African Studies Review (2025), **68**: 3, 450–471
doi:10.1017/asr.2025.10072

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Decolonization and the Underground in Africa

The idea for this forum emerged from the African Studies Association's 66th Annual Meeting, held in San Francisco, California in November 2023. The fact that our call for papers for a panel entitled "Decolonization and the Underground" received a large number of responses—spanning contributions from scholars in Africa, Europe, and the United States—confirmed our intuition about the growing scholarly interest in this topic. It has also proved the relevance of political and cultural undergrounds to understanding contemporary developments across Africa and the diaspora.[1] Clandestine organizations working in concert with transnational networks of activists in exile aptly describes many revolutionary movements during the age of decolonization, as well as contemporary opposition to the likes of Abdel Fattah el-Sissi's authoritarian rule in Egypt or Isaias Afwerki's repressive state in Eritrea (Mandour 2022; Bernal 2013). Islamist groups in Somalia, Egypt, and Sudan have developed organizational power through informal economic activity—another example of the distinct (transnational) "underground" organizational forms that underpin political Islamist militancy (Medani 2021). In another distinct form, much as cultural undergrounds facilitated nonconformist spaces of self-fashioning during the global 1960s, contemporary queer sociality contends with shifting boundaries of visibility, invisibility, and moral judgment across the continent (Mugo 2021). And where anti-colonial organizing produced movement literature in secret and under conditions of repression, contemporary activists from Rwanda to the United Arab Emirates to Western Sahara and the United States produce even more ephemeral and fragmentary archives in the form of encrypted chats and disappearing messages to contend with digital surveillance.[2]

Taking the archives produced by cultural and political undergrounds as a point of departure, the contributions to this forum introduce understudied and previously unexplored sources, along with creative research methods for navigating the constraints of accessing knowledge produced under conditions of secrecy and concealment. Across these contributions, the underground stands as an analytical framework for understanding covert political activity, alternative sites of knowledge production and self-fashioning, and transitional phases of movement formation. When applied to anti-colonial and anti-imperial movements, thinking with and from the underground yields new methodological perspectives for emphasizing actors of decolonization beyond political elites.

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Revisiting decolonization

Revolutionary movements in postindependence Africa faced a common dilemma: the very demands that had been central to their mobilization were often co-opted and enacted by an increasingly repressive "comprador" state that had once been the vehicle for postcolonial liberation. This dilemma illustrates the ambiguity inherent to anti-colonial and anti-imperial projects. That is, though the experience of unfreedom may be immediate and palpable, decolonization remains a "historical event without determinate signs" (Gikandi 2018, 1).

Gikandi's formulation reverses what had long been the common sense in African Studies regarding decolonization as a "transfer of power" (Gifford and Louis 1988; Birmingham 1995). By taking national independence to be the self-evident sign of completed decolonization, these studies focus on the watershed year of 1960 when seventeen African nations gained independence, marking this event as the culmination of anti-colonial nationalism and the end of foreign European rule.

Over the past fifteen years, a profusion of revisionist historiography has critiqued the premise that national independence serves as a proxy for decolonization, arguing that the reduction of this process to a discrete event and scale of analysis obscures broader, complex transformations taking place across multiple spatio-temporal scales (Shepard 2006; Wilder 2012; see also Louis and Robinson 1994; Smith 2003). In stripping away the assumptions regarding national independence as an inevitable outcome of decolonization, this literature highlights the futures past of multifarious projects that did not conform to the telos of nationalist struggle. These studies note that the post-World War II period was not so much the culmination of anti-colonial nationalism as an opening in the global political field. From federation (Cooper 2014; Wilder 2015) to self-determination as a platform for international anti-imperial solidarity (Getachew 2019; Mantena 2016; Lee 2010; Prashad 2007), a variety of political formations took shape during this age of decolonization. At this global scale of analysis, nation-state sovereignty emerges as a normative ideal that both gives expression to and limits the political will to decolonize (Kelly and Kaplan 2004; Bonilla 2015; Sajed 2023). International solidarities and alliances under the sign of Bandung, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the Third World enabled some experimentation in forms of self-determination throughout Africa, yet those projects also responded to or were constrained by the models of development imposed by the United States and Soviet Union (Westad 2005; Amin 1994). The role of transnational solidarity and diplomacy in anticolonial struggle—and the resonance of particular models, from Algeria and Cuba to Congo, Vietnam, and Palestine—demonstrates the importance of a globally interconnected world in fostering, amplifying and sustaining anti-colonial struggle (Connelly 2002; Byrne 2016; Stenner 2019; Bardawil 2020). As Frantz Fanon noted, the Third World during this period was "at the middle of the whirlpool" (2004 [1963], 76).

In reconceptualizing decolonization, this literature has also entailed a re-engagement with anti-colonial thinkers, many of whom were quick to note the limitations of postcolonial independence. In a 1963 article for the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization, Mehdi Ben Barka wrote: "The time when the

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call for independence, pure and simple, was progressive is over. The only current revolutionary claim is the real, total and harmonious development of Africa" (Ben Barka 1999, 193). By revisiting the work of Ben Barka, Aimé Césaire, Kwame Nkrumah, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Frantz Fanon and others, scholars have found that the problem of overcoming "the implacable obstacle of colonial power" (Scott 1999, 202) generated discourses and debates concerned with the very terms of colonial humanism, political community, racial hierarchy, and global order (Getachew 2019; Bose 2019; George 2020; Younis 2022). Anti-colonial movements contested the meaning of freedom, development, rights, duty, and citizenship as part of a broader, global restructuring—even as these debates were inflected with local- and region-specific understandings and frameworks (Hunter 2015; Di-Capua 2018). As Pedro Monaville suggests, Congolese students during the 1960s approached decolonization "not as the deployment of an idea but as a struggle for and over meaning(s)" (2022, 17).

