

THE J.H. KWABENA NKETIA ARCHIVE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GHANA- LEGON

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Abstract: This report is on the J.H. Kwabena Nketia Archive at the University of Ghana, Legon, Accra. In the light of growing destruction of public archives in Ghana, mainly due to chieftaincy and land litigation but also because of the lack of a proper maintenance culture, this report will suggest that other, non-conventional archives, such as the J.H. Kwabena Nketia Archive should be explored by historians and researchers. This report highlights the contribution of J.H. Kwabena Nketia who sought to preserve information that is crucial at a time when the world seems to be abandoning most of the most important and significant aspects of Africa's cultural and artistic history.

Résumé: Ce texte est un rapport sur les archives de J.H. Kwabena Nketia situées à l'Université du Ghana, Legon, Accra. À la lumière de la destruction croissante des archives publiques au Ghana, principalement en raison des litiges fonciers et de chefferie, mais aussi en raison de l'absence d'une culture de la maintenance appropriée, le présent rapport suggère que d'autres archives non conventionnelles, telles que les archives de J.H. Kwabena Nketia devraient être exploitées par des historiens et des chercheurs. Ce rapport met en évidence la contribution de J.H. Kwabena Nketia à la préservation d'informations cruciales à un moment où le monde semble abandonner la plupart des aspects les plus importants et les plus significatifs de l'histoire culturelle et artistique de l'Afrique.

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Introduction¹

There are two archives in the University of Ghana, the University Archive and the J.H. Kwabena Nketia Archive, the latter a resource unit at the Institute of African Studies (IAS). The University Archive is a solely paper archive containing records of the entire university, while the J.H. Kwabena Nketia Archive, uniquely, is both audio-visual and paper. Both archives have a direct bearing on prominent people who made great contributions to the university, and it is interesting to note that the University Archive is located within the Balme Library. The Library is named after a British individual, David Mowray Balme, who was the first Principal when the University was founded in 1948. The J.H. Kwabena Nketia Archive is named after a Ghanaian. J.H. Kwabena Nketia was a world renowned ethnomusicologist and his archive has made ever greater contributions to teaching and research at the IAS, specifically in the sense that over the years it has promoted education and culture through the preservation and dissemination of African music, dance, history, and oral traditions.²

The J.H. Kwabena Nketia Archive has gone through various transitions to reach its current position. It began as a sound archive with holdings of results of various field research and collections from various parts of the country by J.H. Kwabena Nketia while he was in the Sociology Department of the University of Ghana. Most of the holdings were assembled in 1952, but steadily from the 1950s to the 1970s Nketia and his team recorded exclusive stories, songs and dances, and other oral and performance traditions throughout the ten regions of Ghana. The sound archive was augmented by the contributions of other ethnomusicologists, research fellows, staff, and visiting researchers of the Institute of African Studies.

The next phase of the archive began in 1992 when it was renamed the International Centre for African Music and Dance (ICAMD). The renaming had become necessary because the interest of the Centre expanded to include the collection and documentation of materials of African/Ghanaian music and dance, in order to supplement the already existing one at the IAS sound archives. However, in 2008 the entire collection

¹ We will like to acknowledge the financial assistance from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation through its Reinvigorating Humanities Research at the University of Ghana (REHURE-UG). Experience during research into the Female Cult of Okule in some selected archives located outside of the University of Ghana and later in the Nketia Archive enabled a contextual elaboration on the uniqueness of some of the collections in the Nketia Archive.

² *Institute of African Studies. Annual Report* (Legon: Institute of African Studies, 2015–2016), 45.

was donated back to the institute. The donation prompted its then director, Akosua Adomako Ampofo, to set up an Academic Resource Committee to put in place proper processes and procedures that could finally lead to the establishment of a true archive. As she put it: “An archive plays a significant role in memory and remembrance but the resources as received could simply be described as a stockpile of videos. Audios and papers (...) there is really no clue as to what is in there.” Ampofo therefore suggested that the paper records should be classified appropriately and to do so the expertise of university archivist Thomas Anning was drawn upon.

