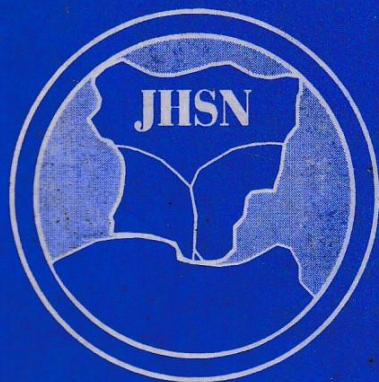


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## USING THE ARCHIVES FOR RESEARCH: A HISTORIAN'S EXPERIENCE

WINIFRED E. AKODA, Ph.D

### Introduction

From the 1970s onwards when African countries were basking in the euphoria of independence and African University Colleges became autonomous from European Universities, a new methodological approach to the study of African history was evolved. There was greater emphasis on indigenous African sources for the reconstruction of history championed by Jan Vansina and his successors, notably E. J. Alagoa.<sup>1</sup>

This indigenous source which gained acceptability and respectability was in the form of unwritten sources, notably Oral Tradition. It was argued that although Africans had developed systematic ways of preserving their history, the vast majority of them did not write down the history.<sup>2</sup> This assertion was a far cry from euro centric exposition which upheld written sources as the only source of history as exemplified by A. P. Newton that, "history begins when men begin to write".

Nonetheless, Oral Tradition became a veritable source for historical reconstruction, and ethnographic and archaeological sources became indispensable to its use. Although this new methodology was a major breakthrough in African historiography, its evolution impacted negatively on the use of the archives, many of which were established in the 1970's and 1980's. Researchers rather began to lay more emphasis on contemporary history many of which depended, to a large extent, on eyewitness accounts. In furtherance to this development, the effect of globalization with the increasing use of electronic data (via the internet) for research especially from the later part of 1980's, diminished the significance of archival research. Hence, some historians and researchers in general viewed archival research as less useful and imperious and bothered less about it. Many historians also found it strenuous and boring to undertake the rigorous activity of accessing endless volume of records usually

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Winifred E. Akoda, Ph.D, Department of History/Int'l Studies, University of Calabar, Calabar. E-mail: [dr--akoda@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:dr--akoda@yahoo.co.uk)



associated with archival research. Yet others are not even aware of the existence of an archive in their location. In the light of this, one quotation of Prof. O. E. Uya would suffice to illustrate to historians and researchers alike, the importance of archival research;

Although it is becoming increasingly fashionable, in this period of anti-intellectualism, to write history books without any significant archival research, it is still true that no monograph of significant depth and sophistication can be written without the long, tedious, often boring and unexciting exercise that archival research involves.<sup>3</sup>

The above comment largely illustrates the significance of archival records to the historian. In an age where it is becoming outdated for researchers/scholars to depend on archival sources, this paper attempts to renew the interest of historians and scholars alike in archival materials by highlighting, through personal experience, some fascinating historical documents that could aid in authenticating the history of the Nigerian nation.

## USING ARCHIVAL SOURCES FOR RESEARCH: A REFLECTION

My first experience in the archives was at the National Archives, Enugu and dates back to 1989 when I was a B. A. graduating student at the University of Calabar. While documenting my research on *"The Role of Efik Women in Calabar"*,<sup>4</sup> it became pertinent to consult and confirm certain historical issues pertaining to the history and role of women in Calabar. The success of my B. A. Thesis, lay partly on archival records obtained from the Enugu archives. The Calabar Provincial files (Calprof) which contained important historical records of the Calabar Province were relevant to the completion of my research. Few of these files were as follows: German factories at Calabar (Calprof 5/4/410); Myluis, E. N. "Intelligence Report" (Calprof 55/1/553); Stroker, "Intelligence Report" (Calprof 5/10/160, 1922); Adiaha Oku to Hon. Commissioner. Southern Province (Calprof 5/4/344) and Sunrise Traders (Calprof 17/1/140).

From 1989 to date, the archives have become invaluable and indispensable in my various researches. I had also learnt that every record was unique in its own right, important, and conveyed a message for the researcher.

As a master's degree student in the same department and institution in 1992, my urge to confirm some historical events about the origin of the Hausa migrants in Calabar led me to the National Archives both at Enugu and Calabar. The latter, which was established in 1989 and situated adjacent to the University on a street called Bateba, was devoid of any form of research or academic activity. It was disheartening to recall that although the archive, a major research institution was situated near the University geographically yet academically it was distant from it. Located in a serene environment outside the din of passers by, it was begging to be utilized by researchers, lecturers and students of the nearby University.