Even as the global turn has significantly revised our understanding of the term, these studies still tend to periodize decolonization in terms of an "age," between World War II and the mid-1970s, that has long been surpassed. If reconceptualized beyond a specific conjuncture, moment, or age, as a lasting, ongoing—even unfinished—process, what is decolonization? Jennifer Wenzel notes that "there's a lot to be gained in understanding decolonization not as *fait accompli*, but instead as an unfinished project, an unfulfilled promise, and perhaps even a utopian aspiration: something that would still be a good idea" (2017, 449). The concept of decolonization as an unfinished project provides a framework for studying the historically situated experience of postindependence unfreedom (Watson 2021). Numerous student and revolutionary movements throughout postindependence Africa developed spaces of anti-imperial knowledge production and political organization to counter conditions of authoritarian, single-party rule (Hendrickson 2022; Tolan-Szkilnik 2023; Bianchini, Sylla, and Zeilig 2024). These movements renewed anti-colonialism's contestation of being excluded from defining one's own political future (Jebari 2022).

Although the global turn has been pivotal to this revisionist understanding, it has retained a methodological focus on political elites and public intellectuals. This focus risks rendering some of the more complex dynamics and contradictory legacies of decolonization unexamined. For example, the expectation of revolution—a central organizing concept for postindependence anti-imperialism in particular—often entails a space of experience structured by clandestinity and secrecy. Recently, scholars have drawn attention to the connections between militant struggle and the militarism that followed independence in many parts of the African continent, and which was often carried out in the name of decolonization (Daly 2024; Mann 2024; see also Hagberg, this issue). Unlike diplomatic projects oriented around international politics of recognition, covert forms of organizing may draw from a wider range, or alternative set, of strategies, discourses, models, and scripts. The legacies of projects animated by the prospect of decolonization can be located in the altered social relations of former participants—and the archives of their

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movements. These less visible sites, spaces, and archives constitute what we call the underground of decolonization and they draw our attention to a wider range of participants in anti-colonial movements.

Most national liberation and revolutionary movements implicitly subscribed to the false idea that national liberation would undoubtedly lead to women's liberation and yet, women's roles and contributions were more often than not forgotten after independence. Although women have participated in all national liberation struggles and postindependent anti-authoritarian movements on the continent, public memory and historical research often overlook their overall significance. This resonates with Alice Wilson's (2019) remark that revolutionaries often experience their mobilization as times and spaces of liminality, or as the temporary cancellation of ordinary hierarchies.

Women's involvement in the Algerian anti-colonial struggle is particularly instructive in this regard. Historian and war veteran Danièle Djamila Hamrane-Minne sought to reinstitute Algerian women to their rightful place in nationalist historiography in her seminal books *La guerre d'Algérie* and *Femmes au combat*, featuring interviews of Algerian women who took part in the war of liberation. Her work details the experience of different women from the "nurse maquisarde" to the "Moujahida" or women fighters (Amrane 1994, 63 and 64). However, as Marnia Lazreg points out, the revolution often stood as the sole horizon for women's freedom: "Self-transformation through voluntary action for the national good was not brought up as an advantage for women in the movement. Rather, the abstract notion of 'freedom,' equated with entry in the war, was seen as the sum total of a presumed change in women's lives" (1994 [2018], 122). In a historical novel that draws on oral histories, Assia Djebar (1985) lamented how Algerian women were confronted with the reassertion of patriarchal traditions once the country was independent. As Wunyabari O. Maloba observes, "[a]vailable evidence from the African revolutionary movements … demonstrates that not all of them addressed questions of gender equality and women's liberation with rigor and consistency" (2007, 44). Gendering the underground of decolonization is as pressing a matter as exploring its structuring role on experiences of decolonization and on definitions of political power.

Postindependence, African political movements increasingly mobilized under the sign of revolution. Kwame Nkrumah argued that "[decolonization] becomes a reality only in a revolutionary framework" (in Getachew 2019, 17). Bianchini, Sylla, and Zeilig note that the strategy of armed struggle "became emblematic of the 1960s and 1970s" in response to the violence and repression of newly independent states (2024, 9). During this period, models of successful struggle—such as Cuba, China, and Algeria—also served as willing purveyors and sponsors of guerrilla tactics. In practice, however, the anti-imperial revolutionary horizon involved not only clear models, transnational networks, and international solidarity, but also a space of experience shaped profoundly by underground activity. Decolonization through revolution entailed political organization and strategy, as well as the production of cultural knowledge and the formation of social relations, carried out under conditions of clandestinity, concealment, and secrecy.

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Thinking with and from the underground

In its literal sense, the underground refers to what lies beneath the surface or is subterranean. In English, the earliest documented figurative use of the term dates back to the sixteenth century, where it denoted what is hidden or concealed (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Today, the term "underground" is often used to describe anti-establishment political and cultural activities. Consider, for instance, the philosopher and May '68 icon Omar Blondin Diop's definition of the underground. In a July 1968 letter to his parents in Dakar, he describes his London host, British filmmaker Simon Hartog, as "un metteur en scène de l'underground" (an underground film director). Diop first used the word "underground" as a noun, rather than an adjective, to denote its status as an alternative to mainstream cultural institutions. He then elaborates on this definition, using the term as an adjective to explain its scope:

> It is an English word that means both subterranean and clandestine. The underground movement emerged in the United States to fight against the ideology produced by advanced industrial societies. The underground has newspapers, movie theaters. There are underground records, underground painters and all these people fight against official and bourgeois culture through satire, provocation and even hoaxes. They are all under 30 and it is truly an extraordinary phenomenon. (2023, 131)

In addition to his description of the underground as an *alternative to mainstream* institutions, Diop defines the underground as an *aesthetics* derived from a nonconformist political posture. Anchored in the Euro-American context, his definition gestures towards the Beat generation–inspired youth counterculture of the 1960s. As Alfrun Kliems notes, "the English word underground implies an aesthetic designation. By the time the beatniks emerged in the United States, the term's connotations had associated it with youth subcultures." One consequence, Kliems explains, is the transformation of the term into a lexical borrowing in many languages of East-Central Europe "without necessarily developing identical or corresponding semantics, associations, or usages in each" (Kliems 2021, 8). Diop's description also resonates with Paul Clements's concept of the creative underground, which he defines as "cultural resistance through 'art' and creative sociocultural practices that oppose hegemony and 'systems' that preserve the status quo." He further notes that "in the main, the term refers to those outside cultural institution and art markets" (Clements 2017, 5, 12). In Clements's framework, the creative underground manifests through multiple dimensions, including counterculture, utopian visions, resistance, and everyday life.

