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Out of the ashes: rethinking loss in the African archive

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ABSTRACT

African archives were predominantly outgrowths of the colonialist machinery, essential armoury in the mechanisms of control which paid little attention to comprehensively documenting the cultures and pasts of the subjugated peoples. Consequently, the genesis of conventional African archives was constituted by loss, a fact perhaps dramatically signified by the string of fires and other disasters to have hit African archival repositories from as early as 1919. Yet still, the embers of these conflagrations provide opportunities for critical reconsiderations of loss that would lead to theoretical and practical gains in the African archive. Archival loss can prod African archivists towards new ontologies of praxis and conceptions of archive that would enable recovery of all the varied registers of the African archive. Specifically, the paper examines the creation and work of the J.H. Kwabena Nketia Archives (at the University of Ghana's Institute of African Studies) and the Likpe Traditional Area Community Archives as archival sites of resistance and challenge to loss that leverage community and institutional partnerships to build and recover the African archive. Ultimately, these archives' work, and the general "African archival turn" advocated for here, have implications for African Studies and the decolonising of knowledge production in and about Africa.

KEYWORDS

Archival loss; J.H. Kwabena Nketia Archives; Likpe traditional area community archives; African studies

Introduction

The image of a fire-gutted African archive is, sadly, all too common. From as early as 1919, when fire destroyed the Secretariat building housing archives of the territory that is now Malawi (Lihoma 2021), African archival institutions have been hit by a string of disasters which, investigations invariably reveal, could have been prevented. For example, the fires that engulfed the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation's Audiovisual Library in 1989 spread quickly and blazed uncontrollably for hours because the fire extinguishers on site were not working. Understandably, the destruction of often rare materials frustrates researchers and other users of archives. Yet, this distress, one dare says, pales in comparison to the heartache of the African archivist who believes that a little more respect for the profession and resources for its professionals and repositories would mitigate the frequency and degree of loss occasioned by these disasters. Furthermore, there is a sense in which these incidents remind the keepers and theorists of these archives that conventional African archives are constituted by loss.

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However, beyond these understandable frustrations at the loss they constantly face, this paper would like to suggest that the embers of these conflagrations provide the African archive opportunities for a critical reconsideration of loss that can lead to theoretical and practical gains. Examining the creation and work of the J.H. Kwabena Nketia Archives of the University of Ghana's Institute of African Studies ("Nketia Archives") and the Likpe Traditional Area Community Archives as archival sites of resistance and challenge to loss that leverage community and institutional partnerships to build and recover the African archive, the paper argues that rethinking loss can – indeed, should – prod African archival practitioners towards new ontologies of praxis and conceptions of archive that would enable recovery of all the varied registers of the African archive. Ultimately, these archives' work, and the general "African archival turn" that is advocated for in the discussion, have implications for African Studies and the decolonising of knowledge production in and about Africa.

To build a foundation for its arguments, this paper will turn next to examining the various registers of loss in the African archive. It will then explore the establishment and work of the Nketia Archives as an archive that was visionary, if somewhat unintentionally so, in capturing key aspects of the African archive before they were lost to the passage of time. Following this, the paper discusses the Likpe Traditional Area Community Archives ("Likpe Archives"), a newly established community archive in the Oti Region of Ghana dedicated to recovering memories and materials that are endangered and are susceptible to other categories of loss. Being the first such community archives in the country, the possibilities the Likpe Archives present for the archival landscape in Ghana is certainly very exciting.[1] Finally, the paper considers the implications that rethinking loss in the African archive can have for knowledge production and the study of Africa; in other words, the link between loss, decolonisation of the African archive and African Studies.

Exploring the registers of loss in the African archive

Conventional archives in Africa were introduced as "a technique of colonial rule" (Decker 2013) and were predominantly outgrowths of the colonialist machinery. By their basic function as essential armoury in the mechanisms of control, colonial archives paid little attention to comprehensively documenting the cultures and pasts of the peoples under subjugation unless the information was relevant to the advance of the colonial project.[2] Consequently, with this neglect of the cultural texts and indigenous documentary and knowledge ways of the peoples inherent in their establishment, conventional African archives' genesis was constituted by loss, a fact perhaps dramatically signified and reiterated by fire disasters. Examples of these include: the fires at the University of Cape Town's Jagger Library (2021), Malawi's Mzuzu University Library (2015), Ghana's Foreign Affairs ministry (2009) and the succession of fires that engulfed Sierra Leonean institutions, destroying law court records and government records (1991, 1990, 1988), to name a few.[3] Fire may be the most dramatic cause of loss to the African archive, but it is not the sole one; other causes of loss are discussed below.

