'We of the White Men’s Country': The Remaking of the Qadi Chieftaincy, 1830s to 1910

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After more than two decades of close scrutiny of its ‘life’, the archive emerges as nothing if not paradoxical. The necessary starting point of a great deal of historical work, it reveals as well as conceals its treasures. It claims authority, yet is pathy in coverage. It presents itself as a record of guaranteed permanence, yet may be subject to disintegration and disappearance in a virtual age. ‘The archive is everywhere and hence nowhere.’

In short, the archive is a social construction, subject to political capture. The focus has been shifted from ‘archive-as-source to archive-as-subject’; yet it is worth noting that historians have long been mindful of the issues at stake. There were strong intimations of the ‘archival turn’ in the 1980s and even before that (see ibid but one practitioner) Marc Bloch discussed in some detail the chance ‘revolutionary confiscations’ of papers that have often benefited scholars, as well as the ‘forgetfulness and ignorance’ that have been a necessary part of modern states’ assembling and controlling of archives.

It is also clear that archive stories are as much about users’ engagement with the extant record as about those who have been responsible for curating it as much about retrieval and use as about collection and storage. This can range from researchers’ experiences in repository reading rooms – that sense of helplessness at not being permitted access to the vaults where documents are held and thus having to rely on finding aids that may or may not be accurate – to the ways in which we read those documents delivered to our desks ‘along the grain’. In Ann Laura Stoler’s execrative phrase, or against it, for the answers they can reveal to our questions.