Beyond lexical borrowings from English, however, the concept of the "underground" is present in many African languages and often carries similar connotations. While it can refer to a physical space beneath the earth, it can also evoke secrecy. In her work in Sierra Leone, Marianne Ferme notes that *ndo(l)owu* "[t]he Mende word for 'underground,'... points to the underneath of the visible world" (2001, 30). Interestingly, the term also points to the production and

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concealment of knowledge and therefore, as Ferme remarks, to "the possibility of unearthing a forgotten history" (2001, 30).

While Diop's depiction of the London cultural scene gives the impression of the underground as an emerging phenomenon at the time of his writing, the underground—both as a concept and a historical reality—is much older and can be applied to contexts beyond the cultural and political movements under study in this forum.[3]

The underground's forms and functions also vary by geographical location, cultural context and disciplinary tradition. Ann Komaromi (2012) describes Samizdat, arguably the most well-known form of underground literature during the Cold War, as time bound. She defines it as "a historically limited system of uncensored production and circulation of texts in the Soviet Union after Iosif Stalin and before perestroika" (2012, 72).

Although in a less strictly restrained timeframe, defining the underground of decolonization explored in this forum requires situating it in a specific historical context. While most essays focused on the second half of the twentieth century's revolutionary decolonization and its entanglement with socialist internationalism, anti-colonial nationalism, and the global student movement, a few contributors have stretched this period as far back as the interwar period (Seck, this issue) and as recently as the twenty-first century (Englert, this issue; Hagberg, this issue). However, movements, ideas, and aesthetics that once operated in secrecy do not always remain underground; some eventually become mainstream, while others fade away as shifting political contexts remove the need for clandestine organization. Though historically situated, then, the underground can also function as a transitional moment for a given movement. Robin J. Hayes's concept of the "diaspora underground" links African national liberation movements and the Black Power movements through the underground as a "transitional space-time" (Hayes 2021). When understood as a "space-time," the underground functions not only as a temporal condition but also as a historically situated mode of political and cultural work. Today, this "underground of decolonization" can serve as an archive of past forms of resistance and imagined futures (Seck 2023).

Beyond signifying covert political activity, a nonconformist stance, and alternative aesthetics, the underground can be approached as an analytical framework, shedding light on the very praxis, visions, and processes of decolonization. For instance, by working with and through the challenge posed by secrecy to archival retrieval, the essays in this forum show that examining decolonization from the underground invites underrepresented actors on the historical scene. Alongside widely studied intellectuals and political figures, the essays in this forum navigate through the decolonizing work and dreams of ordinary people, youth, artists, mothers, wives, and students.

These people point to the ways in which the underground of decolonization has contributed to redefining societal norms and fashioning of new selves. As the essays in this volume suggest, the underground should be examined from multiple disciplinary perspectives to illuminate the many ways it permeated the political, cultural, and social fabric of life in Africa during the period under study.

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Writing about periodicals of the "revolutionary papers project," Ahmad, Benson, and Morgenstern tell us that "these journals force us to be sensitive to the plurality of lefts and anti-colonialisms imagined in response to power, even as they reveal a surprising consistency in ideas of the revolutionary across the global south" (2024, 1 and 23). Indeed, examining underground networks makes visible the movement of ideas through the people and texts that carry and disseminate them. In several contributions, the underground functions as a site of knowledge production and self-fashioning that involves communities that extend beyond the nation-state and redefine its boundaries through the creation of networks designed to evade scrutiny.

Our intervention is timely due to the resurgence of underground forms of resistance in the current global context. Contemporary underground movements in Africa do not always strive for democracy and are not always reactivations of struggles for freedom and more equality. A striking example is the emergence of the jihadist group Boko Haram. Initially an Islamist sect, Boko Haram became a full-fledged terrorist organization following a series of violent clashes with Nigerian police forces that left hundreds of its members dead—including its leader, Mohammed Yusuf—and led the surviving members to flee the country and go underground (Comolli 2015, 111). Crucially, the group's decision to go underground enabled its survival and eventual transformation. In 2010, Boko Haram resurfaced, better armed and skilled, and operating under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau, Yusuf's former deputy. As Virginia Comolli observes, this moment marked the real beginning of the movement. Between 2009 and 2010, surviving members received training in weapons and tactics from militant groups in Mali, Libya, and Sudan (Comolli 2015). This underground phase acted as an incubator, allowing Boko Haram to reemerge more organized and to expand its operations both regionally and internationally.

In other instances, new formations reference and draw upon earlier iterations for inspiration, suggesting that the underground provides a historical model of sorts for preserving and producing uncensored knowledge. Aglaé Achechova (2024, 129) notes the emergence of a "new Tamizdat" following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Loosely translated as "published there," Tamizdat, like Samizdat, refers to unofficial literature or texts that may be deemed seditious. Unlike Samizdat, which translates as "self-published" and was published within the Soviet Union during the Cold War, Tamizdat was published outside the Soviet Union. Through its recycling of older, Soviet publishing terminology for the contemporary Russian/Ukrainian conflict, the new Tamizdat shows the underground's capacity to reemerge as a response to political turmoil. In a period of sudden political change in the USA where masked federal agents detain activists, immigrants, and students on the basis of their political views, the robust undergrounds described in this issue may resonate with contemporary cultural and political responses to authoritarianism in the USA. The underground could not be a more salient object of study.