On the eve of independence, the archives of many former British colonies were spirited out of the territories – illegally, some would argue – and, if they were not destroyed upon arrival in the United Kingdom, were locked away in the basement of

the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO).[4] This created another order of loss in the African archive. Although, perhaps, the most well-known case of these euphemistically termed "migrated archives" are Kenya's, newly liberated nations all across the continent began their political existence without documents potentially vital to their effective administration. Thus, it might not be an exaggeration to say that the unavailability of these African archives to the successor governments of the territories, to which they rightfully belonged, rendered governance in the former colonies less effective than it may have been had this documentary heritage been accessible.[5] Certainly, having access to the most well-known of these migrated archives assisted the Mau Mau suing the British government for torture and abuse to win their case.

While fires have contributed to the accidental loss of archives across the continent, they have also featured as deliberate attempts to literally purge the national narrative of an excoriated political personality or party. For example, in addition to the toppling of the deposed leader's statue in front of Parliament house, the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah's regime was accompanied by soldiers ransacking his offices and lighting up its contents in a bonfire.

Beyond such wilful destruction, loss has also occurred in the post-colonial African state through the obstruction or autocratic policing of the archives in both its composition (that is, what gets included despite the demands of archival best practices) and use (who can access it). In Uganda, as William Musamba's contribution in this volume elaborates (Musamba and Byaruhanga Rukooko 2024), there have been occasions where the national archives have been closed more than open, and when opened, approval decisions for use often came from the presidential palace. This sort of situation, Omnia el-Shakry (2015) notes in the Middle Eastern context, has ironically rendered the operations of the colonial state far more visible than those of the nation states that succeeded them.[6]

Another dimension of the post-colonial state's contribution to loss in the African archive is in the limited resources made available to most national archives. Invariably this lack of support stems from a poor understanding of the work of archives and a poor appreciation of the important role they play in a nation's development.[7] Often the most pressing need is adequate humidity and temperature-controlled space suitable for managing records in the hot and humid conditions found in most sub-Saharan African countries. In Ghana, for example, the Public Records and Archival Administration Department's (PRAAD) regional offices do not have physical facilities of their own, and are typically spared a few rooms in the regional coordinating councils' premises. Many archival materials languish under stairwells or on balconies and verandahs exposed to dust, pests and the vagaries of the weather, the information they contain deteriorating with each passing day. In some instances, these neglected materials end up in the informal economy, precious commodities purchased by streetside food vendors from poorly paid public workers seeking to supplement their inadequate pay; vendors use the papers to wrap their wares.[8] Other archival materials suffer a less delectable fate. The historical materials documenting Ghana's military rule under General Acheampong, that historian Stephan Miescher found himself trampling on in the dungeons of the Christiansborg Castle, Osu, had been thrown on the ground to mop up the incoming surf (Miescher (2009) as cited by Decker 2013).

Lastly, and perhaps most critically, loss occurs due to the generally conservative orientation of African archivists' professional training and perspective of what constitutes the archive(s). This is not peculiar to the region, of course, and African archivists and archival scholars share this conservative view with several colleagues worldwide. Challenging this conventional view of archives in the recent past, however, has been the "archival turn," a significant post-structuralist perspective in humanities scholarship which has expanded the boundaries of the archive beyond the literal physical repositories and the materials within them. Archivists and archival scholars in the global North have begun to critically engage these conversations, being prodded by and adopting some ideas while discarding others as irrelevant chaff in the archival profession's scheme of things. This engagement is generally not happening on the African continent.[9] Indeed, personal observation and anecdotal evidence suggests that some African archivists and scholars are either suspicious of, resistant to, or slow to accept the more expansive ideational definitions of archives and inclusive models of practice that the archival turn has encouraged. Yet, because Eurocentric intellectual frameworks continue to frame archival theory and practice, the ways "archivists and researchers produce knowledge about and through archives" (Gordon 2014) remain delimited. Thus, it is clearly imperative that African archival practitioners and scholars must consider and practice decolonial archival strategies which would counter the archival frameworks operative in most African archives that (in)directly marginalise African cultural contexts and alternative modes of documenting such as those Toyin Falola (2017) has termed ritual archives.[10] Thinking through varied African documentary practices as "particular kinds of knowledge and styles of reasoning" and welcoming understandings of the archive "as a complex system of embedded rules that determines the production of knowledge" (Decker 2013) in our practice will, I am arguing, help African archivists counter loss in the African archive, ultimately leading to a positive impact for knowledge production in and about Africa.

