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ABSTRACT

Government paper: the negotiated production and life of state documents

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Abstract

This introduction provides the rationale for a fresh look at an apparently obvious phenomenon – the production and life of state documents. Whilst ethnographies of statehood have multiplied in recent years, we focus on an underexplored avenue of inquiry: the role played by pieces of paper in constituting modern bureaucratic states. To date, attempts to map out this area of study have focused predominantly on the discourse and semiotics of state documentation. Our work goes further, discussing not just what is on such paper but also its shifting materiality, meaning and social significance throughout its production, circulation and preservation or destruction. These discussions deepen our understanding of statehood, sovereignty and power across Africa, with our part special issue drawing particularly on research in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and Zimbabwe.

Documents in the study of contemporary Africa

This introduction explains the rationale for a fresh look at an apparently obvious phenomenon, the production and life of state documents, situating the contributions in this part special issue within the wider theoretical context of the study of statehood, sovereignty and power.[1] Our interest in the topic emerged from our recent research on policing in South Africa and Nigeria. In these countries, we both separately found that people sought crime dockets from the state despite their doubts that the police would fulfil either their investigative or their protective function (Cooper-Knock and Owen 2015). We realised that to understand such apparently contradictory practices, we needed to take seriously the police's bureaucratic power as scribes of the official record on crime and explore how those records were used in the negotiation of everyday life (Cooper-Knock and Owen 2015).

In recent years, ethnographies of the state – studies which take the apparently natural objects of everyday bureaucracies and de-naturalise them the better to understand their true nature – have multiplied. Landmark work by Gupta (1995) and contemporaries such as Roitman (2005) outlined the meaning-

making contours of the publics' interaction with the state. Academic attention has subsequently moved inside the offices of functionaries, to explore what public service providers make of the world and how they structure it through practice. By examining people of the state and their practices, these studies acknowledge the central role that state officials play in bringing the state into being. However, to focus on people alone is to risk falling into Radcliffe-Brown's (1940) trap of arguing that the state is no more than the people who constitute it. We must ensure that our understanding of state people is not pursued at the expense of understanding other ideas about state practices and state artefacts. Our work focuses on one of these underexplored avenues of inquiry, analysing the central and powerful role played by pieces of paper in constituting modern bureaucratic states, their meaning, and their power.

Within the burgeoning literature on statehood, documents have been recognised as an important "language of stateness" (Hansen and Stepputat 2001). State practices often "become formal or official to the extent that they are documented" (Freeman and Maybin 2011, 2). Archived or in circulation, these documents can act as a locus of state authority to be utilised and contested in people's daily lives. To date, attempts to map out this area of study have focused predominantly on the discourse and semiotics of state documentation. Undoubtedly, this represents an important part of "the relationship between people and papers" (Tarlo 2001, 87) but it by no means fully captures the processes at play nor does it account for their ongoing importance.

In this article, we broaden the analytical lens to explore the negotiated production and use of state documents in their fuller context. We start from the premise that state documents are not just "conduits" of information but have the power to forge, reinforce, mark, or destroy the foundations of varied social, political, economic or cultural "worlds" (Brown and Duguid 1991; Höhn 2013, 112). In doing so, we acknowledge the "inter-calibration of the biographies of persons and things" (Appadurai 1986, 22) and draw together some of the most insightful ethnographic studies on documentation to expand the theoretical framework and agenda for this important area of study in the context of African Studies.

Certificates, notices, official letters, reports, receipts, passports, ID cards, statistics, summaries, circulars; written or printed on paper with letterheads, water-marks, stamps, signatures, carbon copies; compiled in brown envelopes, white envelopes, manila files, exercise books, bundles of forms; stored mouldering in heaps, pristine in suitcases under beds, stacked in in-trays, well-thumbed and damp in jacket pockets, oil-stained and elastic-banded in vehicle glove-boxes, remitted once a year to distant headquarters, confiscated by policemen, destroyed in fires, accidental or deliberate: documents are perhaps the ultimate self-naturalising object, so intrinsic to modern life and our interaction with the public and official realms that they easily slide under our analytical radar.

Currently, the scholars who have acknowledged their analytical significance tend to be either historians, who are keenly aware of the means by which their documentary evidence is created and preserved, or anthropologists, who are interested in re-appraising the apparently natural as part of an exploration of governmentality (Evans 1997; Darling 2014; Graeber 2015; Hull 2012). This part special issue builds upon these disciplinary leads to analyse the ordinary and extraordinary nature and role of state documents in the micro-politics of everyday life in Africa. To contextualise this exploration, let us first consider the potential particularities of analysing state documents on the African continent.

Firstly, the developmental context is significant. Although important differences exist within and between states, many bureaucracies in the continent are characterised by relatively low levels of technology, where paperwork is still the primary mode of recording data, and much of that recording is done by hand. This paperwork is a more fixed means of indexing information than alternative oral or digital processes, but it is also subject to constraints on reproduction and transmission, and delicate in the hands of people and climate. These particularities have significant implications for the ways in which state documents are understood, handled, and deployed, as we shall explore below. We term processes of documentary production, circulation and preservation the "political economy" of paperwork because these factors deal with its abundance, scarcity and control. Akhil Gupta engages extensively with state writing as a component of structural violence and an accomplice to bureaucratic indifference in his 2012 book, *Red Tape*. His starting point is that "Writing, in the form of both narratives and statistics, creates certain representations of the state that are powerful not only because government writing is ubiquitous but also because writing is a prime modality of engaging the state" (36). For Gupta, that leads to considerations of how differently accessible the state is to those with differing levels of literacy. Or, the present authors might add, how legible it is, and how navigable its procedures without employing intermediaries or trusting state functionaries who themselves become more powerful in the process.[2]