Our call to engage with the political and cultural undergrounds of decolonization is also urgent. Actors involved in these movements during the second half of the twentieth century are aging, and many have passed away. Following the fiftieth anniversaries of landmark political events such as May '68, the Zanzibar

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revolution, the Ethiopian Revolution, and so on, the urgency to remember and document these experiences in light of the contemporary threats to democracy on the continent have triggered a renewed interest in these events and their actors who come to represent, as Salem has observed, "a time during which alternative futures were imagined as possible" (2024, 337). Memoirs, documentaries, YouTube interviews, podcasts, and websites and digitized periodicals and pamphlets have proliferated in the last decade.

Studies about decolonization in Africa have explored underground political movements, covert operations and networks, clandestine political parties and organizations, as well as strategies of resistance and opposition to imperial, hegemonic, and authoritarian contexts. For instance, the protracted anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa has been a fertile site for underground political activities as evidenced in testimonies of recruits of *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK) and the African National Congress (ANC) (Gunn and Haricharan 2019). The anti-apartheid struggle has also been a fertile site for examining the role of the alternative or underground press in expanding free speech (Tomaselli and Louw 1991; Switzer 1997; Switzer and Adikhari 2000). The underground press has also been explored in studies about Nigeria during the military regimes of Ibrahim Babaginda (1985–93) and Sani Abacha (1993–98) (Olukotun 2004). Tracing conceptualizations of US imperialism in Ethiopian revolutionary papers, Amsale Alemu (2024, 177) uses the term "clandestine" rather than "underground" not only "as a descriptive" and an "archival designation" but also "as an analytic," noting that "the clandestine was not only the condition of their production but also the conspiracy of alleging heretical propositions" (2024, 176). In the essays of this forum, the term clandestine is often used interchangeably with "underground." However, a subtle and discipline-specific distinction can sometimes be made, especially in the cultural realm (see Seck, this issue).

Beyond left-wing inspired revolutionary movements, other forms of anti-colonial armed resistance, such as the Mau Mau against British colonial rule in Kenya, exhibited characteristics of the underground in their use of secrecy to carry out their rebellion. A popular case for studying secrecy, politics, and anti-colonial armed resistance in Africa, the Mau Mau's use of secrecy resonates with the underground not only as a physical space such as the forest where fighters took refuge, but as a political, social, and cultural force shaped by a distinct "moral logic" that defined its struggle (Mbunga 2024, 2). Through the oath ritual among Kikuyu and non-Kikuyu communities, the Mau Mau were described as fostering community, commitment, and allegiance, which imbued the secret organization with characteristics of a nationalist movement (Koster 2016).

However, the secrecy implied in the idea of the underground is co-constitutive with strategies of intentional visibility for subversive purposes. It is indeed "a game of hide and seek that employs concealment and revelation, camouflage and disclosure, coding and aggressive decoding, with purposeful awareness" (Kliems 2021, 11–12).

An example of underground resistance that pervaded revolutionary imaginaries of decolonization was the Algerian war of independence fought against France from 1954 to 1962 by the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) and its

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armed branch Armée de Libération Nationale (ALN). The FLN's strategies were inspired by the clandestine group Organisation Spéciale (OS) (Arezki 2023). Both the FLN and ALN were created as underground organizations and it is well known that part of their urban guerilla strategies as well as the French's counterinsurgency methods represented in Gillo Pontecorvo's historic film, *The Battle of Algiers*, were used by other armed movements as a guidebook and screened at the Pentagon in 2003 in light of the US invasion in Iraq. Of importance is the fact that the film was of interest to groups and institutions as different as the Black Panthers, the Irish Republican Army, and the Pentagon precisely because it brings to light the underground tactics that were deployed by the FLN during the war. In this context, the underground once again serves as a site of knowledge production whose representations are taken up as a training tool.

In his historical study about the underground Sawaba movement of Niger, Klaas van Walraven has pointed to the importance of emphasizing a history of the quotidian and of the people in African historiography. He maintains that narratives of decolonization have tended to focus on nationalist elite leaders with little attention to the "project of social transformation" carried out by non-elite and understudied actors. He sees such actors as "eyewitnesses" who had the potential to open space for a reinterpretation of that historical moment of Niger's history (van Walraven 2013, 6). If understudied underground movements carry the potential for reinterpretation, and for foregrounding these actors and their projects, we should pay close attention not only to these eyewitnesses and what they can contribute but also to the underground as a framework through which to understand such potential reinterpretation. The underground as a tactical use of secrecy also makes possible the creation of transnational networks that could serve as spaces of contestation for exiled diasporic communities. For instance, in his examination of the newspaper *Free Zanzibar Voice* Nathaniel Matthews (2024) explains how exiled Zanzibaris of the 1964 revolution crafted a narrative of decolonization that opposes the dominant history of the winning party.

Further from the historical context under study in this forum, others have reflected on underground hip hop scenes in Africa, considering their links with a "global underground" (Appert 2018), their references to anticolonial movements as sources of inspiration (Peck 2018), and the role of different forms of protest in underground hip hop culture in the struggle for democracy in Africa (Clark 2018, 71–117). Far from an exhaustive account of uses of the underground in African studies, these scattered examples point to the fact that the underground, whether specifically named as such by historical actors or examined through such a lens by scholars, nonetheless manifests itself in the historiography of decolonization movements through its most common features—secrecy in political movements, and alternative aesthetics of nonconformity to normative, and dominant systems.