The preceding point has repercussions for considerations of the relationship between archives and African Studies. The following sections will explore how the work of two Ghanaian archives, one situated in an African Studies research institute, attend to a recovery of the African archive from the various registers of loss discussed here and, in the process, contribute not only to the process of decolonising the African archive but support African Studies scholars and programmes in their quest to decolonise knowledge.

The accidental archivist J.H. Kwabena Nketia and his archive(s): tales of recovery

> We in the school of music and drama are deeply committed to African culture, and more especially to the performing arts of Africa. We believe that African traditional arts should be recorded, they should be preserved, they should be studied. But we believe also that they should not merely be studied, recorded, preserved, but practiced as living art. We believe also that the art must develop and that the study of African traditions should inspire creative experiments in the African idiom. (Nketia 1963 convocation speech, cited in Harper and Opoku-Boateng 2019)[11]

The late emeritus professor and acclaimed African music scholar and composer, Joseph Hanson Kwabena Nketia, began his academic career at the University of Ghana (UG), Legon, in 1952, at the Department of Sociology. Kofi Busia, the department head, brought the then Presbyterian Training College, Akropong music teacher Nketia to UG because of his background in linguistics and social anthropology (Djedje 2012; Wiggins 2005).[12] Due to his deep childhood exposure to the music and performances of his people, Nketia had a keen interest in documenting these, recognising that the culture was already under threat of losing some of these traditions in the face of imported Western music and dance styles. For example, possibly because of the guitar's growing popularity, use of the Akan *seperewa* stringed instrument was in decline by the 1950s. Nketia was also interested in studying and discovering "the basis of our traditions," at this moment just prior to Ghana's independence, "to find ways of applying that knowledge to culture and development" (Djedje 2012). Busia secured a Land Rover jeep, equipment and a technician from Ghana Broadcasting Corporation for Nketia who began touring all Ghana's regions recording and conducting interviews. Nketia continued this fieldwork even after moving to the UG's newly created Institute of African Studies (IAS) as a research fellow. In 1962, when a School of Music, Dance and Drama was created as part of the Institute, Nketia was appointed its director. By then he had already recorded a substantial amount of music and traditions of the country. Three years later, Nketia became the first African director of the IAS, a position he remained in until his retirement in 1979. After a long "post-retirement" break spent working in the United States, first teaching at the University of California Los Angeles, then at the University of Pittsburgh, Nketia returned to UG and established the International Centre for African Music and Dance (ICAMD).

Nketia formed ICAMD with the hundreds of reel-to-reel tapes from his fieldwork containing interviews, drumming styles of different ethnic groups (such as the Akan, Dagomba, Gonja), festivals, puberty rite music, funeral dirges, brass bands and *gyil* (xylophone) music of the Upper West region.[13] At ICAMD, Nketia continued to collect the complex of texts, ideas, symbols, shrines, images and performances described by Falola as "ritual archives" that "allow us to understand the African world," and he went as far as employing "human archives," people who embodied this knowledge of Ghanaian traditions.[14] According to Falola, ritual archives are the conglomeration of words, objects, experiences and practices that are:

> . . . huge, unbounded in scale and scope, storing tremendous amounts of data on both natural and supernatural agents, ancestors, gods, good and bad witches, life, death, festivals, and the interactions between the spiritual realms and earth-based human beings. To a large extent, ritual archives constitute and shape knowledge about the visible and invisible world . . . they contain shelves on sacrifices and shrines, names, places, incantations, invocations, and the entire cosmos of all the deities and their living subjects among human and nonhuman species. (Falola 2017, 703)

Such an archive with its oral, visual, performative and metaphysical components would have been unrecognisable as archival to colonial administrators (and indeed, as alluded to earlier, the African archivists who succeeded them). Being largely uncapturable by the theories, philosophies and conventions of traditional archival administration, these archives were also often belittled and dismissed by "those with neither the patience nor

the desire to understand [our legends, parables, traditions and lore]," as Tale and Alefaio (2009), speaking on the Fiji context, put it.

But, as the excerpt from the convocation speech he gave in 1963 quoted at the beginning of this section makes clear, Nketia clearly thought that the material he collected was important and he was deeply committed to the work of recovering all registers of the African archive. This pan-Africanist mission was clearer at ICAMD where Nketia envisioned the centre not simply as a "Ghanaian thing, but as a coordinator of something that is shared by Africans" (Wiggins 2005). Indeed, ICAMD heralded the expansion of Nketia's earlier collecting and documentation efforts to include materials on music and dance from across the African continent in addition to documenting these cultural expressions in Ghana (Opoku-Boateng et al. 2020).

