

Serendipity: Conducting Research on Social History in Ghana's Archives

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Abstract: This report provides practical ideas and methodological warnings regarding the use of Ghanaian archives for the writing of social history.

Résumé: Ce rapport propose des idées pratiques ainsi que des suggestions méthodologiques au sujet de l'emploi des archives du Ghana pour écrire l'histoire sociale.

Introduction

Researchers have had varied experiences, including delights, surprises and even sorrows in the archives of Ghana. This report emanates from my experience in the period 2008–2010 while conducting research for my PhD thesis.¹ The report outlines the benefits and challenges that I faced in the archives while completing my thesis on the trade and transport history of the Tudu district in Accra. My experiences in the archives could serve as a stimulus to other colleagues who write about social and labor history.

The Public Records and Archive Administration Department (PRAAD) – formerly known as the National Archives of Ghana (NAG) – is the

¹ For a full report of the thesis see Samuel A. Ntewusu, *Settling in and Holding On: A Socio-Historical Study of Northerners in Accra's Tudu, 1908–2008* (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2011).

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successor of the depository, which was established in 1946 in the Gold Coast Secretariat. By 1953, the archive had been completely organized and an access and classification system had been established.² PRAAD resources, both in their wide range of topics and their accessibility, are an invaluable tool for Ghana's social and economic history. Currently, PRAAD has eight different branches countrywide, including the National Archive in Accra, which doubles as the Greater Accra regional archive. There is one archive in each region, with the exception of the Upper East and the Upper West regions. The documents for the Upper regions were accommodated in Tamale. This is not surprising since these two regions were carved out of the Northern Region. The newer region, the Upper West, was created in 1988. Resource constraints and the lack of trained archivists was the reason for retaining the materials in Tamale.

Of the eight archives, Accra alone contains over half of the total information in duplicate forms, hence one could do research on any topic in the Accra archive alone. But as James B. Silver put it: "The historical researcher who limits his efforts to the Accra branch of the NAG is risking the loss of considerable richness of detail."³ Of the eight archives, I visited six: Accra, Kumasi, Tamale, Cape Coast, Takoradi and Koforidua.⁴

I visited the six archives while simultaneously conducting interviews. Rather than visiting all the archives at once, this allowed me to make maximum use of each archive visit. This is a method I advocate for those who work on social history in Africa. I always scheduled my interviews in advance. Each time my interviewees were unavailable for an interview or the interview had been cut short due to health-related issues, meetings or other unforeseen circumstances, I would rush to the archive to make use of the available time. Most of my informants were drivers and traders, therefore interviews were arranged to fit their work schedule. If they failed to meet for a scheduled interview or changed the date of interviews, which occurred a number of times, I would go back to the archive.

² David P. Henige, "The National Archives of Ghana: A Synopsis of Holdings," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 6–3 (1973), 475–486, 475.

³ James B. Silver, "The Sekondi Archives," *History in Africa* 5 (1978) 365–370, 365.

⁴ I could not visit the archives in Ho and Sunyani due to time and logistical constraints. My inability to visit the archives in those two locations has not affected my research in any negative way; as I obtained much of the information relevant for my study from other archives. For example, the geographical range of the holdings in Kumasi extends well beyond Ashanti to include the Brong Ahafo region. During the colonial period, the Public Works Department Headquarters of the Northern Territories as well as Ashanti was located in Kumasi. Hence, most of the files related to transport, trade and community life of Brong Ahafo, with Sunyani as its capital, are still retained in Kumasi. Just as is the case with Kumasi, much of the information in the thesis related to the Volta Region, with Ho as its capital, was found in the Accra archive.

An Archival Roundtrip in Search of Social History

Throughout my research, I used the Accra archive the most as it contains much of the information related to this thesis. Also, it was nearer to my study site, Tudu, which is located in the central business district of Accra.

The holdings in Accra mostly comprise the Administrative records (ADM), Colonial Secretaries/Secretary's Office files (CSO), Newspapers (NP), Project Works (PW) and other private documents. The ADM has been serialized starting from ADM 1 up to ADM 262, with the exception of ADM 18 and ADM 19.⁵ The ADM series contains files about the correspondence of the Secretary for Native Affairs (SNA) in Accra. The CSO files also relate to the correspondence of the Colonial Secretary's Office, which is also located in Accra. The NP consists of newspapers published from colonial times to the present. The most notable ones include the *Gold Coast Reader* and the *Gold Coast Times* – which were published in the first and second decades of the twentieth century – and the *Daily Graphic* and the *Sunday Mirror*, which were established in the 1950s. The *Daily Graphic* has since remained the most popular newspaper till date. In the archive, one also finds long essays and theses mostly written by Ghanaian university students, particularly those who studied Library and Archival studies from 1974 to the present. It must be emphasized that the ADM 11 file is the richest and most voluminous classification. The file is further divided into 1,856 sub-files that cover the period between 1870 and 1920. Since my research begins with the year of 1908, the ADM 11 was very important for my work in order to construct the history of Tudu prior to the creation of the lorry park. As one progresses into the 1930s, the SNA files begin to dwindle with an emergence of the CSO files. One could understand the shift in light of the colony's political history. By the 1930s, colonialism was firmly grounded and the governor and other regional commissioners became more important. The policies governing the colony were modified to incorporate other outlying areas further north. For me, the shift was of much importance as much of the correspondence expressed the need to expand the various transport systems in the country. Hence, I dug up the CSO files in order to construct the history of both motorized and non-motorized transportation, including the creation of lorry parks in Accra.

