Digital archives and Ghanaian history: Potential and challenges

Jon Olav Hove[#] and Jonathan Allen Brindle[+]

Abstract

The access to digitised archival material is changing the premises for doing historical research as it changes the relationship between archives and users and facilitates new ways to do historical research. While this article argues that digital archives present opportunities for researchers and students alike, the amazing rise of digital archives is not unproblematic. On the contrary, digitised material is both creating new and reviving old theoretical and methodological pitfalls with regard to how knowledge of the past is created. The use of digital archives is far from unambiguous, and sober assessments of challenges are as important as assessments of their potential.

Résumé

L'accès aux archives numérisées modifie les bases sur lesquelles s'appuyait la réalisation des recherches historiques, car il remanie la relation entre les archives et les utilisateurs et facilite de nouvelles façons de faire de la recherche historique. Bien que cet article fasse valoir que les archives numériques offrent des possibilités pour les chercheurs et les étudiants, la croissance exceptionnelle des archives numériques n'est pas exempte de problèmes. Au contraire, le matériel numérisé à la fois génère de nouveaux pièges théoriques et méthodologiques, et en relance d'anciens, particulièrement en ce qui

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Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Historical Studies, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU)

+ Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Language and Literature, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU)

concerne la façon dont sont créées les connaissances du passé. L'utilisation des archives numériques est loin d'être univoque, et les évaluations sérieuses de ses défis sont aussi importantes que les évaluations de leur potentiel.

In recent years, several archives have begun digitalising their material for public access. This is radically changing the premises for doing historical research as it increases access to primary sources, alters the relationship between archives and researchers and facilitates new ways to do historical research. In practical terms, the new digital material allows researchers to access digital copies of documents in the comfort of their homes or offices via the Internet.[1] For anyone otherwise depending on expensive intercontinental flights, the time, cost-saving and environmental benefits are obvious. This is of course relevant to researchers interested in the Ghanaian past: although a majority of the archival material is found in Ghanaian archives, a substantial portion is scattered across the globe, in the archives of the former colonial powers, international financial institutions and missionary societies. Researchers therefore stand to benefit from the increasing availability of digital archives, whether they are located in Ghana or abroad.

Also, access to the primary sources has become more egalitarian. While previously archives were largely reserved for the professional researchers, today anyone with an Internet connexion can access primary sources. Therefore by providing public access to the primary sources via online delivery anyone can write new historical accounts or assess existing knowledge of the past. In other words, if historians ever had a monopoly on history, this is rapidly disintegrating.

Furthermore, digital archives present new ways of doing historical research. For instance, online archives have become new arenas for interaction between archivists and the public, interaction that can generate new knowledge of the archival material. Besides digital archives can accelerate the search of material, and facilitate the collection and compilation of data from several sources to create new knowledge. This

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[1] There is a distinction between accessing and using digital data, but describing the difference between open-access and open-data is beyond the scope of this paper.

potential should spur reconsideration of the manner in which knowledge of the past is created and how historical methodology is taught.

While this article argues that digital archives present opportunities for researchers and students alike, the amazing rise of digital archives is not unproblematic. On the contrary, digitised material is both creating new and reviving old theoretical and methodological pitfalls with regard to how knowledge of the past is created. In particular, digital archives raise questions of representativeness, and uncritical use of this material at the cost of other sources of information might result in unbalanced images of the past that emphasise certain themes or groups at the expense of others. And unless sufficient technical and metadata elements are provided, the digitised material loses its context. This can result in distorted understandings of the material, and thus of the past that it describes. In other words, the use of digital archives is far from unambiguous, and sober assessments of challenges are as important as assessments of their potential.

This article starts out with a short discussion of the nature of digital *archives* as opposed to digital *collections*. It will then present several examples of digital archives relevant to Ghanaian history. The purpose is not to present an exhaustive list of available online resources, something that would not only be futile but also rapidly outdated, but rather to present examples of archives that are of particular relevance for Ghana and discuss their potential as well as possible challenges. The hope is to spur further discussion and increase our awareness of how historical research can be undertaken in the increasingly digital world.

What is a digital archive?

Digital archival material first appeared in the 1980s after public administrators started using computers and, consequently, created digital records in the form of registers, databases and text files. From this point, digital archives were developed, and today material that was not originally digitally created is also increasingly converted, typically by scanning. In a general sense of the word, digitisation implies the transformation or conversion of data, initially handwritten or typewritten on paper, into

digital data, of which machine-searchable text can be extracted and/or manually transcribed and indexed for search.[2] In this article, however, a more special understanding of digital archive is used, namely that the original format of a given archive, either in the form of paper, film, cassette[3] or photograph, is converted by the archival institution or organisation concerned into a digital format. This digital format has then been made available on the Internet, with varying access restriction policies. Restrictions might constitute a subscription, i.e. the creation of a user account and payment of a subscription fee, or in some cases that the access is to be granted by the creator of the digital archive.