In 2008, existing archives at the IAS and ICAMD's predominantly audiovisual archives were merged to form the J.H. Kwabena Nketia Archives in honour of Nketia, and an entire block of IAS's old site was given to house the archives.[15] The IAS archives were mostly paper and photographs that documented the IAS's institutional memory, including its founding and Nketia's tenure as director. Other paper records held at the Nketia Archives include: Nketia's personal files; his published and unpublished research notes as well as those of IAS research fellows, students and researchers; and 500 manuscripts, ninety per cent of which are in Arabic, and the rest in Hausa, Fulfulde and Manmprule. Interestingly, despite their richness, the Nketia Archives' paper records are consulted less often than the audiovisual materials.[16]

Nketia's commitment to preserve African cultural and historical information continues in Judith Opoku-Boateng's tenure as the Nketia Archives' current archivist. In public talks, Opoku-Boateng often credits Nketia's 1963 speech as motivation to push beyond conventional archival practice to document and preserve the cultural activities and stories of Ghana's rich cultural heritage. Therefore, she and her staff go out into the field to record cultural events and sometimes bring community members to the archives' oral history room to conduct interviews that give further insights and contexts about the events. Like Nketia's involving "human archives" at ICAMD, these activities guided by an African-centred epistemology which values African memory ways counter the loss that can occur when these dimensions of the African archive are not collected. This marks the Nketia Archives as simultaneously an archive of, and a generative space for, African creativity and knowledge production.

Still, for the Nketia Archives and other audiovisual archives in Ghana (and, generally, on the African continent), even when materials have been collected or saved, insufficient funding, hot and humid climes that are unfriendly to archival materials, and obsolescence of the media formats on which the material is recorded, means the archive is constantly under threat of loss. Even so, Opoku-Boateng believes African archivists need to move beyond laments to ask how, within their difficult environment, can a culture of collective care of heritage materials be promoted (Harper and Opoku-Boateng 2019). She has thus sought training opportunities for herself and her staff, and the Nketia Archives have secured and benefitted from several short- and long-term training and digitisation programmes, including Making African Academic Resources Available (MAARA) and the New York University's Moving Image Archiving Preservation programme's Audiovisual Preservation Exchange (APEX).[17] The Nketia Archives have also been the site of international events attended by heritage professionals from across Africa,

including the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM)'s Sustaining Sound and Image Collections' (SOIMA) 2017 international course and, under the auspices of the IAS, the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives 2018 conference where several tutorials and workshops were held; these particularly benefited local audiovisual archivists. Thus, with its networks and the technical know-how it has gained through these international heritage preservation trainings and digitisation projects, the Nketia Archives are championing strategies to address resource challenges through institutional partnerships and knowledge transfer with other audiovisual archives in Ghana. This is vital work as these archives are a crucial repository that care for the moving image and recorded sound medium that capture Africa's living and embodied archives.

Other models of recovery: the Likpe traditional area community archives

> . . . we need to work at the development of community archiving to ensure the proper preservation of our documentary and cultural heritage. (Onai 2023)

In a sense what Nketia did was to go out into communities and bring the archive of their memories and traditions back to (a building in) Accra, a strategy Opoku-Boateng and her team continue. While these activities and advocacy of the Nketia Archives to counter loss in the African archive are valuable, the recorded materials remain outside the communities, although available to them at the archives. Archival scholars in indigenous/settler contexts have been debating whether making archives of the community accessible is a democratic enough solution to address issues of cultural theft from the communities or whether repatriation of materials is the only fitting response. While the dynamics are not the same in this case, and the Nketia Archives continues to be tireless in its efforts at inclusivity and ensuring regional representation in its collections, the fact remains that for some communities or community members whose traditions are preserved there, the Nketia Archives *are* inaccessible. Beyond the distance of its physical location in Accra (approximately 16 hours away from the country's northernmost point), its locus on an academic campus could unintentionally be an alienating barrier to some.

This sense of estrangement has been recorded in archival spaces elsewhere, especially among minoritised communities in the global north. In response, community archives, that often operate on principles of "participation, shared stewardship, multiplicity of formats and views, activism and reflexivity" (Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez 2016), have developed, although not without generating some debate among archival scholars, about exactly how the term's component parts are constituted. In the African context teeming with a multiplicity of diversities (ethnic, linguistic, religious and documentary traditions, to name just a few), these conversations are salient.

