

ENGAGING WITH COLONIAL ARCHIVES: A THIRTY-YEAR ODYSSEY

Keynote Speech at the Network of Nigerian Historians (NNH) Roundtable on “Engaging with the (Public) Archives,” Draper’s Hall, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, 16

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By

Professor Ayodeji Olukoju, Fellow, Nigerian Academy of Letters

Vice-Chancellor, Caleb University, Imota, Lagos State

Preamble

Director, IFRA, Members of the Network of Nigerian Historians (NNH), Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen. I am grateful for the privilege of delivering this keynote speech at the Roundtable/Workshop of the NNH, though I intended it as one of the plenary presentations. Hence, let nobody be under any impression that this presentation is anything other than introductory remarks, a mere appetizer to the main course.

Introduction

Archival sources (see the rough categorization below) constitute only one 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, it is important to stress that Nigerian historiography is acknowledged for its mastery of archival sources – in addition to various oral and written sources. Permit me at this juncture to cite an anonymous reader’s comment on a paper that I submitted to a Netherlands-based journal, *Itinerario*, in 2005. The paper, s/he noted, fitted into “a well-established Nigerian historiographical tradition of high-quality archival research.”¹ It is, therefore, imperative for our generation of Nigerian historians to sustain the legacy of high standards of engagement with archival (as well as other) sources. Accordingly, this presentation shall focus on my engagement with Nigerian and British archives on and off since 1979.

¹ ‘The paper was published as “King of West Africa”? Bernard Bourdillon and the Politics of the West African Governors’ Conference, 1940-42,’ **ITINERARIO: International Journal on the History of European Expansion and Global Interaction** (Leiden, Holland), vol. 30, no.1, 2006, pp.17-38. It won the University of Lagos Best Researcher in the Arts/Humanities Award for 2006.

Essentially, it aims to share experiences with, and offer suggestions to, younger researchers – the future of our profession.

A Thirty-Year Engagement With the Archives

I had my first encounter with the National Archives, Ibadan in August 1979, while collecting material for my Bachelor of Arts Degree 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, Ondo State. 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 on local government in Akokoland (c.1900-62), 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. 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 my brief remarks, 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 in an ascending order: District- Division-Province- Group of Provinces/Region-Colony or Central Secretariat-Colonial Office They are generally in bound volumes and listed chronologically. The latter are in files which 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 series 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 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. 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 detail sundry data on economic and social affairs – volume, value and direction of (foreign) trade; population, cost of living, health and urban affairs.

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 and uttering case in the Gold Coast (Ernest Adisi) 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. **Gazettes** are useful for research into the content of particular laws, proclamations and outcomes of commissions of inquiry.

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 easier to access.

What To 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
- (c) different titles for the same subject

I had to deal with these issues when working on multi-volume file on subjects such as ocean passages, currency counterfeiting, lighterage services, the politics of the West African Governors' Conference and urban residential segregation.

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 and loaded files on specific issues are often as rich as multi-volume ones (For example, the file on American schooner, *Allanwilde*, 1922). Either way, we should look for material from other sources, such as newspapers, for balance.

What To Look For In The Files

- (a) The content of the correspondence – how factual or credible; how rich or dense
- (b) The language of officialdom – civil, deferential, formal; often arcane and now outdated (dating such as “the 15th instant;” “the 12th ultimo”); first word on next page reproduced

as last word on 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 – cleavages (officials’ contempt for merchants), inter-departmental rivalry (Treasury versus Board of Trade; Railways versus Customs), politics of decision-making and personality differences, contemporary worldview (racism, patriarchy and paternalism)
- (d) The process of sieving and distilling information - Secretary of State and colonial governors were obliged to obtain written opinions of their advisers before reaching a decision; imperial and local interests were harmonized; finality of Secretary of State’s ruling, often in circular dispatches to colonial governors; and weight of opinion of particular adviser to Governor or Secretary of State (J.E.W. Flood), or of special interests, such as Big Business.
- (e) The Minutes or side comments, often in long hand – one must learn to read cursive or decipher the initials of officials (or use question mark when not sure)
- (f) The enclosures (tables of statistics, correspondence, background or police reports, court judgments, reports of commissions of inquiry, maps, photographs, geological surveys/reports, etc) - these are supporting documents that 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.
- (g) Gaps and silences –pages or entire documents may be removed, damaged or illegible; comments in ink may be smudged; deliberate omissions that can be inferred or retrieved from other sources
- (h) Chronological approach to files, 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/chronological arrangement of documents in the files will determine whether to read from the front or back of the file

Challenges Faced By Researchers

Poor homework before going to the archives: inadequate background reading and unfamiliarity with the literature.

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, photocopying

General Counsel/Possible Solutions

Do omnibus research – collect material on any subject beyond your primary and immediate subject of interest. You may never get a second chance of visiting that repository immediately or double-checking your facts once you have returned to base.

Make adequate preparation and be opportunistic: For metropolitan archives in the UK, take every opportunity of conference attendance to visit Kew Gardens or any other metropolitan archive, such as by making adequate provision for extra days or a week after the 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 would also grant you access to the Newspaper Library at Colindale, which is a major repository of newspapers from across the world.

Take copious notes (laptops allowed at Kew Gardens); number your correspondence or source material in the order in which they appear in the file for orderly presentation when writing

Make generous photocopies: this gives you a chance to review the originals without covering long distances to retrieve missing data.

Align Colonial Office (CO) and Nigerian colonial archive files, where available, on the same subject. This makes for a richer pool of data.

Back-up your data in storage facilities or e-mail them to your gmail account.

Systematize your data, be familiar with them and reflect as you collect to make your writing easy.

Develop a narrative around your data; identify the turning points; look for telling quotes for the title/sub-title of your essay and to reinforce arguments in the body of the essay

Be fastidious about documenting your sources: note the date, author/subject of correspondence or report, and the correct file number; double-check to prevent a mix-up in your 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 to draw inferences from wider contexts of the period, global events or particular episodes beyond the narrow one that you are considering

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, do 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 any investment in it is always worthwhile. Too often bulky files or multiple volumes of files or files with exciting titles have yielded paltry results. Conversely, single files or apparently thin files have yielded nuggets of data or filled critical gaps in the narrative. You will have to determine what material is relevant and what is dispensable without undermining the credibility of your 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, by distilling a compelling story from concrete, verifiable data, properly defines the professional historian.

Conclusion

It is evident from the foregoing that archival material 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. Nigeria has a lot to do to preserve even the rich collections in the archives which are being depleted by poor storage and rough handling. The

NNH and similar bodies should partner with government and other organizations to rescue and preserve (through digitization) perishing and vulnerable archives, and encourage private collectors to turn them 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, including Federal and State government parastatals, such as CBAAC, NCAC, NICO and LASRAB, and international bodies, such as Ford Foundation, SEPHIS, CODESRIA and IFRA. Happily, some of these bodies are represented here and one hopes that others too will join them in promoting the practice of History.

Finally, I hope that presentations at today's Roundtable will enrich our practice of the discipline of History. What is required is for us to re-tool and resolve to do History differently. But that is only possible if we are competent craftsmen/women in the first instance – precisely what workshops and roundtables such as this aim to achieve. On that note, I wish you fruitful deliberations and a happy outcome.

Thank you for listening. God bless.