Incidentally, my M. A. thesis on *"Migrant Communities in Calabar: A Case Study of the Hausa, 1930 – 1966"*<sup>5</sup>, was largely written in that deserted environment. I confirmed some information obtained through oral data from the Hausa quarters at Bogobiri, which traced their origin in Calabar to 1922.

Archival records had actually shown that in a letter to the Colonial Administrator, Hon. H. Bedwell, the first group of Hausa migrants demanded for a site to build their quarters in 1917 stating that they had earlier made the request "about four years ago" but "unfortunately for us the war broke out" (see Calprof 5/7/632, NA/E). In another petition letter by Sarki Abubakar Bogobiri, one of the earliest settlers, he claimed to have been in Calabar for the "past thirty-nine years", which traces Hausa arrival to 1905 or earlier since the letter was written in 1944 (Calprof 17/1/532, NA/E). All these archival information assisted me in placing the origin of the Hausa in Calabar into a proper chronology.

Similarly, archival records demonstrated that there was a thriving cattle trade between Calabar and Fernando – Po (Equatorial Guinea), especially in the 1940's to 1960's. Other files that were invaluable included; "Hausa community in Calabar: Application for a site to build Quarters on Request (Calprof 5/7/632); "New Hausa Settlement" in "Judicial Privileges to Stranger Communities in Calabar", 1936 – 1941 (Calprof 3/1/1834); Cultural Organizations (Cadist 1/16/1317); Historical Events in Calabar Province: 1868 – 1961, (Cadist 1/17/1); Occupation of Communal Land by Strangers (Cadist 3/3/435) and Hausa Community in Calabar: General Correspondence, 1941 – 1966 (Cadist 3/3/96). These sources located both in the Calprof (Enugu) and Cadist (Calabar) files facilitated the successful execution of my thesis.

Beyond this, using these records, I have contributed two book chapters namely; *"The Socio – Economic Impact of Stranger Communities in Calabar: The Igbo and Hausa Since 1900"* and *"The Hausa Community in Calabar"*. The former can be found in the book, *History and Citizenship: Essays in Honour of Okon Edet Uya*<sup>6</sup>, while the latter is published in *The Efik and Their Neighbours*<sup>7</sup>.

As a historian, using the archives has been quite challenging but intriguing. Attempting to piece up materials that had been left in dilapidated state as a result of rodent infestations can be a very tedious exercise. The result of all this activity, though, can be extremely gratifying. In consideration of the latter, I had resolved to give all my researches what I would call an 'archival touch' before publication. That way, it would be possible to paint an accurate historical picture of any society or event especially in an era where politics is bound to becloud the judgement of many.

In 2002, when my Ph.D Thesis was in progress, my visit to the Calabar Archives, which had changed its location to the Northern Industrial Layout (Free Trade Zone), was uninterrupted. My Thesis, *"Calabar: A Cross River Metropolis, 1600 – 1960"*<sup>8</sup>, needed an 'archival touch'. Although in the course of the research I was at the Enugu archives, I found that at Calabar more significant to my area of study, and obtained volumes of records pertaining to my research focus. Most notable of these were the Cadist (Calabar District) files, which remained the major source of information for part of my fifth chapter, titled, "Calabar Under Colonial Rule". Some of these files are as follows; Local Government Reforms in Calabar Division, 1951 – 1955 (Cadist 13/1/87); Local Government Election (2), Urban District Council 1952 (Cadist 13/1/98A); Calabar Urban District Council, General Correspondence, 1956 – 1958 (Cadist 13/1/99); Calabar Native Court, 1953 (Cadist 13/1/760) and Efik – Qua – Efut Development committee, 1949 (Cadist 13/2/277). My Ph.D research is currently under review and would be published in the near future.

The completion of my Ph.D was to open new vista of opportunities in my romance with the archives. I was fascinated by new discoveries that could aid my researches and teachings as a History lecturer since 1993 in the University of Calabar, my alma mater. Nurtured academically by renowned historian, O. E. Uya, I had always borne in mind his words that, "Every nation builds its future on its history". Hence my enthusiasm in digging up forgotten aspects of our colonial and postcolonial history with a view to straightening out some of these records knew no bounds.