Archival scholars writing about community archives acknowledge that the concept of "community" is ambiguous (Bastian and Alexander 2009) and fraught with tension, regarded by some as a reductive reference to ethnic, racial, religious or gender identifiers (Flinn and Stevens 2009, 5) which can be, to adopt Anderson's (1983) formulation, little more than imagined social constructions. Flinn et al. (2009, 73), for example, define community as "any manner of people who come together and present themselves as such." Others note that the boundaries of a community may be agreed upon by its

members or be putative or imposed upon them (Sheffield 2017). Jeanette Bastian (2003), theorising the "community of records" concept which has since been utilised extensively by the archival literature on community archives, refers to a community as both a "record-creating entity and as a memory frame that contextualizes the records it creates."

As has already been intimated in the discussion above, the term "archives" are conventionally understood in a particular way by archival scholars. Thus, in addition to the indigenous "documents" with their unconventional formats produced by African communities, traditional archival theory disqualifies the artwork, books, postcards, pamphlets and other ephemera commonly collected and preserved by community archives as they do not meet the contextual and other conditions archival material ostensibly should (Sheffied 2017, 360).

Despite the attendant theoretical contestations around them, there is little doubt that, in practice, as spaces that collect, preserve and make accessible documents, photographs, oral histories and collections of material (digital or physical) that are created by, for, and about a community of people and their locality (Sheffied 2017, 360–361), community archives have provided minoritised and other underrepresented populations a way by which they can prioritise the documenting of their experiences from their perspectives.

On the surface it would appear that community archives would be superfluous or indulgent projects in the African context. But this is not so; there are minority groups whose his/stories are at risk of loss and must be collected and preserved.[18] The Likpe Archives was formed to counter the loss of one such "minority" archive within the larger African archive. With the help of seed funding from the Nomadic Archivists Project, an archival initiative developed by two African-American archivists in the United States that seeks to document the global Black experience from the grassroots perspective, Killian Kwame Onai, an archivist previously with the UG Archives and PRAAD, has established the Likpe Archives. I would like to share Onai's own words as to why he felt compelled to establish a community archives for his traditional area:

> I was reading Rescuing the Memory of our Peoples, an archival manual by Martha Lund Smalley and Rosemary Seton and was struck by their quotation of a verse from the Bible: "And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things" (2 Peter 1:15 NIV). Reflecting on these words, I considered what the world may have been like if no effort had been made to document past events … It also made me consider what I, as a professional archivist, was doing to ensure the preservation of the memories of my community's great storytellers, orators and drummers. I see the rich cultural heritage of my people gradually fading with each passing day. The verse challenged me as an archivist, as someone in the field of helping to rescue the memory of our people, to make every effort to help my community remember after the departure of these great minds (Onai 2023).

The concept of community archives was not one that was familiar to Onai, an archivist with many years of experience, because it is not one that has gained much currency in Ghana's mostly conservative and, admittedly, underfunded archival environment. However, as he researched, he realised that the establishment of community archives would mitigate the loss that threaten his community's archives. Minority communities, languages and customs such as the Sekpele of the Likpe area are constantly under threat of being subsumed into larger, more influential ethnic groups.

The project has been received with enthusiasm in the community (although not without some hiccups, as discussed below) and has been declared as timely. The paramount chief of the traditional area has given Onai an unfinished property to house the archives.[19] Until its completion, however, Onai is collecting materials to be scanned and then mounted in a virtual space; original materials are returned to the donors. This is not unlike the post-custodial model used by the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA).[20] This strategy also serves another purpose. Because people are generally unaware of the work of archives and archivists, there is some distrust and fear about privacy, confidentiality and continued access once they give up the materials they have. Rather than completely lose the opportunity to document his community, Onai has settled on a compromise until greater trust is built.[21] The additional advantage of these digital surrogates being created is, of course, that they would be available should the originals unfortunately be lost to fire or flood.

Onai has also been organising the chief's records which consist of photographs, letters and land papers, among others. According to Onai, the chief is willing to deposit his papers in the nascent community archives to encourage other community members to do likewise once the building is completed.[22] Additionally, Onai has been conducting interviews to capture the community's various customs and to identify unique aspects of the community's culture. In this regard, Onai bemoans the death of the elderly as repositories of knowledge. Still, the importance of what Onai and his team have captured so far from the living "human archives," including accounts of the community's origin, birth and funerary rites, and naming traditions, is incalculable, and the urgency for continued recovery work is clear.