Literacy is certainly an important issue in the African context. In a context of mass literacy, documents are more or less equally legible to all. The power of documents is very different in a context of limited literacy, where they may often be possessed by – or have mastery over – people who are without power to know what they actually say. It is worth noting here that we view literacy as a continuous rather than a discrete variable. UNESCO estimates that thirty-eight percent of adults in Africa are illiterate.[3] Their definition, however, is a minimal one. UNESCO defines literacy as follows: "A person is literate who can, with understanding, both read and write a short statement on his or her everyday life."[4] This may, for practical purposes, be quite unequal to the task of decoding the language and meaning of official documents, which are often written in technical or archaic vocabulary. Such struggles are compounded by Africa's post-colonial linguistic context: in all countries except

Ethiopia, Eritrea, Tanzania, South Africa and Arabic-speaking North Africa the literacy bar intersects with a language bar because the official language of state documents are the languages of former colonial powers and not the predominant everyday languages of most citizens.[5] In Northern Nigeria, as Emir Sanusi of Kano pointed out, it is not uncommon to find a person who is literate and fluent in Arabic being classed as illiterate while one with below the UNESCO-defined level of competence in English may be classed as literate, due to the colonial re-inscribing of traditions of official literacy.[6] Even where the state is formally committed to being multi-lingual (as in South Africa), this diversity is hard to guarantee in practice and in no way guarantees that all language needs are covered.[7] Africa remains the world's most linguistically diverse continent, with 514 dialects and languages having been recorded in Nigeria alone.[8] Given that those on the linguistic margins are often those on the political margins, a lack of comprehension can play an important role in solidifying the existing (im)balance of power. The effect of this dual inaccessibility is that official documents accrue a power reinforced by their secrecy, which lends itself to both fetishisation and suspicion. What trust can you have in a certificate when you have to rely on an interlocutor to tell you what it says? What potentials and pitfalls of pliability may it have because of that? How does this inflect perceptions of the state and its legitimacy, especially in social contexts where accountability is often performed through practices of visibility?

With these particular contexts in mind, what framework can we use to integrate the lessons from the papers in this collection, which cut into the subject along very different axes? In a thoughtful piece, Hull (2012) notes the duality inherent to paperwork, being both textual and material. He suggests three axes of analysis – aesthetic, affect, or signs. Hull's factors are all applicable to the papers that follow here, but are insufficient as they all depend primarily on the textual function of state documents. As such, they sideline both that important question of materiality and a consideration of the broader social, political, economic and epistemological repercussions of their production and circulation. To answer these needs, we explore three distinct but interdependent axes: first the textuality of documents, which encompasses all those aspects of aesthetic form, affect and sign (after Hull, 2012); secondly, the materiality of documents, concerning their relative singularity or replicability, fragility and translatability;[9] and thirdly, what we consider perhaps the most important and often overlooked, the political economies of their creation, circulation and deployment. Having explored these phenomena below, we consider the ways in which they may be brought together.

Textuality

Aesthetic form and linguistic style are intrinsic to the efficacy of documents, bound up as they are with the processes and practices of officialdom. Knowing the rules by which a document is put together – *de jure* or *de*

facto – is an essential skill for officials seeking to communicate to the public in a state-like manner and those from "outside" attempting to communicate with the state in its own code or language.[10] It is also a means of hiding meanings and practices in ways that only insiders are able to decode. This holds true for those completing closed forms and those addressing more open or narrative forms of official documentation in which agency can be deployed more freely.

Understanding the content and the aesthetics of assemblage is, as Max Weber (2013) recognised, what makes political "masters" placed in charge of bureaucrats appear like "dilettantes" in the face of an expert. Readers who are aware of the formal and informal rituals through which state documentation is created can decode the documentation they encounter. Those who are not thus inducted may find that logics of governance and narratives of action remain hidden in plain sight. It was, for instance, only with the help of current housing officials in India that Tarlo (2001, 77) could "decode official realities" in the text to "reveal official truths" and, crucially, uncover the "unofficial truths" that their counterparts had concealed in the formulaic text of these documents, years earlier.

The stock phrases utilised by the housing officials that Tarlo encountered were intended to hide the messiness of bureaucratic procedure but this is not the only way in which documents serve to obfuscate rather than reveal reality. In Owen's fieldwork in Nigeria, for example, police cases were often only documented in full at the very end of the process. In this context, police officials only produced supposedly procedural texts such as initial reports or entries in station diaries retrospectively once matters were settled, rather than as they progressed. Primarily, this was an exercise in controlling risk by controlling documentation, erasing the possibility that writing could embed any fact that might later become an inconvenient outlier to a neat resolution. This, then, is writing being produced for its own sake, interlocuting with a whole world of the written, rather than that of action. We see a similar process and rationale in Tara Dosumu Diener's account of nurses' record-keeping at the Princess Christian Maternity Hospital in Freetown, Sierra Leone. To put it another way, Freeman and Maybin (2011, 11) suggest that, "documents tell stories, much like buildings do … This is not because they carry words that comprise a narrative, but because they embody the political processes by which they are produced." And this is fundamentally important to the documentation of the state, which casts its power over time and space and provides a foundation for action beyond, mediating forces from the personal to the global.