A whole block at the old site of the Institute of African Studies was earmarked for the archive. The block was re-modeled with a number of offices in the building being knocked down so that the archive became a seven-unit facility made up of a reception area, a listening station, a paper-reference section, a viewing and lecture room, a repository for paper documents, a repository for audio-visual materials, a digitization laboratory, a recording studio, and office space for staff.

In February 2015 the completion of the process with all the documents and audio and video tapes in place allowed the formal opening and naming of the premises and its archive as the J.H. Kwabena Nketia Archive.

The Audio-Visual and Paper Documents at the Archive

The J.H. Kwabena Nketia Archive currently houses audio-visual heritage material, Arabic manuscripts, photograph albums, funeral brochures, and the Institute’s historical paper records. The whole collection includes a variety of field records from all the ten regions of Ghana. However, the earliest recordings by J.H. Kwabena Nketia are the most voluminous and systematic in the archive. The records include various traditional music of the regions, such as drumming, as well as records of marriages, court cases, sterility, pregnancy, traditional midwifery, libations, the History of Okuma, storytelling, the preparation of Ghanaian staple foods like fufu and T.Z, and other customs in Ghana. The resources at the archive include some of the oldest forms of storage alongside current methods, with things like old reel to reel tapes, DAT’s, vinyl LP’s, mini-DV’s, cassettes, DVD’s, CD’s, VHS, and Hi8.

The catalogues are quite extensive with the music catalogue being the fullest among the audio-visual holdings. That is no accident, for Nketia, as an ethnomusicologist, was clearly passionately enthusiastic in his profession. The music catalogue includes various genres of Ghanaian music such as highlife, hiplife, traditional songs, neo-traditional songs, arts, and gospel music, as well as music of other cultures not only in Africa but from Europe and Asia too. This archive may therefore be said to preserve Ghana’s “cultural traditions and post-independence

music history” while not leaving out any record of other African and Western cultures.³

The archive contains not only audio-visual material but there is too a section with paper records. The paper archive is noted for preserving the institute’s memory, including as it does documentation of the opening of IAS by Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, for example, and J.H. Kwabena Nketia’s personal files which in addition to correspondence contain a mountain of information on his published and unpublished ethnomusicology research, as well as his own work on Akan proverbs and dirges, and records of songs. The archive is filled out with other documents and the correspondence of past directors and deputy directors, the various academic sections, units of the institute, visiting scholars, senior members, and senior and junior staff. There is information on the chalets, the Yiri Lodge guesthouse, the new IAS building, and about links between the institute and other universities and organizations within Ghana and outside it. The paper records, labeled and shelved in high-quality storage boxes and all in unique files – some of which are stamped “Institute of African Studies” – reside in the paper repository overseen by the Research Assistant in charge of managing data. However, researchers consult them much less often than they do the audio-visual heritage.

³ Detailed descriptions of the Ghanaian music holding at the archive include: GH/T 1 - GH/T 24 which comprise Traditional Songs including Ritual Music, Recreational Music of Anlo, Akom and Tigare Music in Ghana; GH/NT 1 - GH/NT 3 comprise Neo Traditional Songs including Hewale Sounds and the Pan African Orchestra; GH/HP 1 – GH/HP 16 comprises Hiplife Songs featuring the likes of Sarkodie, Mzbel, Obrafoo, Lord Kenya, Becca, Batman, Bisa Kdei, Kwabena Kwabena and Abrewa Nana just to mention a few; GH/G 1 – GH/G 34 1 comprises Christian Religious Songs popularly referred to in Ghana as Gospel music, featuring the likes of Professor Kofi Abraham, Diana Asamoah, Daddy Lumba, Daughters of Glorious Jesus, Bernice and Jane, Esther Smith, and others; GH/ART 1 – GH/ART 11 comprises Art Music featuring various choral choirs and mostly Nketia and Agya Nimo; and GH/HL 1 – GH/HL 107 1 comprises Highlife featuring Agyeman Opambuo, George Darko, Jewel Ackah, A.B. Crentsil, C.K. Mann, E.T. Mensah, King Bruce, Dr. Paa Bobo, J.A. Adofo, Nana Acheampong, Kojo Antwi, Daddy Lumba, Oheneba Kissi, Dada K.D., Amakye Dede and Kaakyire Kwame Appiah, and The Ghana Dance Ensemble, just to mention a few. Please note that Professor Kofi Abraham is not an academic. This great composer, song writer, and performer was born as Abraham Kofi Boakye on 5 August 1954 to Methodist parents at Sekyedumase in the Ashanti Region. He was given the title “Professor” at Koforidua by a member of the ruling government in Ghana under the presidency of Hilla Limann (1979–1981). His contribution to gospel music goes back to 1970s and the role he played in the music industry opened the doors to the growth of gospel music in the country.