Loss, decolonisation of the African archive and African studies

At a weekly seminar held at the University of Ghana's Institute of African Studies in 2022, a European scholar used the spectre of fire in the African archive to justify what can only be described as neo-colonial strategies of "reoccupying" the African archive. According to him, "archives burn in Africa and there are no backups." While the general veracity of this statement cannot be challenged, the solution it led him to – the mirroring, in European institutions, of African archival material digitised through European grant money – can. A heated discussion ensued as archivists and scholars in the (physical and virtual) room challenged his assertion. It was pointed out that there is a recent trend to talk about decolonising the archives but with very neo-colonial undertones that demands copies of the collection to not simply be preserved as backup copies in the Western institutions, but to make these digitised copies available to their patrons.[23] In the long run, this negatively affects African archival institutions (and their national economies) as they miss out on the patronage of researchers which consequently contributes to the perception that they are irrelevant. Furthermore, the loss of income through reprographic orders, search requests and other services which supplement the inadequate support received from government or home institutions means that they cannot adequately care for the materials under their oversight or expand their collections by pursuing acquisitions. This, of course, introduces another layer of loss in the African archive and has an impact on research and knowledge production on the continent.

It was ironic to hear these claims made in the building complex named after Kwame Nkrumah and at the Institute he commissioned to contribute to the advancement of knowledge about the peoples and cultures of Africa. Charged with this call, Nketia's vision as articulated in his convocation speech and as director of ICAMD was decolonial in its posture. In ICAMD, he wanted an accessible space for African scholars to conduct their research. He felt research and scholarship on Africa, from an African perspective, suffered when the materials to consult were at European and American centres. He wanted, in his words, "to create something in Africa which would serve all continents so that there is a centre of gravity for the studies because the materials are in Africa" (Wiggins 2005).

Not only are the materials located in Africa, but a significant amount of them, above 70% by Opoku-Boateng's approximations, are in Ghanaian or other African languages. This is significant for the attempts to dismantle the "Europhonic legacies of colonialism" (Ngugi Wa Thiongo quoted in Mendisu and Yigezu 2014) which, Mendisu and Yigezu (2014) argue, is a necessary first step in decolonising knowledge production in Africa.[24] If, as Achille Mbembe (2015, 18) maintains, the decolonisation process involves both critiquing the dominant Eurocentric academic model and imagining what the alternatives to this model could look like, then the Nketia and Likpe Archives as "first and foremost epistemic space[s]" (Lambrechts 2020; Mbembe 2015) are the producers and preservers of the materials that make possible this important work. Consequently, whether the final outputs generated using their materials are in African or European languages, through their collection and preservation of African language songs, traditions, rituals and other (potentially ephemeral) forms of documentation "susceptible to interruption" (Carter 2006), the Nketia and Likpe Archives are decolonial spaces that allow the exploration of "alternative structures and registers through engaging with new collections or by exploring previous collections in new ways in order to empower multiple paradigms and epistemologies" (Lambrechts 2020, 318).

Thus, these two archives give us hints of how the African archive may impact African Studies, particularly the variety of the field pursued on the continent grappling with whether we have "any tools to deconstruct or debunk the regimes of knowledge" (Akçay 2022). In its diverse languages and forms, the African archive can challenge the language and form in which African Studies are produced; Nketia, for example, produced some academic work in his native Twi. As it makes room for democratic contributions to knowledge, the voices of a chief and his subjects inhabiting the same space, the African archive can influence African Studies scholars to begin shifting the orientation of knowledge production away from the ivory tower. An "archival revival" that sees the inclusion and use of all the varied registers of the African archive (oral, written, ritual, performative, material) will ensure scholarship that is sensitive and inclusive.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how rethinking loss might return "beauty for ashes" in the African archive, opening up opportunities for recovering various aspects of the African archive. The paper has identified the different causes of loss in the African archive and then looked at how two archives in Ghana are working to challenge these.

Although without a doubt a passionate musicologist and composer, Nketia's impulse was, one could argue, that of an archivist. Unfettered by the frameworks a formal archival education in Ghana would have given him, Nketia's archival project turned archives collected and preserved the histories and traditions missed (at best) or ignored by the conventional set-up of PRAAD. Thus, through ICAMD and, later, the Nketia Archives, these "documents" of the African archive that would otherwise have been lost were recovered and preserved. Indeed, in his dedication to collect, preserve, study and promote the alternative archives of Ghana's "folk," I see parallels between Nketia's work and that of Afro-Puerto Rican bibliophile Arturo Schomburg whose counterarchive which resisted the erasure of the African/diasporic past was the genesis of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture located in New York City.

While the Nketia Archives seek to counter loss in the African archive through its activities and advocacy, the Likpe Archives are trialling a different model of recovery located within communities. Refusing, like Nketia did decades prior, to watch the varied registers of the African archive in his community die on his watch, Onai, the lead archivist on the project, demonstrates his belief that archivists are indeed pivotal in the process of consolidating and shaping a community's memories. The community archives that he has established – hopefully a model for many more in Ghana and across Africa – proves that sometimes, this has to be done, in the words of Opoku-Boateng, "beyond normal archiving limits" (Ashie-Nikoi forthcoming).