In all these contexts, knowledge is clearly powerful, allowing people to understand how to disentangle what documents do and do not represent. State officials, however, have no inherent possession of, or guaranteed monopoly over, this knowledge. We must ask, therefore, how is knowledge acquired and either shared or safeguarded? As Jocelyn Alexander's paper in this collection shows, state officials can find themselves berated by citizens for

not following their own rules of documentary production or not acting upon these documents appropriately. Prisoners' letters show how some detainees indignantly petitioned the prison guards who abrogated (intentionally or otherwise) their legal duties in the midst of this repressive state. In doing so, they demonstrated an in-depth knowledge of the legal minutiae that set the parameters of their detention. In this case, prisoners had learnt the state's rules for themselves. Like so many others around the globe, they had been spurred on by an imaginary of how the state *should* behave and a knowledge of how the state *did* behave in reality: this knowledge served as both "sword and shield" in their everyday lives (Messick 1996). Conversely the empire may strike back in seeking to silence and limit the scope for literary appeal against state diktat; as witness in this volume Henry Mang and David Ehrhardt's tracing of the changing formats of indigene forms in the conflict-prone locality of Jos North, transforming from open spaces for entries wherein an applicant can define their own ethnic identity, to a tick-box form validating only three officially pre-defined ethnicities as legitimately "indigenous."

In other cases, citizens and subjects rely on mediators in the midst of bureaucratic production and negotiation. Frequently, these mediators are used both for their basic literacy and their capacity for deciphering and navigating the codes, institutions, and relationships involved in documentary production and procurement. The wiles of documentation provide a ready niche for the middlemen who are often involved in shuttling between the supplicant and the state. Some residents in an informal settlement that Cooper-Knock studied in eThekwini municipality, South Africa, relied heavily on a former policeman to check that local police officials issued them the necessary documentation to take their cases forward. On occasion, as Cooper-Knock witnessed, this resident would also fill out people's statements for them when the police were unable or unwilling to do so. Such mediation proved doubly useful: it reduced the costs of documentary production for the state officials (see below) and meant that cases could be framed as strongly as possible in the litigant's interests. The efficacy of these mediators is crucially important in many people's negotiation of everyday life, and we return to them again, below.

Efficacy, however, is not the only goal at stake in mastering aesthetic form. The development of a professional and personalised style can be a matter of great pride for state officials and others in and of itself. This explains, for example, why Nigerien Gendarmes prize literary style and resist attempts to simplify it in the name of technocratic reforms, telling the French instructor who laments their complicated descriptions "Mais c'est joli" – "but it's pretty" (Göpfert 2013, 329). Similarly, the police officers that Owen encountered in his fieldwork proudly distinguished their style of writing up a case from that of their colleagues. The virtue they courted was the capacity to relay content and detail elegantly, demonstrating individualism in small increments by the performance of their own interpretation of an aesthetic of official literary propriety in otherwise seemingly transparent and "faceless" documents.

The precarity of materiality

Materiality is the strength and weakness of state documents. Latour famously argued that the "immutability" and "mobility" of documents was analytically important (Latour 1986). The immutability Latour spoke of here relates to the materiality of documentation and he was undoubtedly right to note its importance. The materiality of state documentation imbues it with a sense of permanence and precision, lending powerful support to the cause of whichever official, citizen or subject brandishes it. Building on Latour's arguments, Freeman and Maybin (2011, 6) argue that physicality lends documentation a "temporal power": "a degree of stability over time." Whilst we agree with the premise of their argument, we would add two important caveats.

First, whilst the form of a document might be stable over time, its meaning and utility is far from stable. Therefore, we need to pay attention to what we term the "afterlife" of documents: the ways in which documents survive beyond their intended usage, to be deployed for a whole range of different purposes. We might think here of expired passports being repurposed into fake documents to undermine the state borders that they were built to protect; the records of the colonial government in Kenya forming the basis of potential reparations claims in the present; or documents bearing the marks of famous former leaders, like Thomas Sankara, becoming commoditised as collectibles.

It is in an effort to constrain such "afterlives" that bureaucrats may attempt to disguise their personal contributions to state policy documents (Hull 2012) and regimes may mark their exit from office with the systematic destruction of their own paper trails, as the apartheid government did in South Africa. Our understanding of the processes of production and the political economy of circulation are incomplete if we overlook how actors are shaped by the fear of documentary "afterlives."[11]

Conversely, however, we also need to recognise the ultimate fragility of state documentation, which can be destroyed, deleted or defaced. Ultimately, a key strength of state documents – their materiality – is also an important weakness. In practice, *contra* Latour, they are far from immutable. What is more, the fragility of materiality is intimately linked to the fragility of people's everyday lives: those who live a more precarious existence may be in most need of the "sword and shield" that state documents offer but they are likely to have the hardest time preserving such documents. Informal settlement residents in Durban, for example, live in constant danger of shack fires (Birkenshaw 2008), which can not only kill but also destroy possessions including documents, passports, prescriptions and police reports (Cooper-Knock and Owen 2015). Similarly, Namibians living on the border with Zambia usually lacked the documentation required to cross the border legally because the identity cards they acquired fell victim to recurring "floods, widespread

fires, and theft" in the area (Zeller 2007). Recognising the importance of certain documents and the precarity of their existence, some will go to great lengths in order to protect them. Brinkley Messick (1996, 217) argues, for example, that in the midst of conflict within a town in Yemen, locals would send their documentation into the countryside for security.[12] However, even systematic attempts to preserve documentation can have unintended consequences. Archiving, for example, seeks to preserve "fragments of lives and pieces of time" (Mbembe 2002, 19). The process itself, however, can functionally mean "discard" as much as "preserve" – and this is an interesting paradox – preserved paper and the promise of being "on record" have such powerful resonance, but in many cases if you actually tried to retrieve anything from the records, it is doubtful if it could even be located, while suboptimal storage facilities in other places may house paper slowly degrading into illegibility or mush.

