

ENGAGING WITH COLONIAL ARCHIVES: REFLECTIONS OF AN END-USER¹

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Introduction

One legacy of European colonization of Africa was the accumulation of a large body of written material – official correspondence, annual reports and reports of commissions of inquiry - which constituted the bulk of national archives established, in the case of Nigeria, in the twilight of colonial rule. The Nigerian National Archives with regional locations at Ibadan, Kaduna and Enugu² have been the port of call for generations of researchers, mainly historians, both expatriate and indigenous. It can be said that most of the theses produced by graduate students of History in Nigerian universities from the 1960s to the 1990s relied heavily on archival material. However, archival sources (see the rough categorization below) constitute only one possible source-material for the study of History. While not over-emphasizing the importance of archival sources vis-a-vis other written sources, and the non-written ones,³ it is important to stress that Nigerian historiography – epitomized by the famous Ibadan School of History - is acknowledged for its mastery of archival sources – in addition to various oral and written sources. An anonymous reader's comment on a paper submitted to a Netherlands-based journal commented that the paper fitted into “a well-established Nigerian historiographical tradition of high-quality

¹ This article evolved from a Keynote Speech at the Network of Nigerian Historians (NNH) Roundtable on “Engaging with the (Public) Archives,” Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, 16 March 2012. It is dedicated to the memory of my wife, Abosede Omowumi Olukoju, nee Olorunda (1961-2014).

² The Nigerian archives have been the subject of various studies. See, for example, Uduigwome, 1989; Heap, 1991, 1994; Adelberger, 1992; Abioye, 2007.

³ In a Northeast Yoruba community in Western Nigeria, it was an archival document that explained the date and circumstances of a dynastic disruption caused by the British on which there was no consensus in local oral sources. See, Olukoju, 1993.

archival research.”⁴ However, this could be a generalization as expertise in the use of archival sources is not evenly distributed. It is, therefore, imperative for the older generation of (Nigerian) historians to sustain the legacy of high standards of engagement with archival (as well as other) sources and share their experiences with others.

The need for a rigorous (re)engagement of researchers with colonial archives is urgent in contemporary Nigeria, where many of the younger generation of historians tend to prefer research topics that do not require the use of archives. This can be explained as follows. First, the quest for making the discipline of history “relevant”⁵ to contemporary needs has lured many younger Nigerian historians into inquiry into post-independence (that is, post-1960) issues. Second, this attitude has also been an unintended consequence of the hybridization of the discipline – adding “International/Diplomatic/Strategic Studies” to the nomenclature of History Departments. This change was intended as a marketing strategy to boost student enrolment into History⁶ but it has tended to provide a haven for university teachers without a solid background in the use of the archives, who have also influenced some of their graduate students. Third, the sharp decline in the quality and density of archival records in Nigeria after 1955, and the application of the 25-year rule in opening up the archives has dampened the interest in archival records. This development is critical in that younger scholars now find the period before the 1950s more and more distant from their current interests.

Accordingly, this paper presents an end-user perspective⁷ focusing on the author’s engagement with Nigerian and British archives on and off since 1979. While Nigerian archives are conventional and manually operated, the British National Archives at Kew Gardens have digital

⁴ Electronic mail from an anonymous reviewer, 2005.

⁵ For the crisis of relevance in Nigerian historiography, see, Dibia, 1997.

⁶ The nomenclature change fad in Nigerian universities has generated debate. The opposing views are expressed in Adesina, 2006 and Olukoju, 2007.

⁷ A good precursor to this paper is Alegbeleye, 1987, which focused on a single class of records in one repository in Nigeria.

catalogues. The contemporary user of the archives is required to be proficient in the use of both systems of archiving. Essentially, this paper aims to share experiences with, inspire and offer suggestions to, younger researchers – the future of the discipline of History. In a wider context, it draws attention to the challenges facing archivists and end-users alike, notably, the maintenance and under-utilization of archival resources. The author's experiences are widely applicable to users of colonial archives in the former British colonies in Africa with which Nigerian archives share broad similarities.

A Thirty-Year Engagement With the Archives

The University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where I undertook undergraduate studies, specified the submission of an original research essay of about forty pages with an appendix containing full transcripts of interviews and a comprehensive bibliography of all written sources consulted. Although my topic focused on the pre-colonial period, I had to consult archival sources to complement the oral sources. That was my first encounter with the National Archives, Ibadan in August 1979. I finally submitted a Final Year Project on the pre-colonial history (origins, migrations, sociopolitical and economic organization, military exploits and external relations) of my hometown of Oka-Akoko, Southwest Nigeria.