However, within African studies, the underground as an analytical framework rather than a descriptive term remains underexplored. The essays in this forum address the knowledge gap by examining the underground's role in shaping cultural and political movements of decolonization in Africa and its diaspora in Europe and Latin America. Contributors demonstrate how the underground

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reshapes, expands, and challenges our understanding of decolonization both as a historical period and as an ongoing process while pointing to the need for new research methods to access the archives of the underground.

Archives of the African underground

If we understand decolonization as a process rather than an already completed event, then where do we locate its archives if the process is not necessarily over and if we want to draw attention to nonelite actors? More critically, decolonization is a process that has not infrequently entailed a slide toward single party and undemocratic rule as well as the perpetuation of neocolonial economic structures by postcolonial governments at odds with the politics of emancipation and social justice espoused by many of their critics. Where do we locate the archives of decolonization if postcolonial states have had little interest in preserving record of or providing access to evidence of their political mistakes and repression?

Historians of Africa have long grappled with how to conceptualize "the archive." In some cases, they sought ways to write pre-colonial histories without documents, particularly in regions that lacked significant written sources until the colonial period. However, most of their concerns coalesced around the colonial archive and the necessity of recognizing its biases, omissions, and erasures (Mbembe 2002; Hamilton et al. 2002).[4] Today, when read critically with their complexities acknowledged, colonial archives are still considered useful, particularly when complemented with alternative sources. Recognizing the limitations and fallibility of these archives has led to significant methodological innovation among historians of Africa. Scholars have turned to alternative sources such as oral history, ethnographic fieldwork, material remains, music, locally produced literature, and linguistic data. These sources, though subject to critical analysis, provide valuable insights into Africans' experiences of the past (Falola and Jennings, 2003).

And, yet, it is "unlikely," according to Stephen Ellis, that "historians seeking to write the history of Africa since independence will enjoy the same quality of documents as their colleagues studying the colonial period" (Ellis 2002, 12). In many postcolonial contexts, researchers find that not only are state archives incomplete, badly organized, and poorly maintained, but they often are also impossible to access due to politics of censorship, intentional vandalism, or simply neglect (Mir 2015; El Shakry 2015; Ellis 2002; White 2015). Indeed, as Farina Mir underlines, "questions of what to archive, and where, became ever more complicated in the context of decolonization" (2015, 847–48).

Those researching underground movements must inevitably confront questions of state power, suppression, and fragility, as it is often the state that creates the conditions necessitating clandestine activity. State archives shaped by concerns over maintaining authority reflect these dynamics. In postcolonial Africa, leaders frequently prioritized national unity in the public sphere, making access to counterhegemonic discourses and the struggles of ordinary Africans difficult. Postcolonial state archives can thus downplay opposition and state

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violence while simultaneously exaggerating the state's ability to monitor and control dissent.

Even as states cannot avoid the creation of archives, they remain acutely aware that archives can threaten their legitimacy and legacy (Mbembe 2002, 23). In postcolonial contexts, Brahim El Guabli observes that "documentation is scarcer the closer its relation to the present time indicat[ing] that, in the minds of state agents, archival evidence was tantamount to future accountability" (El Guabli 2022, 310). Achille Mbembe has accused postcolonial states of *chronophagy*, or eating up time/ravaging the archives to destroy traces of a troubled and uncomfortable and damning past (Mbembe 2002, 23). For instance, in its final years, the South African apartheid state deliberately destroyed archives to hide atrocities committed by the secret police (Dlamini 2020). Similarly, Morocco's government erased traces of its violence during "the Years of Lead" of the 1960s through the 1980s (El Guabli 2023). Recently in Mauritania, photographs circulated on social media showing bales of newspapers and government documents sold by the kilo in Nouakchott's streets. As one citizen wrote, "Memory in the [trash] heap .... Old newspapers and archives, once witnesses to the history of Mauritania, are now exchanged for a few MRU [local currency], ending up as packaging or protective materials in sheet metal and paint workshops" (Ahmed Mahmoud Jemal Ahmedou, *Facebook*, November 10, 2024). Contrary to what one might expect, it is not as if the postcolonial archives are any less complicated than those of colonialism. Official state archives—be they colonial or postcolonial—still have the state and its interests to credit or blame for their silences, creation, organization, and (in)accessibility.

This special issue seeks, in part, to identify the archives of the underground in Africa. In some cases, these may include the fragmented and inconsistent holdings of postcolonial state archives, which scholars of decolonization have described as "hodgepodge," "messy," and "scattered" (Ahmad 2023; White 2015; Straussberger 2015; Elkins in Mir 2015; Ochonu 2015; Daly 2017). As demonstrated in the articles within this issue, anti-colonial and decolonial activists went to great lengths—often sacrificing education, livelihoods, personal safety, and family stability—to keep their activities invisible to state authorities. It is thus unsurprising that state archives contain gaps and blind spots regarding underground movements.

For those studying political clandestinity, the absence of documents is a recurrent challenge. As the authors of *Revolutionary Movements in Africa* describe in their introduction, despite the fact that "an important part of all militant activity is the dissemination of pamphlets or leaflets ... pamphlets and leaflets no longer exist for various reasons: because of the fear of repression (during the revolutionary years those found in possession of these materials could be detained in police custody and sent to jail), together with the harshness of the climate and also the 'gnawing critique of mice' ... and termites" (Bianchini, Sylla, and Zeilig 2024, 2). "Archival retrieval," as Mahvish Ahmad asserts, is endlessly complicated in the case of the underground in that texts produced by members of underground political movements—documents she calls "movement texts"—were produced with the explicit goal of being clandestinely produced, shared, and read (2023, 55). They were not supposed to end up in the hands of state

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agents. Ideally, propaganda, instructions, explanations, notifications, observations, and reports were ephemeral in nature—and, thus, either written in ways that made their material form disposable, or not written down at all. The questions, then, might be where do we find the archives of the underground if state archives are both problematic and fragmentary? Where do we find an archive of what was never supposed to have been seen and scrutinized, much less amassed in one place? But, more broadly, what do the archives of the underground tell us about decolonization in Africa?