Of course, the destruction or loss of documents may not always be accidental. Landau's (2010) work on South Africa highlights the willingness of the police to destroy asylum seekers' papers in order to justify arrest. Meanwhile, Henry Mang and David Ehrhardt draw our attention to the illicit and deliberate selective destruction of colonial-era material in Nigerian archives by some archive users, in order to prevent people checking and questioning the veracity of contested indigeneity claims.[13] Here, we can see calculated political logics at work. Conversely, state documentation can also be casually destroyed without mention – amidst acts of reorganisation and rationalisation – rendering the events and lives that were caught up in those records effectively unmentionable by the state. Captured in such acts is the great asymmetry of silence, which is the outcome of both radical erasure and quotidian routine. For ultimately, to render a life unmentionable can be to render it untenable. This was the realisation confronting British families who had been invited to the UK from the Caribbean from the late 1940s. In recent years, many have been called upon to prove their legal status by the same state which had destroyed their disembarkation cards (Channel 4 News 2018). Now, those whose entry to the UK was previously documented are told "we have searched our records, we can find no trace of you in our files."[14] Contrary to the law, such documentary verdicts have brought with them the threat of detention and deportation. Thus, documentary studies reinforce what scholars of marginality have long realised: that flippant disregard can be as powerful as any calculated campaign in demonstrating which populations are held in political contempt. In other cases, doctoring documents may be more viable and effective than destroying them altogether. The suspicion of such antics can be pervasive: when working as a consultant with public sector officials, for example, Owen was berated for submitting a report with blank opening pages; and was told that each should at least be numbered and bear "this page left blank" in order to eliminate the suspicion that pages bearing crucial information had been removed.

This precarity of materiality inherent in the destructibility or disruptability of paperwork matters all the more when we consider the relationship between the material object and the residue of its production. A lost drivers' licence is a matter of inconvenience and short delay for drivers if their state's transport department is highly technologized, as replicas are produced automatically from archived data. The process is entirely different in a state where the database is non-existent, incomplete, or functionally inaccessible due to distance, time, expense or the fragile goodwill of officials. In such circumstances, the document becomes not just a signifier of a truth fixed and held elsewhere, but the truth itself; an object rather than a sign. Such situations may cause us to reconsider whether Kelly's (2006) assertion that documents never stand simply for themselves is equally true everywhere. In fact, wholly separating the materiality, textuality, and aesthetics of documents may be an ethnocentric exercise in itself. West African popular Islamic traditions saw (and still see) Koranic suras written on paper, sewn into pouches and carried as talismans, or painted as calligraphy on to *Allo* boards, washed off and the ink drunk as protection and cure; the power of writing transmutable between its incarnations as meaning, symbol and material, a conceptual foundation which can frame our contemporary understandings of the fetishised power of the document, seen or unseen.[15] Fetishisation and materiality intrude abundantly, too, in elite global contexts which pride themselves on their technocratic ethos. One of the authors was present one evening as the representative of a renowned international consulting firm talked a subordinate through the final submission of a policy report to a major governmental body in Africa. The largest part of the discussion was dedicated not to content but to the GSM weight and gloss finish of the paper.

Political economies of documentation

We can usefully explore the political economy around documents in two respects – the efforts involved in their creation and in their circulation. Let us begin with the act of creation. It is practically and theoretically significant that it takes political energy, physical effort and scarce resources to produce state documents. This shapes the negotiations that surround the creation of documents and the value of the end product. The relative degree of political energy taken to create a state document depends upon multiple factors, not least: the degree to which the power relations embodied in documentation are established or emergent; the extent to which the applicant's qualification for documentation is apparent or contested; and whether the production of documentation is more or less routinized. Whereas issuing a parking ticket for an "ordinary" citizen may take little political energy, the creation of policy documents may take a great deal. For this reason, David Mosse argues that we must always read policy documents "backwards to reveal the social relations that produced them, the future contests they anticipate and the wider 'discourse coalitions' they are intended to call forth" (Mosse 2005 of Fairhead

and Leach, 2002, 9). This processual consideration also combines with the aesthetic and the intended effect; witness the singular passive and acronym-heavy language of UN documents whose authors intentionally aim to erase the traces of their creation, and which prompts Eastwood (2005, 26) to advise that "researchers exploring the work of organisations should take as a fundamental problematic the work that goes into final documents, as well as the actions those documents subsequently organise and intend."

On top of this political energy, we must also consider the practical energy and resources expended in bringing these material documents into being.[16] That paperwork is a bore is not a trivial observation. This is not to suggest that writing records is universally resented; far from it. Some state officials relish the capacity and opportunity to wield a pen, or similar: such acts can often prove intrinsically valuable and instrumentally useful as a route to gaining economic, social or political capital. Kynoch's (2003) historical work on South African policing, for example, demonstrates the extent to which a police official's literacy was at the heart of the communal regard they garnered prior to the widespread political resistance of the late 1970s. Even as this resistance grew, Steinberg (2008) argued, the pull of literacy did not completely fade. A detective, he claimed, was

a Janus-faced being: he was mistrusted because he was employed by the police, feared because he worked with violence, but deeply respected because white-collar professionals who worked with a pen and paper were considered middle class and were looked up to. (Steinberg 2008, 76)

Similarly, in Niger, Göpfert (2013) found that Gendarmes consider themselves superior to municipal police, not because they are paramilitaries, but because they *write*; their command of literary form alone connotes professionalism.