Since then, I have visited the Ibadan Archives on several occasions and have also employed research assistants to collect material on a variety of issues. In November, 1990, I was at the National Archives, Kaduna in the context of my University of Lagos Central Research Committee funded project on the maritime trade of Lagos. I also collected material on my native Akokoland, which was in Kabba Province of the Northern Group of Provinces between 1900 and December 1918. In 1982, I submitted an M.A. Research Project based largely upon archival data (spiced with oral evidence, private papers and secondary sources). My focus shifted from 1983

onwards to the maritime trade, shipping and ports of Nigeria, with an emphasis on Lagos.⁸ Outside Nigeria, I have been a frequent user of the Public Record Office (now known as the National Archives of the United Kingdom) at Kew Gardens almost an hour by train from central London. The bulk of my post-doctoral research (outside of Japan and Nigeria) has been carried out there since 1998. In the rest of this paper, I shall highlight what the young researcher needs to note or do to get the best from archival research.

Variety of Material in the Archives

The immediate or future research interest of the scholar determines the premium placed upon the holdings of the archives. From my own perspective, the richest sources are (a) **official correspondence** and (b) dedicated **files on sundry subjects**. The former is transmitted from the lowest colonial jurisdiction to the Colonial Office in London in an ascending order: District-Division-Province-Group of Provinces/Region-Colony or Central Secretariat-Colonial Office. In the Nigerian archives, they are generally in bound volumes and listed chronologically. Files on sundry subjects are numbered and titled as appropriate. In Nigeria, the Central Secretariat correspondence with London, known as dispatches, are listed under a series of letter codes and numbers, such as CSO1/1. Central Secretariat files are coded as CSO series⁹ but provinces, divisions and districts files are titled with “Prof,” “Div,” and “Dist” coming after the name of the location. For example, “Ondoprof,” “Owodiv,” and “Akokodist,” respectively. The papers on the Colony of Lagos are classified as “Comcol” (Commissioner of the Colony) papers.

In the third category are **annual reports** and **gazeteers** of various colonial jurisdictions (Districts, Divisions, Provinces and Colony) and departments (Railways, Customs, Police, Public

⁸ The research generated many scholarly publications, including Olukoju, 2004

⁹ In Nigeria, correspondence originating from the central secretariat in the colonial capital (Lagos from 1914 to 1960) are classified in “CSO” (Chief Secretary’s Office) files. Correspondence from the Colonial Office are coded as “CO.”

Works, etc), which are equally important source material for researching sundry topics. In the same category are **intelligence reports**, compiled during the 1930s to aid colonial administrative and tax “reforms” promoted by Nigeria’s Governor Donald Cameron (1931-34). The intelligence reports consisted of ethnographic data (origins, migrations, social, political and economic organisation, inter-group relations, etc) on various indigenous communities collected by anthropologists recruited into the colonial administration for that purpose.

The fourth category comprises statistical data stored in **Blue Books**, which are in bound volumes. These volumes detail sundry data on economic and social affairs – the volume, value and direction of (foreign) trade; population, cost of living, health and urban affairs. Economic and social historians who are interested in volume, value and direction of overseas trade, cost of living in urban centres, population estimates and censuses, and statistics detailing various aspects of life have a body of data in the Blue Books. However, such statistics should be used contextually and in comparison with material from written and oral sources.

Maps, photographs and exhibits, which are generally inserted in files as enclosures are critical to understanding the spatial and visual contexts of the subject of the file. The photographs are kept in pouches while the maps are neatly folded into the enclosures. As an illustration, I found copies of counterfeit West African currency notes and photographs of the mastermind behind a celebrated currency counterfeiting case in the Gold Coast¹⁰ in a Colonial Office (CO) file at Kew Gardens. At the time, even the British Museum was apparently unaware of their location.

Proceedings of meetings of legislative houses - **Hansards** - are of great significance for understanding the content and context of debates, the process and dynamics of decision-making and the limits of “guided democracy” in the colonial and post-independence settings. In colonial Nigeria, proceedings of the legislative councils provided insights into policy decisions,

¹⁰ Olukoju, 2009.

especially the views ventilated by Nigerian nationalists. **Gazettes** are useful for research into the content of particular laws, proclamations and outcomes of commissions of inquiry. Scholars of local government reforms and the evolution of the justice system find this source most directly relevant to their quest.