For all of the reasons above, historians of Africa have long understood the absence of traditional historical sources and the problematization of official state archives as an opening for inventive methodological approaches. As such, the conclusion that variant forms of preservation and memory-making exist and that these sources provide an alternative to state archives is not new. Scholars have focused on how African communities create and preserve history through embodied, oral, or material means. Sometimes labeled "hidden histories" (Barber 2006), "street archives" (Callaci 2017; Hendrickson 2017; Drury 2022) or, more recently, "other archives" (El Guabli 2023) in the study of contemporary Africa, these oral, architectural, musical, and, yes, textual sources are understood to provide not only substitutes for but also rich evidence of urban life, youth and popular culture, social realities, and political opposition. In this sense, in addition to locating and identifying the archives of the underground, this special issue also speaks to how we can use these archives to redefine decolonization both in terms of periodization but also in terms of its actors. A pivot away from official state archives brings in sources produced by, for, or about ordinary people—nonelite men and women, primary school students, public school teachers, rural inhabitants, laborers, artists, parents, siblings, and informal sector employees. Sympathetic fathers who might have stashed away pamphlets, dissidents who used poetry as a form of political expression, primary school students calling attention to the conditions in their schools, mothers who brought their imprisoned children food and clean clothes, and union members who organized protests are accorded more weight in these "movement texts" and oral histories. In the process, scholars are privy to the struggles of ordinary people during extraordinary times—water shortages during severe drought, violence against working-class protestors, sexualized violence against girls, or insufficient stipends for university students.

This special issue's essays offer nimble and creative methodological approaches that encourage us to work with, rather than against, secrecy, as Greg Childs (2015) has suggested. Such an approach includes mining personal libraries, parsing through self-censored testimonies, the close analysis of iconography, songs, and coded language, the convening of webinars as well as reflecting on how the materiality of redacted and termite-damaged documents illuminate a phenomenological account of life in the underground. Texts in the form of pamphlets, periodicals, posters, and petitions that signal the existence of political opposition were designed to be ephemeral. Nonetheless, as demonstrated by some of our contributors, some underground movements explicitly operated in plain sight. Oral history, whether through interviews or group webinars, and participant observation have, in particular, revealed these

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tensions between what was known and unknown (Englert, this issue; Hagberg, this issue). Several of our authors rely on oral history interviews, well aware of the fallibility of human memory and emotion.

Eugénie Rokhaya Aw, a member of clandestine left-wing political organizations in the 1970s in Senegal under Senghor's single party rule, miscarried a baby while in detention. Reflecting on these years of revolutionary politics in post-independence Senegal, she recounted in an interview shortly before she passed away in 2022: "Militancy tore families apart. ... Sometimes the children block the writing of this story because they have suffered from the involvement themselves. And as soon as we try to talk about it, there's an immediate outcry" (Bobin and Sylla 2023, 10). Aw points out that the access to stories of life in the underground is gendered and that women often bear the burden of secrecy even when they are no longer involved in clandestine activities. Aw's interview is, to this date, one of the rare direct accounts of a Senegalese woman's experience of life in the underground.

As Bianchini has argued, interviews can provide "an inside view of the revolutionary atmosphere and a deeper understanding of the practice and networks of activists" (2025, 171). Deciding what remains invisible and what becomes public, as Nugent explores, "is a highly contested political process" (2010, 699), a process which has much to say about the configuration of social order in a specific context. In Birgit Englert's example from South Africa, the visible travel to and daily lives of white anti-apartheid activists in the country was only possible because of the racialized social order there, where their whiteness served as a cover for their clandestine political activities. In Mauritania, leftist activists chose to hide their copywriting activities in the minaret of the capital city's principal mosque, using the central and elevated sacred space as a cover as they hammered away on the typewriter messages calling for the overthrow of the government (Drury and Pettigrew, this issue).

Some documents have been preserved in the archives of former colonial metropoles such as the French diplomatic archives in Nantes (Drury and Pettigrew, this issue). This preservation underscores both the transnational nature of activism and the enduring political and economic continuities between colonial and postcolonial states. These archives demonstrate the persistence of colonial structures and networks, revealing the blurred line between colonial rule and the postcolonial period (Straussberger 2015). What Ann Stoler (2013) sees as the "ruins" or "debris" of colonialism, Sara Salem (2019) evokes as a "haunting" of coloniality in the postcolonial period. These lingering shadows of colonialism can be found when one follows the grooves or trodden paths that remain between the colonial and formerly postcolonial periods in search of the archives of the underground. These archives reveal the persistence of educational, economic, and political relationships as these grooves directed in part activists' life trajectories.