This theme has global resonance. In the pseudonymised village of "Alipur" in North India, Akhil Gupta (1995) found that generating land registry documents and filling in government ledgers played a crucial role in cementing the importance of the street-level bureaucrats. Gupta (1995) quotes Sripal, a local villager, who argues

those whose job it was to inspect the buildings just sat in their offices and approved the construction because they were the ones who had the authority to create the official record ("They are the ones who have pen and paper *[kaagaz-kalam unhee key paas hai]*")

This stood in contrast to Sripal's own illiteracy. In all of the examples above, it is clear that the *performance* as well as the potential to utilise a pen and paper was incredibly important in generating official authority. The power of this performance should not be under-emphasised. Sat in Magistrates' Courts in eThekwini Municipality, Cooper-Knock noticed how the percussive sounds of staplers and stamps ordering and authorising state records on the judges'

bench corralled the drifting attention of the gallery as if state justice was condensed into such moments of documentary production.[17] Our argument does not undermine the importance of this process. It simply highlights that these opportunities for bolstered social status or material gain must be balanced against the costs in energy, time and resources that documentary production demands.[18]

Once in circulation, issues of legibility and visibility fundamentally shape the political economy of these documents. We have dealt with the issue of legibility – both literal and technical – above, so let us now turn to the question of visibility: are citizens and subjects able to see what documentation has been created and curated on their lives? As Weber argued, the process of bureaucracy systematically creates expanding numbers of "professional insiders." An insider's power rests on the capacity to claim privileged access to persons, techniques, knowledge or resources. Consequently, bureaucrats have an interest in maintaining that privilege by portraying themselves as knowledgeable without fully disclosing the full breadth, depth, and function of that knowledge, nor disclosing how that knowledge was obtained. For those who depend on evading the full reach of the state, this mystique can provoke a powerful affective response. The literal definition of "bureaucracy" is rule by the desk. In this context, however, it is not just what passes across an official's desk that bolsters their power, it is also what people believe *may* have crossed that desk in the past, present or future. Bureaucracy, in other words, in not just governance through what is written but also what *might* have been written. So documents, like many fetishized objects, garner a great deal of power and potentiality in being hidden. Nigerian policemen, for example, live in fear of the accidental error or vicarious blame which will "spoil your file" – the mysterious off-stage bundle of documents which dictate the future path of their life and career.

Indeed, the materiality of documents makes even their storage and retrieval meaningful as social action. Unlike the keyword-searchable database, human choice can mediate the forms of physical storage with great discretion, as well as contingency. Federico Pérez focuses on this as the central aspect of what researcher and city bureaucrats in Bogotá alike term "juridical archaeology," the unearthing of long-lost cases and regulations which are used to reconstruct legal topographies and claim authority in the service of creatively navigating what Pérez (2016, 220) terms an "acutely indeterminate" legal sphere. These acts of curated discovery or revelation can be made that much more potent through the performance of their presentation. Take, for example, a meeting between tax officials and a community in South-West Nigeria, witnessed by one of the authors. There, during a contestation over the management of a forestry resource, a senior government official sought to establish the primacy of the state over customary claims by producing the original yellowed, flaking, many-times-folded, signed statute from the 1930s from inside its manila file; a powerful seldom-seen reminder that the state held the trump card not just in terms of *de jure* legitimacy but also its own deep

historical roots, which could answer community claims to customary ownership. Authenticity is key in such exchanges, and it resides triply in form (genre, language or style), in materiality (paper, stamps, look and feel) and in provenance (who carries it, and from where and by what process it was obtained). It is no less important for researchers. A permission letter may be less a finalised form than an inscribed object, bearing the marks of its creation process, all of which accrete and add to its "thickness," weight and authenticity. It is significant that the rubber stamp on a permission letter can be as important as the document itself, and that an unstamped object immediately attracts doubt.[19] Given the multi-layered nature of authenticity, we should naturally expect that in contexts where many people may need to misrepresent official processes, much effort is put into the creation of fakes,[20] and thus much doubt is re-cast on the authenticity of originals. In Nigeria, concerns over fakery and authenticity feed into a wider complex of ontological insecurity and precarity. Apter (1999) and Smith (2007) amply document the unfolding of this insecurity; Apter in locating the rupture of the sign and the signified amid the inflated expectations and magical bonanzas of the oil boom, Smith in the dislocation of trust and value embedded mainly in post-oil decline and the trope of corruption as extending beyond financial malpractice to generalised debasement and insincerity. In fact, such concerns extend before and after both periods. Nigeria's military colonist Lord Lugard recorded his worries about the power of insignificant pieces of paper, concerned that the entire attempt to extend British rule could be undermined by fakery when enterprising rural fraudsters "producing an old envelope picked up in a deserted camp, or even a piece of newspaper, as his credentials, would declare himself to be the authorised emissary of the Government, and demand what he chose" (Lugard 1922, 252). And during Nigeria's second oil boom officials profiting from the fuel subsidy under Goodluck Jonathan debased their own official documents by issuing two authorisation letters for the same cargo; both official, frauds but not fakes.[21] This consternation, and equally the at least partial utility a fake can acquire, gives rise to new categories – witness the authentic inauthentic or "clean fake" fetishised by the migrant workers that Reeves (2013) met in Moscow.

Papers and people: the (in)sufficiency of documentation

This section starts from the premise that the overlay between a document and a person or event is always incomplete: the former can never fully encapsulate the latter. This partiality expands the parameters of negotiation at the heart of the production and circulation of state documents. Such negotiations can be an issue of life and death for those on the margins and – for all their regularity – are often shot through with uncertainty and fear.

