizers and colonized, between Western culture and African culture caused major political upheavals in Africa, economic disintegration, the dislocation of social structures, the disorganization of traditional bonds and the reshaping of modes of cultural expression and authentic standards of civilization.

- **Place:** Benin and the West African region.

- **People:** A large part of the proposed documentary heritage concerns the life and work of kings and various local chiefs. A very important part deals with the state of mind and outlook of the indigenous populations, including their reactions to the colonial experience. There is also

information on the rebel kings - Kaba, Béhanzin, Bio Guerra - who opposed and fought against the colonial administration.

- **Subject/theme:** The main theme of the proposed documentary heritage concerns Africa at the time of colonization, the case of Dahomey (Benin) and, by extrapolation, of the French colonies of Africa. A vast range of subjects is covered by the files contained in this series. The documents are of undoubted use for the study of questions concerning the administration or functioning of colonial institutions in Dahomey, colonies in French West Africa, German Togo or the British colony of Nigeria, as well as the relations between neighbouring colonies.
- **Form and style:** The information contained in the files forming the proposed documentary heritage is expressed in an elaborate artistic style and in intelligible language. Most of the texts are written by hand, with the words almost drawn in pen and ink in very careful calligraphy with elegant downstrokes and upstrokes. The clarity of the writing guarantees the readability of the information conserved and makes one eager to read it and embark on research.
- **Social Value:** In the proposed documentary heritage, much emphasis is placed on two of the world's major systems of belief. It contains important data concerning the arrival and progress of Christianity and Islam in Africa, especially in West Africa. Pride of place is given to useful information on the spread of Islam, on Islam and colonial policy, on the evolution of traditional religions confronted with imported faiths and on the reactions of the Church to the rise of colonialism and relations between the colonial administration and religious leaders.
- **Integrity:** The poor conditions of conservation in the distant and more recent past have led to the slight or not-so-slight deterioration of certain files and the dismemberment of others. However, most of the fund is intact.
- **Rarity:** Dahomey was the French colony with the largest number of intellectuals concerned with awakening black consciousness. The efforts to oppose the colonial power by this intellectual élite began in Dahomey before gradually embracing the whole of Africa. Everything regarding the life and work of the earliest champions of resistance such as Louis Hunkanrin and others is conserved in the proposed element of documentary heritage. Apart from a few negligible traces to be found in the Overseas Archives in France and in the Archives of Dakar, capital of what used to be French West Africa, on which the territory of Dahomey depended during the colonial period, whole segments of the archivist heritage are available and accessible only in Dahomey.
- **Contextual assessment including an assessment of the importance of a series of documents:** The periodic political reports of the governor and local administrators make up the largest part of the proposed documentary heritage, mainly because the colonial authorities at various levels were obliged to produce at fixed intervals (daily, weekly, monthly, three-monthly or yearly) reports on events taking place in their administrative districts during the period in question. These reports make up nearly 70 per cent of the proposed documentary heritage; next in order of importance is correspondence exchanged with metropolitan or local political authorities.
- **An evaluation of authenticity:** : This documentary heritage is a set of highly valuable documents conserved in the very place where the colonial authorities that produced them had their administrative headquarters. It is thus a collection whose authenticity is attested by the original documents it contains.



Consultation

- **Owner:** State
- **Custodian:** Directorate of National Archives



Nominator

Ms Elise Paraiso

Director of the National Archives, depositary of the proposed element of the documentary heritage

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Assessment of Risk

The formerly unfavourable political climate has improved somewhat for archives since Benin accepted pluralist democracy as the means of exercising political power.

The physical environment is unfavourable owing to the characteristics of the tropical climate, characterized by alternating intense heat and low temperatures. The thermic shock occasioned by frequent atmospheric disturbances and the fluctuations in temperature are dangerous for the documents. To reduce such risks, a repository has been constructed in solid materials that meets international standards of architecture, with protection from humidity, lighting, air-conditioning, metal shelving, thermo-hygrometric apparatus, extinguishers, aspirators, etc. As regards the methods used for handling and displaying the documents, some of the staff as well as the users are rather unfamiliar with the principles in such matters, resulting in many cases of deterioration of the proposed documentary heritage. Most of the documents have yellowed and become brittle and are hence extremely vulnerable to the least clumsiness in handling. Indeed, safety measures including the introduction of a system of consultation on the spot and the supervision of researchers during their investigations have been taken to discourage vandalism and theft. Provision has been made for a financial and material allocation for conservation under each annual budget. But this is insufficient and does not permit the organization of events to bring the richness of the documentation to public knowledge.

The proposed documentary heritage is of great practical value for historians, political scientists, pupils and students as well as all persons interested in the history of the major political occurrences before and during the colonial period in Benin. National, African, European, American and other researchers come to the archives to carry out their research. Research statistics have shown it to be used by more than 100 researchers each year.



Preservation Assessment

The proposed element of the documentary heritage is a set of handwritten, typed and occasionally printed documents which have aged considerably, representing nearly 750 linear metres of shelving. The intrinsic value of these documents lies in the wealth of information of great scholarly interest that they contain. The poor conservation conditions from which they suffered before the construction of the repository in 1991 are responsible for the early deterioration and dismemberment of certain files. However, the collection is reasonably complete and more or less intact. The documents in an advanced stage of deterioration can be consulted via copies or microfilm. Microfilming of certain categories of document is in progress with a view to restricting access to the originals. A binding service is busy with consolidating, strengthening, binding and repairing the damaged documents. This task is being performed by a binding specialist and his assistant.

The work of conservation and protection is placed under the responsibility of middle-level archivists with not a single curator present. The possibilities of providing training, further training or specialist training are under study.

● **History of preservation:** Inherited from the French colonizers, the proposed element of documentary heritage is part of the collections held by the National Archives of Benin. These archives were set up by Local Order No. 225 of 2 May 1914, which established the Archives Department of the former Dahomey in pursuance of an Order dated 1 July 1913 by the Governor-General of French West Africa creating a repository of archives in each district capital of the territory. For a long time the repository did not have fixed premises and was from 1938 to 1965 housed in six different buildings, including the present colonial building which was refurbished and equipped in 1991. These constant removals inevitably aggravated the condition

of the documents and led to the breaking up of certain parts of the collection, including that proposed for selection. Today the future of this heritage appears a bit more promising. Formerly unsorted and mixed up, the documents have now been roughly classified and assigned to the various series established by the classification system and put in boxes. The repository provides a good standard of physical protection.

● **Preservation policy:** The proposed element of the documentary heritage has for the most part been cleared of dust, pre-classified, placed in boxes with a brief description of contents, given code numbers and stored in well-arranged premises, the repository of all the collections of the Directorate of National Archives of Benin. A proportion of the documents have been indexed. Access to the repository is strictly forbidden for non-members of the staff. It is forbidden to take archive documents home; only consultation on the spot is permitted. It is not permitted to write on the documents, underline with ball-points, to mark passages in pencil or lines of the texts placed at the disposal of the researcher. It is forbidden to smoke on the premises or in its immediate vicinity.

● **Person or organization responsible for preservation:** The Directorate of National Archives is the institution responsible in Benin for the implementation of national policy with respect to archives.



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[World Heritage List - Benin](#)

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