The research topic itself called for utilization of other regional archives for the thesis. Tudu is located in Accra, but its development process was influenced by a number of factors. In part, the history of Tudu could be viewed as the history of Ghana, if not West Africa in general. For example, Tudu is inhabited by a number of ethnic groups, including Togolese and Nigerians, and its cattle and shea butter supply was dependent on the

⁵ Adam Jones, "Ghana National Archives: A Supplementary Note," *History in Africa* 15 (1988), 385–388, 386.

north and so was the import of horses and migratory labor. Kola nuts for the Tudu market were obtained from the Eastern, Central and Ashanti regions of the colony. Tudu was dependent on West Ghana for a greater part of its imported goods, which came through the harbor of Takoradi, as well as for locally produced rice from Asiama. The observation above reveals that a successful written history of Tudu cannot be based solely on the sources from the archive in Accra. Sources from other archives in Ghana must be used.

In the Kumasi archive, my main concern was military history, particularly that of the Gold Coast Hausa Constabulary, since it played an important role in Tudu's expansion. Even though this was my initial concern, I came to realize that Kumasi held much of the information that I needed about lorry parks and, to some extent, the kola nuts and shea butter trade. The Kumasi archive provided me with data about the creation of parks in Ashanti. I combined the information from the Kumasi archive with the information I had obtained from the archives in Accra and Cape Coast to construct the history of motor cars and lorry parks in the colony.

The Tamale archive proved useful for the construction of the history of the shea butter trade and the development of routes in Tudu.⁶ It also facilitated ideas on non-motorized transport systems in Tudu. I got most of the figures regarding the import of horses and migratory labor from the north to Accra from the archive in Tamale. The categorization of the holdings into seven broad themes made the search easy and interesting. These themes were: District Administrative Offices, Regional Administrative Offices, Government Departments, Courts, Education, Special Collections and Historical Manuscripts. However, what proved particularly useful were the annual reports of the district and regional administrators, contained in the NRG 1–9 series, and the special collections, particularly the Blue Books and the Ghana Handbooks. These reports and collections contained detailed reports about trade and migrant labor. These reports also compensated for the empty files on the import of horses in the National Archive in Accra.

The archive in Cape Coast provided documents about the competition between the motor transport and the railway system. The Cape Coast archive also had much information about the trade of kola nuts, disbanded soldiers employed as commercial drivers and lorry parks in the Central Region. Among other things, the information in this archive augmented the history of the kola nuts trade in Tudu, particularly after the death of one of the prominent kola nut traders called Chief Braimah. After the death of Chief Braimah in 1915, the records regarding the kola nut trade

⁶ For more on the Tamale Archive, see: Iddrisu Abdulai, "The Ghana Public Records and Archival Administration Department-Tamale: A Guide for Users," *History in Africa* 27 (2000), 449–453.

became slimmer in the Accra archive.⁷ Further searches in the Cape Coast archive revealed the involvement of the Kotokoli, a group that at first worked under chief Braimah as carriers or head porters.

The formation of Zongo communities has been an important aspect of the urbanization process in the Gold Coast.⁸ In Secondi, the files that I accessed mostly related to the formation of Zongo communities in Secondi and the occupation of the migrants in the twin city of Secondi-Takoradi. The archive provided leads to an internal Zongo-to-Zongo migration and the switch to other occupations following the operation of the harbor of Takoradi. For example, groups such as the anti-robbery groups emerged in Zongo communities elsewhere mainly due to the formation of such groups in Secondi.

The last archive that I visited was the Koforidua archive. For this research, I used the information in this archive the least, because I had already found most of the files related to my topic in the National Archive in Accra. Nonetheless, the ADM 29 file proved particularly interesting, especially as it contained information regarding the conflict between the *omanhene* (chief) of Koforidua and the *Sarikin Zongo*,⁹ whose wealth – accumulated through the kola nut and shea butter trade – made him undermine the position of the *omanhene*. The file particularly augments the interview that I was granted by a prominent horse-drawn transporter, Abass Adamu of Tudu, regarding his business links to Koforidua.

Limitations

The use of the archives, valuable as they were, was not without limitations. A few of these limitations included the physical condition of the files, classification, accessibility and terminology.