The implications of insufficiency are twofold. First, the greater the gap between documentation and lived reality, the greater the power those writing

the official record have to frame the issues and individuals in question. Invariably, the production of a document demands that its author drastically reduce complex realities into clear depictions and categorisations (Kelly 2006, 91). Whether we are looking at UNHCR officials dividing border-crossers into groups of "migrants" and "refugees" or the scribes at South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission recording narratives to determine whether past crimes were "political" (Buur 2001, 171) we are reminded that capturing lives on paper is an incredibly political, partial, and imperfect act.

Secondly, in fieldwork in Nigeria, Owen was struck by the abundance of *provisional* documentation – the bureaucracy of the "not-quite" covering such things as submission receipts for immigration card applications, electronic receipt chits for vehicle registration rather than the registration documents themselves, affidavits attesting the loss of significant documents, the problematic status of genuine but expired documents such as vehicle licences. This again opens up space – and sometimes attendant revenue streams – for the official who can use their discretion to accept or reject the document as formal. The interesting aspect is not so much how often these opportunities are taken but how often they are not, and instead the provisional document is sympathetically accepted as an inevitable fact of life, product of the bureaucratic slowness and material vulnerability cited above; situations in which it is not acceptable to not have a document, but in which it may be human and reasonable to have not-quite-a-document.

Thirdly, the greater the gap (or the greater the *imagined* gap) between record and reality, the more unstable and less predictable the social life of state documents become. This process is most apparent in studies of identity documents and border control. Toby Kelly's (2006) work on the documentation of Palestinians and Madeleine Reeves's (2013) work on Kyrgyzstani migrants in Moscow both point to a similar pattern: the state increases the documentation of those it considers a threat in order to try and control them. The aim of this increased documentation is to simplify the relationship between the state and its subjects. However, the relationship between documents and people is complicated by their insufficiency. As Reeves concludes, these "fictively hyper-documented" workers are "accompanied by an array of papers that bear only a partial relation to the physical person" (2013, 520). Officials checking this documentation know that people are unable and unwilling to abide by the state's constrictive legislation and, as such, will attempt to exploit the gap between document and reality to thwart the system. Consequently, suspicion grows in the cracks of the very exchanges that should have been simplified by increased documentation.

It is for this reason that the presentation of a document is rarely sufficient at checkpoints. Instead, this presentation must be integrated into a broader performance that seeks to close the gap between life and document. Those possessing a document recite the learned litany of contextual facts that will make possession appear procedural and legitimate, allaying the "routinised

suspicion" of state officials and others who would seek to police them. Although many of these performances are highly skilled and well-used, such exchanges are always marked by an uncertainty that provokes fear in border crossers. It is for this reason that Kelly (2006, 103) concludes that "law and legal categorisation provide only a false refuge from arbitrary power." Often, this arbitrary power operates against the interests of the supplicant: Nigerian officials tasked with issuing indigeneity certificates in Ibadan, for example, doggedly pursue socially authenticated process of determining ancestry and local familiarity, even in the complete absence of any legal requirement to do so (Fourchard 2015), though they might see this overt diligence as integrity rather than arbitrary or exclusionary power. Sometimes, however, the arbitrary processes and priorities of state officials can work in the supplicant's favour: frontline bureaucrats in the Kenyan state, for example, frequently issue Somali citizens and denizens with identity cards because the benefits of regulating this population through registration are deemed more important than using these documents to acknowledge genuine claims to citizenship.[22]

State bureaucrats have no monopoly on fear and suspicion, however. In the municipality of eThekwini, South Africa, state officials spray numbers of the doors of informal dwellings. The residents to whom Cooper-Knock spoke were told that this number is held on a municipal document, alongside their name and ID number. This is the document that is supposed to determine housing allocation. Sprayed numbers remain as a visible testament to the fact that citizens have been seen by the state but residents feared that – in the bowels of the municipality – this document would be altered and that the painted promise would be broken. The fact that some people's doors had become a palimpsest of paint was testament that their fears were not unfounded. So the dual issues of interest here are the processes of arbitration and of abstraction: what, ultimately do documents represent? And under what conditions do they *become* reality rather than simply representing it? For Diener (this issue) perhaps the prime function of statistics in the Sierra Leonean public health system she observes is to enable governance from a distance by the multilaterals and INGOs, which becomes fetishised to the point where filling forms takes precedence over actually treating the patients. They are a tool, then, in a transnationalised rule of experts. In his book of that name, Mitchell (2002) depicts documents as a stage in an increasing process of de-materialisation, a technopolitical process moving towards the spreadsheet as the primary surface through which global development actors interact with material realities. And yet, paradoxically, the documentary object becomes more powerful the greater the abstraction. In Mitchell's Egyptian example land is transformed into measuring rods, then to paper, to spreadsheets, to statistics, to loans, to power relationships structuring postcolonial international relations, in the process transforming space, flattening topography, eliding specificities, introducing inevitable error.[23] Yet all the time, as Diener (this issue) shows, these abstractions are intrinsically tied back to material considerations such as whether to document in pen or pencil. The lesson then

is that if we see documents as self-evident, and fail to treat them as a material stage of broader social processes, we may vastly underestimate the insights they provide into questions of ontology and authority.