In addition to the digital files, a digital archive also needs sufficient metadata that provides the necessary information to understand the digitised documents. This information, usually called a catalogue entry, includes to name a few, the title, the creator, the location, the owner, the subject, the state of the primary material, date of production of primary material, date of conversion, etc., and crucially, the position in a sequence of, and relationship to, other documents. Without the metadata, it becomes difficult to put the document in its right context and problematic to use it in research as a source of information about the past. Indeed, without proper metadata it is impossible to confirm the authenticity of the primary source. Authenticity is a key factor with regard to digital archives. With the proliferation of equipment and technical know-how, many can digitise and publish documents online, documents that can either be frauds or original records.

Besides, even if the documents are original records, one cannot know whether they are representative of the available records in the actual archives or whether they represent a biased selection created to further the agenda of the creator of the digital collection. Indeed, any selection of original records, either intentional or unintentional, might skew the readers' understanding of the past. For this reason, we should distinguish between digital archives and digital edited collections of documents, the latter containing, as Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig note, "at least an

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[2] For information about aspects of digitisation of Ghanaian records, see Kimura (2015).
[3] Several formats have existed for storing sound, the cassette being only one such format.

implicit interpretation of the available materials rather than the hands-off approach of most archives" (Cohen and Rosenzweig, 2006: 31)

This underscores the importance of archival institutions themselves taking the lead in the creation of digital archives. In addition to the issue of sampling and selection, individual researchers and students have varying technical know-how and different levels of knowledge about the structure of the archives. Therefore, their ability to undertake digitalisation projects can be restricted and responsibility must rest with the professional archivists, with researchers and students assisting rather than leading the digitisation process. Yet, even when archives start digitalisation projects, they cannot for practical reasons digitise all the available material simultaneously. Instead, groups of records are digitised at a time, which means that the digital archive is an incomplete supplement to the collection of primary sources found in the actual archive.

Digital archives and public records: British and Ghanaian archives

The British National Archives located in Kew Gardens in London have in the last decades taken a lead in digitising archival material.[4] This archive is well known to many who have studied the history of Ghana. In addition to the many documents created by British traders as far back as the 17th century, it contains archival material relating to the period of British colonial rule on the Gold Coast between the 19th and 20th century. Documents found for instance in the catalogue CO 96 address a wide range of topics. In fact, browsing the online catalogue of the National Archives can give fascinating insights into the many interests of the colonial state. Officials were not only interested in post-war political reforms, which is the topic of, for instance, the file CO 96/827/13, but also "Women medical officers" which is the topic of CO 96/670/11 and "Koforidua market", the topic of file CO 96/673/9.[5]

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[4] Archives in other countries are also relevant to Ghanaian history, such as the National Archives of Netherlands. See for instance Doortmont and Smit (2007).

[5] The reference and description of these files have been found in the British National Archives' online search tool called "Discovery" at www.nationalarchvies.gov.uk (Accessed 01/12/2015)

The objective of the British National Archives is, as it states on its webpages, to "collect and secure the future of the government record […], preserve it for generations to come, and to make it as accessible and available as possible."[6] As a means to this end, it has commenced a considerable digitalisation project. To date, it has digitised and published 80 million of its historical documents online. This includes historical documents relevant to Ghanaian history such as the British Cabinet Papers from the period 1915 to 1986. These papers include Cabinet Minutes and Memorandum through which we can access the British government's discussions and conclusions of political, economic and social issues relating to Ghana which required Cabinet attention and decision. Examples of such issues include the British debates of the constitutional reforms leading to independence in 1957, an issue of crucial importance to the creation of the independent country of Ghana. Also relevant are the many discussions of general colonial policy for the British African colonies including trade, currency and development policy. The Cabinet Papers are not just scanned documents but have been indexed for search. A search for "Gold Coast" for instance retrieves a list of 239 matching documents. Additionally, some handwritten documents have been transcribed and indexed for search. Hence the Cabinet Papers have become highly accessible and easy to search for researchers and students.[7]

Another digital archive that sheds light on British colonial policy is the Historic Hansard, the verbatim reports of the proceedings of the House of Commons and House of Lords between 1803 and 2004. This archive allows the users to find debates from specific dates, or to search for words from all the speeches made during a certain time period. The debates, particularly in the Commons, show how British politicians from different parties understood and discussed colonial policies. Also, on several occasions, the British government made policy declarations regarding the colonies, including the British government's resolution of April 27, 1874, stating that it was "of the opinion, that, in the interests of civilization and commerce it

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[6] See "Who we are" on www.nationalarchives.gov.uk (Accessed 01/12/2015).
[7] Indeed, the deciphering of Norman Brook's hand-writing is not a task for the easily discouraged.