The physical condition of most of the files in all the archives was deplorable. In fact, sometimes I felt sad handling some of the files and wondered whether they would still exist the next time I would visit the archive. In Kumasi,

⁷ The terminology with regards to Chief Braimah, the founder of Tudu, and his family was confusing. In most of the files related to Braimah, the terms “Chief Braima,” “Chief Braimah,” and “Braimah the Butcher” were used. All these refer to the same person. After his death in 1915, Chief Braimah’s successors, who were mostly his children and grandchildren, still maintained the name and title Chief Braimah. Subsequently, most of the correspondence between the colonial administration addressed the chiefs as such making it difficult to know which of the Braimahs is being referred to. For a proper understanding of the archival information, I had to go to the Braimah family in Tudu to obtain their genealogy.

⁸ Zongo are migrant communities mostly inhabited by ethnic groups from the northern part of Ghana, as well as from Nigeria, Togo and the Sahel area. Zongo communities have a greater orientation towards Islam, and buildings there do not usually conform to the building plans of the city.

⁹ The *Sarikin Zongo* is the traditional political head or leader in a Zongo community.

some of the staff members kept laughing at the way I handled the files, carefully picking one page after the other. One of the staff members remarked: “We know when serious researchers are in the archives, they treat our files with care and we are proud of them.” The worst affected files were those in the Tamale archives. Storage space has been a problem in all the archives in Ghana, but in Tamale it has reached an alarming state. Not only does the air conditioning frequently break down due to power outage, but also some of the files are still kept on the veranda. The regional administration is not willing to provide new premises. Moreover, it is even threatening the archive staff of vacating the small room and giving it to the regional administration for administrative purposes. Lack of adequate facilities for the storage of materials has therefore led to the deterioration of some of the files.

Another problem was accessibility. Here accessibility would be broadly defined in the context of wrong dating and changes in government policy and its consequential impact on the utilization of files for proper construction of historical narratives. There have been instances where particular inventories did not at all match the contents that I found. For example, file NRG 8/2/120, titled “Election of Ya Nas, 1948–1960,” contained more information on the behavior of the lorry park collectors in Yendi. Moreover, I found several files with promising titles, which, to my great disappointment, were empty. But sometimes I found data unexpectedly. For instance, in the Tamale archive, files NRG 8/3/20 and NRG 8/3/10 contained invaluable reports about the import of horses from the northern territories to Accra.

Wrong dating was also a problem. Some of the files stated no dates at all, while in other files the dates did not correspond to the contents of the files. A few examples include: In the Accra archives, file CSO 17/1/11, “Mechanical Transport in the Gold Coast,” which stated 1930 as its opening date even though by 1927 the Overseas Mechanical Department had already started its work in the Gold Coast. File CSO 14/1/270, “Lorry parks in Accra,” stated 1938 and 1939 as its opening and ending dates respectively, but lorry parks were created as early as 1925 and 1927 as further examination of the content of the file revealed.

A few complicating factors, of historiographical nature, were government policy objectives, rules governing the archives, and administrative terminology. These made the use of files difficult – even with the proper dates and titles – and construction of a full story was only possible by combining the files with other oral or written accounts. Knowing what I was looking for in the archive was not always enough, for common sense was subject to revision by administrators and could be actively changed.¹⁰ Therefore, in order to navigate through the archives I had to map out the administration and policy choices since an issue could be important in one particular

¹⁰ On “common sense” policy, see: Nate Plageman, “Colonial Ambition, Common Sense Thinking, and the Making of Takoradi Harbor, Gold Coast,” *History in Africa* 40 (2013), 317–352.

period and unimportant in another. Such was the case in the course of my research in the archives. Let me illustrate this with an example. It was evident that by the early 1930s, the railway system in Ghana was near collapse as a result of stiff competition from the motorized transportation. All accounts point to this fact. But by the mid-1930s, as a result of the competition, the government policy was to introduce low fares into the railway transport system. This led to increased sales of train tickets, as file CSO 17/1/3, "Road and Rail Competition" illustrates. The colonial administration did not indicate on which particular routes the railway system proved more successful than motorized transport. Instead, it drew hasty conclusions and generalizations that the success of rail over road was evident in the increased sales of tickets. Figures showed that train tickets were sold out and that trains even had to leave passengers behind, a clear indication that the railway system was not failing. I was able to reconstruct this by examining the regional reports in the various archives and combining this information with oral interviews that I had carried out in Tudu about the various transport systems in the Gold Coast as well as the movement of passengers and goods. Further search in the other archives revealed that passenger increases were only temporary and never continued beyond 1938. More so, the increases were only on particular routes and not nationwide.

In addition, it was also of utmost importance to get used to terms that were used in the archives. In much of the correspondence, a commonly used term was "yours of the (...) instant." The word "instant" – I was told by seasoned researchers – referred to the same month that the correspondence took place. Gaining an understanding into the term was useful as it meant that I could not depend on one document to understand a particular situation without tracing other documents that were being referred to.

Doing archival work to write the social history for present-day Ghana may be a matter of serendipity. However, it can be rewarding if one decides to invest time in it, has a broad scope, visits several archives, combines it with using other sources, and views titles as plausible indications rather than as a description of the content.

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