Documentary manoeuvres

In the literature that surveys state documentation thematically, there has been too little attention to the ways in which it is utilised post-production in the negotiation of everyday life. And yet, understanding what it means to possess the "materialisation of the state" (Hansen and Stepputat 2001, 8) plays a vital role in comprehending the nature of statehood in a particular polity. To explore this issue, we need to ask several key questions: on what repertoires of authority does the state draw? How successful are these claims to authority in different contexts? In what ways and to what degree are those in possession of state documents able to harness and wield such authority? What are the limits of this authority? In what contexts may non-state documentation (or orality, or actions, or the utilisation of popular legitimacy) carry more weight than state documentation?

In closing, we reflect on the need to explore the manoeuvres that people attempt with state documentation. The scattered studies on this issue currently suggest that documentation can be used as both a "sword and a shield" in daily life (Messick 1996). It may be that they are used immediately to such ends. Alternatively, they can be stashed and protected, representing a powerful potentiality: a promise, threat, or insurance policy for the future (Cooper-Knock and Owen 2015). Tentatively, we suggest four key manoeuvres that people can make with state documents as a social resource, which could be pursued individually or in tandem with each other.

First, state documentation can be used to (re)negotiate the presence and nature of social ties. This emerged clearly in our work on police case reports: the opening of a case and the issuing of a case number often produced a rupture between the accuser and accused. This could be utilised by the accuser to break ties with the accused altogether or to radically redress the power balance between them. Conversely, the dropping of a case, which destroyed or deactivated the case number in question, could be used as a salve to repair social ties (Cooper-Knock and Owen 2015).

Second, state documentation can verify or create identities and statuses. The issuing of passports and ID cards is perhaps the most obvious instantiation of this process, and the "sans papiers" migrants in European cities the most obvious internalisation of it (or its lack) as a source of self-identification. However, the identities demarcated by state documentation could be more nuanced. Jocelyn Alexander's work, for example, explores how people could be identified as "traitors" in and indeed by the ever-increasing state paper trail that amassed around them. Over the course of such negotiations of status,

state documents may be closely scrutinised. Alternatively, they may be glibly waved or simply alluded to. As Brinkley Messick's (1996, 218) work on Yemen demonstrates, many protagonists could benefit by simply asserting that they "had documents" to support their stance in a given conflict. Conversely, in South Africa, un(der)documented migrants do not seek the health services to which they are entitled because they feel vulnerable on account of being unable to gesture towards such documents (Makandwa 2014, Munyewende et al. 2011).

Third, they can be used as a basis from which to determine authority and claim resources. As Henry Mang and David Ehrhardt's work on indigeneity certificates in this issue demonstrates, state documentation could be the key that unlocks economic opportunities to survive and thrive. These opportunities were not all within the state itself: far from it. Indigeneity certificates, like passports and other state documentation offered people the opportunity to access employment, education, housing, and much more. This may be navigated by canny agentive actors, but it is also clear that important issues may be decided as true social facts by the circular requirements of the world of paper itself. At a meeting of taxation technocrats in Addis Ababa recently, the difficulty of taxing fixed property in a continent of frequently complex property rights was seemingly overcome by participants who suggested issuing tax certificates to landlords and tenants alike, until it was pointed out that tax certificates are then often used retrospectively as proof of ownership (see also Goodfellow and Owen 2018, on how processes of property tax documentation in Lagos, Nigeria are appropriated as *de facto* claims to property rights). Paperwork, due to its dual fixity of form and plasticity of deployment, has a very powerful "observer effect" on what it seeks to record.

Finally, documents can be used to enact or to obfuscate accountability. The creation of a paper trail by state officials can be seen as a means of creating accountability and transparency. And, indeed, in the midst of the pursuit of "good governance" advocates frequently spoke of the virtues of government reports.[24] However, as ethnographers of state and non-state organisations have highlighted, reportage is as likely to be used to stymy accountability as to facilitate it. As Tarlo (2001, 77) argues in her work on housing in India, regular record keeping could be used as a shield to protect housing workers from aspersions of irregularity and corruption; a depiction that stood in contrast to the contested and patchy reality of housing practice.

Conclusion

For Max Weber (2013), files were the ordered heartbeat of the rational-bureaucratic state. They preserved the written rules on which bureaucracies were based and bore testimony to those rules being followed. Scholars who have engaged with Weber have tended to chart only the divergence between a particular polity and his ideal type. The valorised and assumed link between

paper, rationality and transparency has remained. Our exploration suggests that metamorphosis is possible. As Franz Kafka demonstrated – writing of similar institutions at a similar time – paper and its circulation or reservation also has the power to obfuscate, to confuse, and to exclude. Our task then becomes to unpick the particularities of power caught up in paper at any given moment. And, perhaps increasingly, within digital documentation. Are Weber's files being utilised to track, trace and record? Or are they being carefully constructed in order to evade accountability? Are files the centrepiece of state control, used both to surveil and shape conduct? Or have these files gained a fetishised power and shed their omniscient supervisory capacity? Are they part of the armoury of a practice-based set of institutions, and of citizens seeking ways to interlocute with them, more than their organising logic: a part of government's sleight of hand, rather than its rational documentary shadow?

Such questions clearly demonstrate that documents are not merely ways for "structuring and navigating information space" (Brown and Duguid 1991, 42). They are an important means through which social spaces are forged and political and economic flows are directed within them. This creation, though, is more likely to be an act of negotiation than of declaration. Moreover, bringing state documents into play with other citizens, subjects or state officials is often no simple matter. The leverage they provide cannot always be guaranteed in advance. This is perhaps particularly true when individuals have to confront the "irreducible core of discretion" that street-level bureaucrats enjoy in their jobs (Evans 1997, 370). The contributions here reveal that to understand discretion – that process of negotiating fixity and authorising truth – we must look not just at what is produced, but the interplay of practice and documentation: we must frame documentary creation *as* practice, not as opposed to it.