As the articles in this special issue illustrate, poetry, song, dress, graffiti, memoirs, oral history, photography, self-published literature, street signs, and buildings can serve as remnants of cultural, social, and political pasts. Soviet historians have labeled such sources "counter-archives" (Smola, Kukulin, and Bachmaier 2024); that is, forms and remains of counterhegemonic politics of

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resistance. The underground archives of decolonization are all of these—hidden, street, other, counter—but they are also "aspiration archives" in that they provide us with a sense of how political activists thought about the way to provoke radical social and political change. Jacob Dlamini, in writing about a secret service album that escaped destruction by the apartheid state in South Africa, sees in such remnants "a collective portrait of hope and idealism" (2020, 18) since the album's contents are constituted of mugshots of opponents to apartheid. Inspired by this phrasing, we argue that the fragmented yet rich sources drawn on here also constitute what Sara Salem has described as "a memory of hope in the past" (2024, 322). As such, these aspiration archives document the optimism, ambitions, and beliefs of political activists and their sympathizers. They give us a sense of what activists identified as the quotidian struggles of ordinary people—limited access to education and health care, food, and electricity shortages, drought, inflation, patriarchal limits on women's family and social lives, minority rule, freedom of expression—and of the strategies they deployed to bring about a radical transformation of these realities. Aspiration archives are also evidence of guerilla tactics, organizational discipline, militarized plans, intellectual reading circles, fervent gatherings, and idealistic educational and protest campaigns. In many cases, they attest to "a population not yet destroyed by apathy and despair" (Salih 2017, 16) whose members might describe these projects today as "stillborn" (Selim, in Salih 2017, ix) in that, more often than not, they remain unfinished and/or suspended. Oral histories and memoirs substantiate this vision of an unrealized dream. Imperfect in their personalization and amplification or stifling of some voices, they nonetheless project an immense nostalgia for a moment of shared expectation and hope.

The archives used by the authors in this special issue help identify two distinct but interconnected kinds of undergrounds—the political and the cultural—whose "texts" tell us about the movement of ideas but also political and artistic practice and form (Drury and Pettigrew, this issue; Seck 2023; Seck, this issue). As Elleni Centime Zeleke writes, "the archive of revolutionary thought in Africa teach[es] us about the practice of critical theory" (2019, 1). This echoes Ahmad, Benson, and Morgenstern's assertion that we should understand revolutionary texts "as method rather than (merely) as source," as "tools of worldmaking" (2024, 8). These archives, then, reveal and follow transnational networks. They are guides to political practice, are critical of the inevitability of the nation-state, and are signs of how activists thought about the past and the future and the best way to bring about social transformation. But they are also, crucially, the actual implementation of alternative epistemologies of power, the state, political organization, nonelite political and cultural actors, and artistic expression. Drawing on Andrew Apter's (1992) engagement with the "hermeneutics of power" among secret societies in contemporary Yoruba society, the archives of the underground can make evident the ways power relations are structured, legitimized, and understood. Instead of the underground archive constituting an obstacle to our own knowledge production as researchers, these archives are also a key component to understanding decolonization, its logics, and its strategies.

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Our forum

This forum presents six articles that examine political and cultural manifestations of decolonization and the underground in various parts of Africa, as well as their connections to other regions of the world. Looking at movements and processes, rather than defining decolonization by a specific age, period, or set of events, foregrounds the question of what is being decolonized, rather than when and where. Two examples from this issue illustrate the relevance of decolonization as a lens for making sense of postindependence African political projects up to and including the present. **Birgit Englert** offers a methodological intervention in her consideration of the experiences of white non-South African anti-apartheid activists who used their whiteness as a cover for solidarity missions in 1960s and 1970s South Africa. Pairing activist autobiographical writing published in the intervening years with webinars conducted with some of these activists during the COVID-19 pandemic, Englert sees the webinar as an effective space to "overcome the burden of secrecy" for these activists who operated clandestinely while living and travelling openly in the apartheid state. Not only did the webinars allow for a multivocal and dynamic discussion of these activists' past lives (for example, they were more inclusive of women's voices), they also served as a collective passing of memories to a new generation of South Africans. White non-South Africans who undertook clandestine missions in the struggle against apartheid demonstrate the enduring significance of internationalist commitments in countering racial hierarchies.

Meanwhile, **Sten Hagberg** describes the background and ongoing presence of the Parti communist révolutionnaire voltaïque (PCRV), a clandestine movement that for decades has critiqued Burkina Faso's social and political status through an anti-imperialist lens. The PCRV's insistence that Burkina Faso has never gained independence continues to underpin the party's decades-long commitment to revolutionary process and underground political practices. Hegberg argues that by publishing Marxist materials, organizing reading groups, participating in protests, and maintaining connections with groups in civil society, the PCRV's "underground practices" galvanize and sustain the movement's commitment to revolutionary practice while amplifying its absent presence in Burkina Faso's public sphere. These two examples foreground two recurring features of projects of decolonization: transnational solidarity, on the one hand, and the underground as a site of anti-imperial resistance, on the other.

As epitomized by the Rhodes Must Fall movement at University of Cape Town a decade ago, anti-imperial forms of knowledge are particularly important to processes of decolonization (Nyamnjoh 2016). And given that these projects often operate under conditions of violence and repression (Ahmad 2023), the concealment, recuperation, and retransmission of this knowledge is often bound up with processes of production, distribution, and reception. Two of this issue's authors show the role of literature in sustaining and renewing anti-imperial relations. **C. Darius Gordon** explores the role of poetry as a vehicle for anti-colonial and international solidarity among Portuguese-speaking writers and activists by tracing the contour of a "Black diasporic cultural underground." Following Brazilian activists in support of independence movements in the

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Portuguese colonies and their reception of the 1958 *Anthology of Black Poetry in Portuguese*, edited by Angolan poet and political leader Mário Pinto de Andrade, Gordon describes an emergent geography and language of Black anticolonialism. As **Fatoumata Seck** argues, the recuperation of Lamine Senghor's interwar writing by the Front culturel sénégalais (FCS) points to the resilient legacies of certain forms of anti-imperialist intellection and imagination. Here, Seck investigates the material history of Lamine Senghor's *La Violation d'un pays* (1927) by tracing its underground republication in 1979 by the Maoist-oriented cultural movement, the FCS, and its members within the African student movement in France. She argues that the FCS's attempt to connect this understudied historical figure to its political project through underground networks and publishing, while giving new life to Senghor's work, had limited success in fully incorporating his name and writings into national history.