In accessing archival materials, my motive was to enliven history by documenting and interpreting some of the neglected records. This was a great challenge in the sense that every document, no matter how insignificant it may seem, is important to the historian. The onus, therefore, rests on the latter to unearth a source material and make history out of it. Indeed, acclaimed Nigerian historian, Adiele Afigbo, had identified some major challenges facing Nigerian historians<sup>9</sup>. Three of these are relevant to this study and are as follows; focusing our writing, studying and teaching history in such a way as to engender in the people an understanding of the past and present; deliberately attempting to incorporate into our historical studies the common people and those interpersonal social and economic forces that sustained and changed society; writing more biographies of our "authentic" heroes whose life would inspire others "to dare and achieve". These, which have posed a major challenge to my historical researches, stimulated my publication in the 2005/2006 Edition of the Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria (JHSN).

The article, *"The Significance of Private Records in Historical documentation"*<sup>10</sup>, gave life to the personal records of some Nigerians that excelled in their various disciplines overseas as doctors, lawyers, and engineers, some of whom returned to serve their fatherland. These could be the "authentic heroes" Professor Afigbo meant – people whose life would challenge others. Incidentally, celebrated historian, J. F. Ade – Ajayi, in his work, *Christian Missions in Nigeria*<sup>11</sup>, had associated the creation of elite with missionary education thereby exaggerating the role of missionaries in sponsoring education in Nigeria. Contrary to this view, archival records have actually pointed to the role of families and communities in engaging in self-help to sponsor their children's education within and outside Nigeria. Volumes of documents accessed in the National Archives have indicated that most of these students were privately sponsored students as written on their personal files. To buttress this point, I had read Sir Francis Akanu Ibiam's biography where Sam Aka Ibiam, his elder brother was seen to be the former's major financier while he was a Medical student in the United Kingdom<sup>12</sup>. This illustrates the fact that families and communities, during the colonial era, were conscious of their responsibility in providing their ward with qualitative education thereby helping to create the elite in their societies. The pomp and pageantry celebrations associated with the arrival of these overseas returnee students, after a successful academic sojourn, are better witnessed than imagined. Petition of ordinary people, whom we

know today as the common man, were also detected in the archives in the same research. These petitions were pointers to a society that was cosmopolitan in nature. Petitions cut across people of diverse backgrounds, within and outside Nigeria, who resided in Calabar as students, workers, businessmen, and professionals, amongst others. The archives had indeed provided answers to some questions that had aroused my curiosity. The cosmopolitan nature of the Calabar society arising from the influx of people of diverse origin – Ibibio, Igbo, Hausa, Ijo, Ghanaian, Sierra Leonian, Lebanese etc. explained why there was a thriving trade in women trafficking and prostitution between Nigeria and Ghana. Similarly, it was no more surprising to discover why there was a lucrative cattle export trade to Fernando – Po (Equatorial Guinea) on the Calabar waterways, or why Nigerians went en – mass to Fernando – Po and Gabon as paid laborers on their plantations. The following files are relevant in this regard and can be accessed in the National Archives, Calabar: Export of Cattle to Fernando – Po 1947 – 53 (Cadist 13/1/13); Export of Cattle to Fernando – Po, 1953 – 54, 1954 – 60 (see Cadist 13/1/414 and 13/1/415); Recruitment and Medical Examination of labor to Fernando – Po, 1961 – 60 (Cadist 3/3/324); Fernando – Po Recruits Petition Against Recruiting Agency, 1946 (Cadist 3/3/484); Recruitment of labor to Fernando – Po 1951 – 60 (Cadist 13/1/286, Vol 2); and Recruited laborers to Fernando – Po and Gabon, 1950 – 54 (Cadist 13/1/292).

It is interesting to note that apart from the sea route which facilitated movement in and outside Calabar, many foreign nationals, resident in the city were “ambassadors” of their homeland and provided Nigerians with first hand information of opportunities that abounded in their countries. That way, unemployed Nigerian job seekers were destined for Fernando – Po and Gabonese plantations while the young women saw Ghana as a country where greener pastures could be attained.