The paper documents in the Nketia Archive follow the same cataloguing system as the University Archive.⁴ There are approximately 218 paper records in the database of the General Records. The catalogue begins with the General Record comprising correspondence and administrative records, with staff personal files for both senior and junior staff and senior IAS members seemingly the most numerous. Fortunately, all the material for this archive are housed under one roof, unlike in the cases of certain archives elsewhere in Ghana where one can even find papers stored on the veranda.⁵

The Arabic and Ajami manuscripts and photograph albums too are to be found in the paper archive. The Arabic manuscripts are greatly relevant to the history of Ghana and West Africa as they contain information on themes which include: *Al-Tarik* (History), *Al-Tawid* (Theology), *Al-Tasawuf* (Mysticism), *Al-Figh* (Jurisprudence), *Al-Adab Al-Arabi* (Arabic Literature), *Ilm-al-Falak* (Astrology), *Al-Saydala* (Pharmacology), and *Ar-Rasa'il-As-siyasiyya* (Political Treaties). The Arabic Manuscripts were assembled in the 1950s and 1960s and amount to approximately five hundred manuscripts. Ninety percent of the documents are in Arabic with the rest in African languages, especially Hausa, Fulfulde, and Mamprule. They are broadly catalogued as IASAR/169 and IASAR/114.

The photograph albums mostly contain photographs of researchers, their informants and members of the communities they researched and objects relevant to them. Other pictures of interest are of conferences and seminars held at the IAS. There are also funeral brochures and posters, with the brochures being an especially rich source. As Edem Adotey argues, in Ghana and other regions of West Africa the funeral poster is an important part of the funerary ritual, being an arena of contestation, negotiation, affirmation, and elaboration of beliefs and conflicting views. Adotey indicates that even though brochures and posters are made with a local

⁴ Some of the holdings with their catalogue numbers include; IAS/3/1/78 titled Nkrumah Chair with data on Kwame Nkrumah Chair, 2010, the life and work of Kwame Nkrumah, and other Nkrumah papers; IAS/3/1/44 titled NUFU; IAS/3/1/72 titled G.O.C. Relations to data on National Commission on Culture, Ghana Academy of Arts and Science and Correspondence with Ministries; IAS/3/1/65 containing data on Visits to IAS, 1996–2005; IAS/3/1/56 containing data on Manhyia Records Office Kumasi, 1980–1997 and General Correspondence Manhyia Archives, 1997–2009; IAS/3/1/48 titled Correspondence with data on various correspondence with Faculty of Arts; IAS/3/1/24 titled Confidential Series with data on African Studies-Advisory and Consultative Committee 1959–1963; IAS/1/1/1–3, IAS/1/5–8, IAS/2/1–1A, IAS/2/1/2–3 to IAS/2/1/33–37; IAS/JS/A labeled Personal Files with data on senior staff, junior staff, senior members, and PhD students.

⁵ Cf. Samuel Aniegye Ntewusu, “Serendipity: Conducting Research on Social History in Ghana’s Archives,” *History in Africa* 41 (2014), 417–423.

audience in mind they are a very useful source for general historical enquiry into how people address the subjects of kinship and other relationships.⁶

A Unique Advantage of the Archive

The archive has certain unique strengths. There are currently three permanent staff and three temporary staff, the permanent staff including a Senior Member (Archivist), a Research Assistant (Database Administrator), and another Research Assistant (Audio Digitization Technician). The temporary staff include two national service personnel and an intern. The archive benefits from a Senior Research Assistant (Video Editor) and a Research Assistant (Photographer). Such varied expertise is a great advantage.