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

Notes

1. In this part-special-issue we do not distinguish between various definitions of "government" and "state" but use both terms to refer to the realm of official

governmental power as exercised through various institutions including police, prisons, hospitals, territorial administrations, migration bureaucracies and others. The authors thank the African Studies Association USA for hosting the panel which began this collaboration, and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful and insightful comments.

2. Gupta also notes that incompletely-literate publics retain many tools for counterattack, including bypassing written procedure, mimicry and counterfeit.

3. http://www.unesco.org/new/en/dakar/education/literacy/.

4. http://www.unesco.org/education/GMR2006/full/chapt6_eng.pdf.

5. Although this varies between urban and rural contexts as well as those where colonial episodes were stages in longer transnational relationships, so that (for instance) an Angolan brought up in urban Luanda may be a Portuguese native speaker, even if also identifying with a particular ethno-regional political identity. NB: The inclusion of South Africa in this list is made on the basis that, officially, state documents are available in numerous official languages.

6. HRH Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, "Tradition, Modernisation and Reform," Thomas Hodgkin memorial lecture, Oxford, 6 March 2017.

7. In South Africa there are eleven official languages and the constitution stipulates that all must be treated equally. Nonetheless, English has become the dominant language of the state. The Use of Official Languages Act (2012) attempts to encourage multilingualism by pushing all national departments, public enterprises and public entities to utilise at least three official languages in their communication. Tellingly, however, the online version of this act is preceded by the note that 'Please note that most Acts are published in English and another South African official language. Currently we only have capacity to publish the English versions.' (http://www.gov.za/sites/www.gov.za/files/35742_gon801_0.pdf, accessed on 22 February 2017).

8. http://www.multidisciplinaryjournals.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/LANGUAGE-AND-COMMUNICATION-IN-A-MULTILINGUAL-NIGERIA-IMPLICATION-FOR-UBE-ENGLISH.pdf.

9. Meaning, in this case, their *physical* translatability, from pencil to pen to photocopy to a scan stored as data in a distant server, or the reverse declension, from a database to a printout to a transcript.

10. Thanks to Joost Fontein for foregrounding this question in response to the presentation of these papers.

11. As historians of the future will encounter, what British civil servants were willing to put on paper (or electronic document) changed almost overnight with the introduction of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the immediate possibility of being held accountable for the afterlives of their documents.

12. Or as recently in Tombouctou under Islamist rule, where libraries of historic documents are as important as objects as they are as texts in construing the global fame of the city, they may be smuggled out or buried (Hammer 2016).

13. One side-effect being that (as a colleague in Benue State University related) some of the reputedly most restricted colonial-era files in Kaduna archives are those related to seemingly innocuous local administrative arrangements; as these could undermine present-day claims and mandates for the powers of influential chieftaincy institutions. Regardless of the truth of this, it stands as a parable about the mystique and power of inaccessible state documents.

14. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/apr/17/home-office-destroyed-windrush-landing-cards-says-ex-staffer.

15. In the nineteenth century at least, this respect was extended to other forms of the written word. Naval officer Hugh Clapperton, looking for the journals Mungo Park had died with in Bussa twenty years before, was told that at least one of them had been taken south by a Fula (Fulani) warrior on jihad as protection (Lockhart and Lovejoy 2005). Readers interested in this regional combination of textuality and materiality, encompassing forms as diverse as nsibidi, àrokò and gold-weights, are directed to the articles and resources assembled for exhibition on this subject by the British Library, available online at https://www.bl.uk/west-africa.

16. And of course, they are also often considered time-consuming and boring to read; leading some to take risks on the assumption they never will be fully read. Owen witnessed a local government document being tabled for discussion by a State Executive Council (cabinet) in Nigeria with a cover note which summarised the contents as the exact opposite of what they actually were, in a vain attempt to prevent a transfer of powers from one department to another.

17. See also Mawani (2012) on "law as document and as documentation."

18. Gupta is also concerned with how documents flow, up and down bureaucratic hierarchies and how they are stored. He contends that there may be a fundamental misunderstanding between a public understanding of an official undertaking to write, for example, a complaint or memo as a way of triggering action, and a civil servant's understanding of this as an action in itself foreclosing other action. Our previous research (Cooper-Knock and Owen 2015) contests this, as we argue that at least in the sphere of our

policing fieldwork, publics do understand inscription on record as action in itself, and further as action which is a useful instalment in, and leverage upon, other forms of more direct social action.

19. Sometimes these practices exceed secular concerns of validation and authenticity, straying into aesthetic form and performance which re-imbues bureaucratic practices with powers of enchantment its rational roots are supposed to have shed.

20. A virtual industry one of whose hubs in former times was the "openly secret" Oluwole Market in Lagos Island (see http://www.vanguardngr.com/2011/08/day-of-reckoning-for-oluwole-fraudsters-%E2%80%A2as-security-agents-raid-hideout/, accessed 24 March 2016; and Rasmussen and Carrier, *forthcoming*).

21. Interview with political communications advisor, Abuja, September 2016.

22. Rasmussen, forthcoming. Denizen here denotes a resident, as against a citizen with recognised rights of belonging to the territorial nation and locality.

23. In comparable vein Tufte (2006) shows how such a process can be embedded in the aesthetic aspect of the form of representation, as the nested hierarchical bullets of a Powerpoint software document introduces an inbuilt inevitable inaccuracy which can entirely reverse meaning, all the while disguised as increased legibility.

24. See, for example, http://www.transparency-initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Opening-Government2.pdf.

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