In the course of my research, I realized that records from the archives were inexhaustible. In the process, a file titled, “Prostitution”, (Cadist 3/3/238 and Cadist 13/1/939) captured my interest. Here, it was discovered that there existed a thriving trade in women for the purpose of prostitution between Nigeria and Ghana in the nineteen thirties. Hence, the generally accepted views that female trafficking was a post 1980 phenomenon would not hold sway. I resolved to write an article titled “*Trafficking in Women: The Nigeria – Ghana Experience, 1930 – 1955*” (in print). This research relied on archival records which established that the trade was an organized

one whereby family members, especially in the Obubra and Yakurr areas of the Cross River State region openly admitted to receiving a fee (amounting to some pounds) from every woman who practiced it (Cadist 3/3/238). The concerted effort made by the colonial government to prohibit this trade, as shown by administrative correspondences, is clearly captured in this file. This research concluded that, modern day trafficking in persons (with emphasis on women), was not a post – colonial phenomenon. It was only the continuation and amplification on greater scale, of an organized venture that had its roots in the colonial phase of the Nigerian nation.

It is interesting to note how archival sources aid in confirming or negating certain widely accepted historical beliefs. That is why the historian's most important hardware – manuscripts – are located in the archives waiting to be unearthed. Intelligence Reports, Legal documents, Government records, Parliamentary debates, Colonial and Post-colonial administrative matters/personnel amongst other inexhaustive records lie in want of historians, researchers and the public.

It is lamentable that these institutions, which are known to be the custodians of the documentary heritage of the nation, have not only been neglected by researchers and their like, but have been starved of government funds. The National Archives, Calabar, which has recently moved to its third and hopefully final location on Ekorinim road, is one of such archives in need of funding. Regional archives, those at Enugu, Ibadan and Kaduna, as well as state archives in other Nigerian towns could do with an increase in budgetary allocations to solve some of their boggling problems.

Indeed, the problems associated with Nigerian archives are similar everywhere. They are plagued with the destruction of valuable historical source materials arising from unsatisfactory methods of preservation and management, rodent infestation, poor ventilation, constant changes in location (as in the case of the National Archives, Calabar), all militate against proper records management which in turn destroys fragile documents dating back to several decades. In view of the delicate nature of these records, and the fact that some of them have even witnessed their ‘centenary anniversary’, these documents need to be treated with utmost caution for posterity sake.

Another problem plaguing Nigeria's storehouses of records is the location of some of these institutions in noisy areas which can be very frustrating to researchers. For instance, the National Archives, Port – Harcourt, situated on the ever busy Aba express road is unsuitable for any serious academic research and leaves much to be desired. It is therefore



Important that archives are positioned in serene environments, away from the hustle and bustle of city life.

Finally, the digitalization of archives in this era of technological advancement and globalization is certainly indispensable to effective records management. This has been the trend in developed countries like U.S.A. and U.K. where archival records have been reduced to electronic system for efficient accessibility, preservation and management. Presently, it is only the National Archives, Enugu that has achieved this feat. This major achievement should, as a matter of urgency, be extended to other Nigerian archives in order to extend the life span of many materials, most of which are in depressed conditions.

The problems plaguing the archives and the solutions proffered would only come to fruition if the Nigerian government takes cognizance of the important role played by the archives in nationhood by granting more funds to bring these challenges to a logical conclusion.

### Conclusion

In sum, there is no doubt that when we engage archives to authenticate our national history and thus get a better appreciation of the challenges and travails of national building from which we can draw enduring lessons can the country be certain of acceptable level of stability and progress.

### Endnotes

Archival Documents used in this research have been deliberately acknowledged in the body of the research and are listed after the Endnotes.

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- Cadist 13/1/85, NA/C** – Local Government Reforms in Calabar Division, 1951- 1955.
- Cadist 13/1/87, NA/C** – Local Government Reforms, Calabar Province, 1949 – 55
- Cadist 13/1/98A, NA/C.** Local Government Election (2), Urban District Council, 1952.
- Cadist 13/1/99, NA/C** – Calabar Urban District Council, General Correspondence, 1956-58
- Cadist 13/1/760, NA/C** – Calabar Native Court, 1953.
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- Cadist 3/3/484, NA/C** – Fernando – Po Recruits- petition against Recruiting Agency, 1946.
- Cadist 3/324, NA/C** – Recruitment and Medical Examination of Labor Fernando – Po, 1961 – 66
- Cadist 3/3/327, NA/C** – Remittances from Fernando – Po Laborers, 1959 – 64
- Cadist 13/1/292, NA/C** – Recruited Laborers Fernando – Po and Gabon (1950 – 54).
- Cadist 13/1/ 296, NA/C** – Remittances from Fernando – Po Laborers, 1959 – 64.
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- Cadist 13/1/414, NA/C** – Export of Cattle to Fernando – Po, 1953 – 54.
- Cadist 13/1/415, NA/C** – Export of Cattle to Fernando – Po, 1954 – 60.