Each of the aforementioned classes of sources has a simple list of documents available on the location or subject. At Kew Gardens, colonial-era documents are catalogued as “CO” with a matching number, such as CO 447, CO 583. The collections there are digitally catalogued and, therefore, easier to access.

What Researchers Should Note

Central to the composition of official dispatches is the **hierarchy of colonial officialdom**, each with its own bureaucracy and, therefore, cache of correspondence and files. If a local incident, such as an anti-tax protest, took place, one is most likely to get the best report on it in the District or Divisional correspondence but decisions and the processes leading up to them will be found at various levels, in an ascending order.

While going through the simple list of documents manually or by computer (Kew Gardens), we should note the following:

- (a) the possible re-numbering or merger of files
- (b) cross-reference to previous or other files on the same or related subjects, and
- (c) different titles for the same subject

I had to deal with these issues when working on multiple files on subjects such as ocean passages, currency counterfeiting, lighterage services, the politics of the West African Governors’ Conference and urban residential segregation. It is possible to pursue the thread of a research inquiry by painstakingly going through multiple files on the same subject.

The **number of volumes on a subject** is often a clear indication of the importance of the issue from the colonial government's point of view. Multiple volumes suggest the intractability of the problem being addressed and its ramifications. This should whet the researcher's appetite. However, in certain instances, single, but loaded, files on specific issues are often as rich as multi-volume ones.¹¹ Either way, we should look for material from other sources, such as contemporary newspapers, for balance.

What To Look For In The Files

- (a) The content of the correspondence – how factual or credible; how rich or dense; how coherent or sequential.
- (b) The language of officialdom – civil, deferential, formal; often arcane and now outdated (dating such as “the 15th instant;” “the 12th ultimo”); last word on the previous page reproduced as the first word on the current page; pecking order and social courtesies duly observed; occasional strictures delivered from the Colonial Office, by the Secretary of State for the Colonies.
- (c) The context or sub-text in the exchanges among officials and with external interested parties. These included cleavages between officials and entrepreneurs (officials' contempt for merchants), inter-departmental rivalry (Treasury versus Board of Trade; Railways versus Customs), politics of decision-making and personality differences, and contemporary worldview (racism, patriarchy and paternalism).
- (d) The process of sieving and distilling information within colonial officialdom. The Secretary of State and colonial governors were obliged to obtain written opinions of their advisers before reaching a decision. This entailed the harmonization of imperial and local interests but the Secretary of State's ruling was final. Such rulings were circulated in dispatches to colonial governors. Worth noting is the weight of opinion of advisers to the colonial governor or Secretary of State (for example, a certain J.E.W. Flood was very influential at the Colonial Office during the inter-war years), or of special interests, such as Big Business (represented by chambers of commerce in the United Kingdom and Nigeria).
- (e) The Minutes or side comments, often in long hand, shed light on intricacies of the decision-making process. Hence, one must learn to read cursive writing or decipher the initials of officials (or, use question marks when not sure), and follow the thread of the conversation. Often, cleavages among officials are revealed by the side comments.
- (f) The enclosures to main correspondence are vital supporting documents. These are tables of statistics, correspondence, background or police reports, court judgments, reports of commissions of inquiry, maps, photographs, geological surveys/reports, etc. These documents provide background to the correspondence or report in question. They constitute a treasure trove, which is as important as the text of the correspondence and Minutes.

¹¹ Olukoju, 2001 is an example of a paper based upon a single, though extremely rich, file.

- (g) Gaps and silences that are accidental or contrived. Pages or entire documents may be removed, damaged or illegible. Comments in ink may be smudged. Deliberate omissions can be inferred or retrieved from other sources.
- (h) A chronological approach to files is recommended, though the material may not be so arranged. For instance, an enclosure dated 1932 might be affixed to a starting correspondence of mid- or late 1933. The sequential or chronological arrangement of documents in the files will determine whether to read the files from the front or the back.

Challenges Faced By Researchers

Poor homework before going to the archives: Inadequate background reading and unfamiliarity with the literature. Lack of adequate preparation leads to waste of valuable time and resources.

Diffuse focus or ambiguous/ill-defined research topic: This makes it difficult to identify relevant material, leading to dissipation of efforts and resources.

Funding: Costs of accommodation, subsistence, transport and photocopying of documents can be prohibitive. This is especially the case when a self-sponsored researcher visits a foreign repository.