The archival turn has ignited a changing perspective of the archive from a neutral and passive repository to one that considers archives, and to a large extent the professionals who work within them, as active participants in the creation and production of knowledge. By adopting this active posture that resists traditional notions of archival institutions and archivists, both Onai and Opoku-Boateng position themselves and their archives as active participants in the creation, preservation and production of knowledge from an African perspective. Thus, they demonstrate that this conceptualisation of the archive is full of possibilities for African archives and archivists. Additionally, like Nketia before them, Opoku-Boateng and Onai operate from a keen awareness of the spectre of loss that constantly threatens the African archive – loss caused not just by fire and flood but by neglecting the different ways African societies remember and document knowledge, events and experiences. It is their attention to this aspect of loss that leads the Nketia and Likpe Archives into archival praxis that decolonise the African archive and expand its boundaries, consequently enabling more inclusive narratives and analyses in African Studies.

To conclude, I return to the image of fire-gutted African archives. Aware of the susceptibility of the African archive to loss, African archival scholars have concerned themselves with matters of preservation and disaster management. For example, in arguing for disaster management being part and parcel of archival management strategy in Africa, Patrick Ngulube states that it would not be prudent for archivists to put so much effort in their core responsibilities of acquiring, arranging, describing and preserving archival materials if the archives are then lost as a result of a disaster, the management of which has not been planned (2005, 16). This is certainly a valid point. Yet, what the discussion has hopefully done is show that it is imperative for African archival practitioners and theorists, in thinking about archival loss, to expand the borders of what constitutes the African archive and plan for recovering the memories and

knowledge (including indigenous) that live in people's minds and are embodied in various cultural traditions. Doing so can only mean gain for the African archive and, consequently, African studies.

Notes

1. Other traditional area archives exist in Ghana, for example, the Akyem Abuakwa State Archive (Ofori Panyin Fie) at Kibi and the Manya Krobo Traditional Council (Mate Kole) Archives at Odumase, both in the Eastern Region. However, as their names suggest, these archives primarily keep records relating to the activities of the traditional rulers. On the other hand, as shall be discussed below, the Likpe Traditional Area Community Archives was initiated by a member of the community as a repository to document the community's traditions, culture and history.
2. For example, closely studying and exploiting the chieftainship systems for the implementation of indirect rule. Still, Njabulo Khumalo's (2019) emphatic proposition that colonial powers used the system of records and archives to dismantle indigenous African governance systems which transmitted economic, political and social entitlements orally is worth noting.
3. These fire disasters afflicting African archives have resulted both from unintentional carelessness and suspected arson. Additionally, although fire events are listed here, Ngulube et al. (2011) assess water related disasters to be the most common affecting archival institutions.
4. As Ellen Namhila (2015) notes, the South African government did the same with Namibian documents as well as destroying large volumes of apartheid related documents in South Africa prior to the finalisation of the negotiated democratisation process.
5. The disadvantage continues in the present day. Africa's migrated archives and other stolen objects remain far removed from their place of provenance. Archival scholar Nathan Mnjama has written extensively on this category of items in the last 40 years and notes the irony that African nations, archives and scholars often have to purchase, at high cost, copies of materials which rightfully belong to them (see, for example, Mnjama 2020). This is another aspect of archival loss that plagues the continent. Still, others like Francis Garaba (2021) see opportunity here for African archives to decolonise and focus on indigenising Africa's archives and making them an empowering space.
6. The records of the colonial state were also more consistently preserved, with the many coups and infrequency with which state and parastatal agencies deposited their records at national archives contributing to gaps in the post-colonial era's archival record.
7. There is a parallel ignorance about archives and their relevance among the general populace. Both are examined in some detail in Ashie-Nikoi et al. (2023). Another level of loss in the African archive is created here as well, as people, who do not perceive that the letters, photographs, journals etc they have in their homes to be of significance and interest, discard and destroy them.
8. Samuel Ntewusu (2017) advises researchers who come up empty at the national archives in Ghana to hang around the ministries or agencies dealing with their area of study and to buy from the food vendors in the area! Musamba's contribution reports a similar situation in Uganda.
9. Due to a project with which I am involved, I am aware that some interrogations are beginning to happen; but again, these are mainly among non-archival practitioners and scholars.
10. By deploying the term "archives" in relation to Africa's rituals, Falola insists on expanding our understanding of the term and challenges the boundaries of conventional Eurocentric archives, especially regarding what is considered preservation worthy. Relatedly, the collection of essays in Hamilton and Leibhammer (2016) signals how the "marooned archive" of material culture (including objects, which are often significant elements of rituals) may be

probed as "archive." By doing so, the contributions "challenge the organisational structure and limits of what is understood epistemologically to be the pre-colonial archive or perhaps, more accurately, the lack of a pre-colonial archive" (Hamilton and Leibhammer 2016, 14).