Attention to both the cultural and political aspects of decolonization provides a framework for considering the wide range of what Susan Slyomovics terms "innovative structures" that emerge from the varied trajectories of unfinished, interrupted, and ongoing struggles against colonial power (Slyomovics 2024). These structures may take the form of Leninist, vanguardist political organization and strategy, such as the revolutionary African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC). Revisiting the aborted clandestine guerrilla operation in Cabo Verde carried out by Cuban-trained PAIGC members, **Desmond Fonseca** explores how the underground's role in shaping the PAIGC's ideology and organizing strategies resonates with the Leninist model of the revolutionary party and structured the party's logic from its inception. From the infiltration of Cabo Verde labor unions to guerrilla training in Cuba, the vanguardist party's commitment to revolutionary armed struggle entailed a shifting series of clandestine tactics. In detailing the PAIGC's unfulfilled plans for a transatlantic guerrilla operation, Fonseca underlines how transnational relations both sustained underground preparations and foreclosed the "futures past" of certain revolutionary projects.

In their article, **Mark Drury and Erin Pettigrew** situate Mauritania within transregional politics of anti-imperialism while also showing the specificities of political contestation and social change in the country during the late 1960s and early 1970s. As an anthropological history of an underground political opposition movement called the Kadehine, the article develops a concept from a specific perspective afforded by its sources (largely interviews and movement literature). These sources emphasize the importance and practice of clandestinity, as well as the influence of New Left ideas. In the case of the Kadehine, the legacy of these decolonization movements may lie both in their ability to open the horizon of possibility for social transformation, and in their commitment to a politics of concealment, derived from and rooted in underground activism and organization.

Our contributors reflect on several questions that bring into focus the epistemic, political, and aesthetic contributions of the underground. Underground activity, by necessity, deploys strategies of evasion—avoiding surveillance, repression, and direct confrontation—which, paradoxically, makes the architecture of state control more visible. As is evident in Englert's contribution

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in this issue, the covert tactics illuminate both the presence and the limits of state power, revealing cracks in robust systems of control such as the apartheid regime.

Interestingly, censorship becomes less prominent in successful underground operations not because it is absent, but because such movements often operate beneath its radar. As Gordon observes in this issue, when subversive content is encoded in poetry, for example, it becomes harder to police than overt political tracts or pamphlets. Yet, as Seck (also this issue) argues, the very tactics that allow underground movements to survive and resist (secrecy, concealment, minimal trace) can also contribute to their historical marginalization. The underground thus occupies a contradictory space: it challenges dominant structures but does so through strategies that risk erasure and silence in the historical record.

Underground political activism and political diplomacy make up two possible —and sometimes complementary—approaches to achieving liberation from imperial rule and its "debris." Underground movements can engage in protests, sabotage, and armed resistance that directly undermine administrative control and disrupt the ability of colonial and postcolonial states to govern (see Fonseca, this issue). Because underground activism operates in secrecy, it can bypass and defy the laws and repressive measures of the state. This enables actions that would be illegal or swiftly suppressed if conducted openly. Diplomacy, by its nature, often works within existing power structures and through compromise, thus it has not always had the leverage to force truly revolutionary change, at least not on the timeline requested by activists. And, as Drury and Pettigrew highlight, while underground movements can also be prone to internal divisions, the shared risk and common enemy can sometimes forge stronger bonds and a more unified front among diverse groups than what might be achieved through formal, public, diplomatic negotiations.

The studies in this issue draw attention to decolonization through counter-hegemonic cultural and political projects defined in opposition to colonial and imperial power (see Ahmad, Benson, and Morgenstern 2024). Whether articulated as resistance to neocolonialism or apartheid, as expressions of Black diasporic or international solidarity, through the recuperation of past anti-imperialist intellection, or as an ongoing revolutionary process, the projects of decolonization are the work of those mobilizing against forms of militarism, authoritarianism, and dispossession enabled by imperial structures of power. Across a range of temporal and geopolitical contexts, contributors describe the commitments, tactics, imaginaries, spaces, and organizational forms that have sustained—and constrained—projects of decolonization. Through historical, literary, and ethnographic lines of inquiry, these studies engage with current and former members of anti-imperial movements, and the aspirational archives that these movements produced. Identifying sites of knowledge production, political practices and processes of subject formation, this forum is based on research conducted, with and through conditions of secrecy to make legible an enduring connection between decolonization as a horizon of expectation and the cultural and political underground.

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Notes

1. For various reasons, not all of those scholars who participated in the three-part panel series sought to publish their research in this special issue of the *African Studies Review*. Some of them already had publications in the pipeline (Matthews 2024; Alemu 2024; Mbunga 2024) whose arguments we found helpful when writing this introduction and in articulating the contributions we hope this special issue can make to the study of decolonization and the archives of the underground in Africa.
2. https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/02/15/transnational-repression-rwanda; ecdhr.org/cyber-surveillance-in-the-united-arab-emirates-updated-assessment/; https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/03/morocco-western-sahara-activist-nso-pegasus/
3. It can encompass cases as different as underground Islamic movements that opposed the slave trade in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Senegambia, as explored by Boubacar Barry (1998), or the literary underground of eighteenth-century France, described by Robert Darnton (1982).
4. If the colonial archives were necessarily a reflection of European colonial power and its proclivity to focus on how to manage subject populations, historians interrogated the colonial production of knowledge about Africa. They questioned whether these archives could reveal anything beyond Western thought and its construction of African societies to assert authority over them (Mudimbe 1988; Stoler 2008; Trouillot 1995). The colonial archives had to be read against and along the grain to discern structures of colonial power and thought while identifying their inaccuracies, oversights, and silences regarding African societies (Gordon 2019).

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Cite this article: Drury, M., E. Pettigrew, and F. Seck. 2025. "Decolonization and the Underground in Africa." *African Studies Review* **68** (3): 450–471. https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2025.10072

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2025.10072 Published online by Cambridge University Press