Moreover, this archive is unique for its audio-visual collection and is easy to find on the University of Ghana campus. Opened less than a decade ago it has already served a large number of researchers and students from within Ghana, as well as from Europe and the United States. Over the years the archive has built good relationship with other archives both within and outside Ghana. An example of one of the archive's initiatives, which was supported by a link to the United States, is the current digitization project known as the "Making African Academic Resources Accessible" (MAARA). The Nketia Archive is working in partnership with New York University's Moving Image and Archiving Programme (MIAP) through a research initiative, Audiovisual Preservation Exchange (APEX).⁷ For the project, staff were trained to "conserve, digitize and make accessible 400 hours of audio-visual heritage materials for teaching, scholarship and programming." After the project those 400 items could be accessed worldwide via the University of Ghana's online catalogue and audio files.

The archive has an open acquisition policy by which it encourages researchers and students to bring their own privately acquired audio-visual materials and paper documents so that copies may be made for the archive, enabling the donors to retain the originals. Most such recordings and documents are labeled with only the name of the depositor, but as well as their field notes many include pictures taken by researchers and students during their field work. Recently individuals outside the academic community have started bringing in their private video recordings of their out-doorings, engagements, weddings, and funerals.

Certainly, this initiative makes the archive unique and very different from the State Archives that seek to preserve only documents relating to

⁶ Edem Adotey, "Where is My Name? – Contemporary Funeral Posters as an Arena of Contestation and (Re)negotiation of Chiefly Relations Among the Ewe of Ghana and Togo," *History in Africa* 45 (2018), 59–69.

⁷ *Institute of African Studies. Annual Report*, 45.

the government, particularly those of the various Ministries, Departments, and Agencies of the State. They are under strict regulation and are required to eliminate what the State Archives might consider “useless files or papers” and retaining only what they term “valuable ones.”⁸ The categorization of files into two such broad themes of usefulness and uselessness could be deeply disadvantageous to researchers since what the government might consider useless might instead be very useful to a researcher. It is in that light that this report seeks to encourage researchers to consider the Nketia Archive, for it considers everything potentially useful, leaving the final decision to the researcher.

Some Warnings on the Use of the Archives

Almost all the paper and audio-visual records at the archive are in good condition. The staff do their very best to preserve the materials, observing the rules of best practice and employing the right management skills. As a rule, the higher the temperature the quicker any archival material will deteriorate because higher temperatures promote the chemical reactions which quicken the degradation of archival materials. Holdings in the tropics are therefore at very high risk of degradation. Accordingly, the lights are meticulously switched off in all rooms unless a document or collection is being retrieved and the air conditioning is usually in use to regulate the temperature – although it is switched off when the staff close the premises at the end of the day. At first sight, that action might not appear to be advisable but if the air conditioning were to remain perpetually operational the risk of losing all the records to fire would be unacceptably high.

Useful as this archive could be there are however a few warnings for any researcher. Even though almost all the documents are in good condition, the acidic elements in all paper make some of the records fragile. Therefore the staff closely supervise how the records are handled. The same applies to the audio-visual records, the fragility of which obliges the staff to cleanse and repair the records regularly.

Moreover, there are difficulties in playing back certain materials created on obsolete media carriers because of the unavailability of suitable playback devices in Ghana and the difficulty of purchasing and shipping them into the country. This sometimes frustrates the work of researchers who might be highly excited to find certain materials only to realize they cannot gain access to the content. Some of the original materials are in deplorable states so that even when there is playback equipment its very use would put the materials at risk of further damage. Such material is therefore indeed preferably best left untouched.

⁸ Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Koforidua, ERG 1/14/19, Achieves, 1982.

Useful as the Arabic records might be, none of the staff can read Arabic, Hausa, Fulfulde, or Mampruile and so cannot guide researchers on the specific content of most of the files in those languages. Finally, the archive is completely dependent on electricity. The rooms are naturally dark and there is no sensible way for any document to be retrieved if the lights go out. The reading room is fully air-conditioned but without electricity could not be used because the windows are too small for the natural atmosphere to be tolerable to anyone wishing to conduct research. So if there were a power cut, even if one could perhaps use a pocket torch to retrieve a document, it would be practically impossible to study it.

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