11. Convocation speech at the Institute of African Studies. The reel-to-reel audio of the speech is available at the Nketia Archives.
12. Nketia operated at the nexus of a few disciplines. He was initially taught European music theory at the Akropong Presbyterian Training College (one of his teachers was Ephraim Amu, famed Ghanaian musician and composer of the national anthem in local languages). He was awarded a scholarship to study Linguistics at School of Oriental and African Studies, also taking classes at the Trinity College of Music and Birkbeck College, University of London. Although Nketia is often identified as an ethnomusicologist, his research into African music, dance and folklore began before the discipline, emerging out of comparative musicology, formally developed. Furthermore, Nketia considered his disciplinary preoccupations diverged from Western counterparts: "The core knowledge of the discipline, the traditions, and the problems in the country in terms of people learning their own cultures were issues that concerned us . . . Our problems are truly different from what people in the Western world seem to be concerning themselves with" (Djedje 2012). These comments provide interesting perspective into the archives Nketia established.
13. These fieldwork recordings range from live performances to analytical recordings in which individual parts were demonstrated (Harper and Opoku-Boateng 2019).
14. For a detailed account of Nketia's engagement of Osei Kwame Korankye's services to teach the *seperewa* at ICAMD, see Papa Kow Mensah Agyefi (2021).
15. Upon its formation, the Nketia Archives became the second archives for which the Institute of African Studies (IAS) at the University of Ghana has oversight; the other is the Manhyia Archives in Kumasi, which began as the Ashanti Research Project, an IAS initiative and garnered the support of the then-Asantehene, Otumfuo Osei Agyeman Prempeh II and his successors. For more information, see https://ias.ug.edu.gh/content/manhyia-archives. The IAS case, like the Center for African Studies' African Studies Library and Special Collections at UCT, demonstrates the vital role African Studies centres in African can play in the preservation of the African archive.
16. Recent scholarship that has used materials at the Nketia Archives or discussed its work include Agyefi (2021), Kwasi Ampene (2020) and Daniel Salem (2020).
17. At the APEX training, staff were shown how to "conserve, digitize and make accessible 400 hours of audiovisual heritage materials" (Opoku-Boateng et al. 2020). See also Opoku-Boateng (2023).
18. My work on a documentation project in Ghana's Upper West region sensitised me to the possibilities of archival silencing and erasure along class, ethnic and regional lines (Ashie-Nikoi 2021).
19. In Ghana, traditional areas are the defined territory under the rule of a traditional authority, usually a chief.
20. SAADA does not accept physical custody of records, but rather borrows records from individuals, families, organisations, and academic and government repositories and digitises them. After digitisation, the physical materials remain with the individual, family, organisation or repository where they originated. The digital objects are described "in a culturally appropriate manner" and linked to related materials in the archives (www.saada.org, see also Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez 2016).
21. It is significant to note that Onai faces this situation even as an actively involved insider of the community.
22. Chiefs are respected as custodians of cultural knowledge (Alhassan 2006). The chief's decision to donate his papers to the community archives is an interesting variation of this role. Although there isn't a precedent to gauge whether community members would follow the chief's example and donate materials to a community archives, studies from the context of community development projects (Kleist 2011; Osei-Tutu et al. 2019; Tieleman and Uitermark 2019) suggest that this is highly likely. Community members' decision to do so

might be interpreted by those unfamiliar with the culture as coercion but must not be misconstrued as such. Onai and his team have made clear that donation to the archives is completely voluntary and there are no repercussions for not doing so.

23. In a conversation with an archivist after the seminar, they revealed that whereas previously they had been under the impression that this was a requirement from the funding agencies, they since found out that it is often, in fact, a condition imposed by the "third parties" – the European libraries, archives and institutions that the funding agencies often contracted to provide assistance to the African archives. The archivist had recently pushed back on an approach from one such European institution and suggested that funding agencies either ensure such mirroring demands are not made of African institutions or consider funding South/South collaborations so these institutions could be each other's backup. These, the archivist insisted, would be more equal and sustainable partnerships.
24. Mendisu and Yigezu (2014) make the concomitant and important point that languages, themselves, are "archives of social memory."

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