General Counsel and Possible Solutions

Do omnibus research: Researchers who can spare the time and resources should collect material on any subject beyond their immediate or primary subject of interest. They may never get a second chance of visiting that repository immediately or double-checking their facts once they have returned to base.

Make adequate preparation and be opportunistic: For metropolitan archives in the UK, the visiting researcher should take every opportunity of conference attendance to visit Kew Gardens or other relevant archives. This includes making adequate provision for extra days or a week after a conference. This requires extra funding and/or frugality, and it is best to have compiled a list of sources to be consulted ahead of the trip to save time and money. Registering with the

British Library at King's Cross confers an advantage as it also grants access to the Newspaper Library at Colindale, which is a major repository of newspapers from across the world.

Take copious notes (laptops are allowed at Kew Gardens and many other archives): It is necessary to number the correspondence or source material being collected in the order in which they appear in the file for orderly presentation when writing.

Make many copies: This gives a chance to return to the originals without covering long distances to retrieve missing data. Focus should be on the most important documents that are better copied than summarised. These days it is possible to use digital cameras instead of photocopies but you should check that the quality is acceptable (especially if you are using the built-in cameras in phones) granted that flash photography is usually prohibited.

Align Colonial Office (CO) and colonial archive files, where available, on the same subject: This makes for a richer pool of data. Omissions in one set of data can be filled from the other set.

Security or Back-up data: The possible loss of archival data should be anticipated. The use of electronic storage facilities or storage in the researcher's e-mail account are reliable means of data security or backup.

Systematize the data from the archives: Researchers should familiarize themselves with the data and reflect on them as they collect the archival data. This makes writing easy after returning to base.

Develop a narrative around the data: The researcher should identify the turning points in the unfolding narrative, looking for telling quotes for the title/sub-title of the proposed essay and to reinforce arguments in the body of the essay.

Be fastidious about documenting the archival sources: Note the date, author/subject of correspondence or report, and the correct file number. Double-check the data to prevent a mix-up

in the attributions. Find out from the source-material or from secondary sources the identity, status, interest and other peculiarities of the characters in the historical drama that is being reconstructed.

Go beyond the text: Draw inferences from wider contexts of the period, global events or particular episodes beyond the narrow one under consideration.

General Observations

The content of archival files in the Nigerian archives thins considerably from the late 1950s, with the take-over of the civil service by Nigerians during the era of internal self-government. So, one should not expect too much from the file holdings after 1955.

The UK archives are now open up to the 1970s in compliance with the law prescribing the number of years before documents are made public. I am not aware that Nigerian archives are able to do this given that the scars of our turbulent post-independence years are still fresh and the fact that most of the *dramatis personae* are still alive and eager to maintain a lid on potentially explosive disclosures.

Archival research demands diligence, tenacity, time and financial resources. But investment in it is always worthwhile. The titles of files may generate unrealistic expectations or be downright misleading. Too often bulky files or multiple volumes of files or files with exciting titles yield paltry results. Conversely, single files or apparently thin files have yielded nuggets of data or filled critical gaps in the narrative. Researchers will have to determine what material is relevant and what is dispensable without undermining the credibility of their research findings. At all points, there must be an eye for detail, the historian's forte. The ability to collect data from a broad range of sources, to master text and context, and to distill a compelling story from concrete, verifiable data, properly defines the professional historian.

Conclusions

It is evident from the foregoing that archival data of various types remain a key source material for historians of all generations. There is, therefore, the need for all stakeholders to collaborate to collect and preserve them. African countries, especially Nigeria, have a lot to do to preserve the rich collections in the archives which are being depleted by poor storage and rough handling. Professional associations, private and public archives, and all end-users should collaborate with government and other organizations to rescue and preserve (through digitization) perishing and vulnerable archives. Private collectors should be encouraged to turn their material over to the official archives, where they can be accessed by scholars and other interested persons. The funding of historical research should also be taken up as a matter of priority by relevant government and non-governmental agencies.

The proper use of the archives will enrich historical analysis and deepen the understanding of events and historical personalities. Experiences vary in the use of the archives but the ones presented in this essay indicate how best to mine metropolitan and colonial archives. The practice of historical scholarship demands the re-tooling of the historian's craft and a resolve to do History differently. But that is only possible if historians are competent craftsmen/women in the first instance. This is because the documents in themselves cannot translate to historical writing. It takes the proper training of researchers, especially historians, in the use of archival sources to ensure optimal engagement with the pile of documents in the archives.

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