would not now be desirable to withdraw from the administration of the Gold Coast".[8]

The Cabinet Papers and House of Commons Debates provide direct insight into the deliberations of the British government during the heyday of colonial rule and this digital archive has a considerable potential for increased understanding of the Ghanaian past.[9] Yet, when making use of digital archives, researchers and students alike must be aware of and sensitive to questions of representativeness. The Cabinet Papers, for instance, provide first and foremost insight into the thoughts and activities of people living and working in London. Their interests were largely economic and political, and the documents they created reflect this by focusing primarily on those economic and political processes thought to be important to Britain. The Cabinet Papers give marginal, if any, insight into the life of people in the Gold Coast. Also, to the extent that they give some insights into African thoughts and activities, they focus on the political male West African elite. This is, of course, no news to researchers who are trained in historical theories and methodology.[10] However, as already noted, digital archives are radically changing the availability of historical records: documents that were hitherto available only to researchers aware of questions of representativeness are now available to anyone with an Internet connexion. This has only heightened the relevance of questions such as who the documents speak for, and who are marginalised, misrepresented or silenced.

Furthermore, the availability of the digital archives might impact on our selection of research topics. As we know, many elements influence and direct our fields of research and one of the most important is the availability of data. Since many European archives have been in the forefront in the creation of digital archives, such as the British National Archives,

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[8] The House of Commons Debates of the 27th of April, 1874 are available at hansard.millbanksystem.com.

[9] Other examples of primary sources created by colonial officials and missionaries that are now rendered digital can be found at www.britishonlinearchives.co.uk. Also, a complete collection of Official Gold Coast Reports can be found at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign Library website libsysdigi.library.illinois.edu (Accessed 01/12/2015).

[10] See for instance the by now classical textbook by John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (Tosh, 1990). Of particular relevance to African history, see Ki-Zerbo (1990).

overdependence on these archives might create a bias towards the activities of Europeans rather than the activities of those living in the Gold Coast or Ghana. In other words, if the use of digital archives is not balanced with the use of other archives, we might risk a return of the so-called "colonial school" in which the activities of Africans becomes peripheral.[11]

An interesting recent digital and online addition to the British National Archives is the personal files created by MI5, the British Security Service. Some of these files are relevant to the Ghanaian past as both Kwame Nkrumah and Bankole Awonoor-Renner were under surveillance in the 1940s and 1950s.[12] Nkrumah and Awonoor-Renner were unintentionally the creators of some of this material, such as their intercepted letters, and the material therefore to some extent increase our knowledge of their thoughts and activities. Yet, the files mainly consist of selected transcribed wiretaps and reports by agents and their informers. Thus, the files generally shed more light on British fears of communism and techniques for providing intelligence than the Ghanaian past. This also applies to American intelligence gathered on Ghana and Ghanaians. Searching for 'Ghana' in Wikileaks found 20635 results (accessed on 14.02.2016). Cablegate, and Carter and Kissinger cables in particular, contain quantities of relevant material. This material, which covers the time period 1973-present, has exceptional value and is easily available online, but should be treated with the same caution as the MI5 material.

However, digital archives are not only representative of European male elites' outlook but can shed light on the ideas and activities of others. For instance, the British National Archives has digitised a number of wills, dating as far back as the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Although the wills were created by British traders and administrators, they also shed light on social relations on the coast of West Africa, including Afro-European family relations. Also available online at the British National Archives are

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[11] Representativeness of data and the recognition of biases are subsumed in our use of 'balance'. For a discussion of choice of theme and perspective, see Simensen (1990).

[12] Other persons under surveillance of interest to the Ghanaian past are Hasting Banda who stayed in Ghana during the 1950s, Geoffrey Cecil Bing, adviser to Nkrumah in the late 1950s, and Dorothy Padmore who assumed the role of advisor to Nkrumah after the death of her husband George Padmore in 1959.

medal cards and awards given to West Africans. This material provides important insight into the somewhat neglected role of Africans in global theatres of war during the 20th century.[13]

Digitalisation projects were commenced with the aid of the British Library in different branches of the Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD) in Ghana, formerly known as the Ghana National Archives.[14] Through its Endangered Archives Programme, the British Library gave grants towards the creation of digital copies of prioritised archival material in different parts of the world. Priority was given to applications from countries where government resources are inadequate to support the archival sector and the historical significance of the documents is deemed particularly high. So far, four grants have been given to institutions in Ghana, resulting in two digital archives devoted to the preservation of historical records held by PRAAD in the regional archives in Tamale.[15] It includes documents related to, among other things, the Franco-British Boundary in Togoland, land disputes in the Mamprusi State and Tamale residential plots near Agric Road. The two other projects focus on the preservation of pre-colonial and colonial records in the Regional Archive at Cape Coast and documents on Nzema land in national and local archives.[16] While the former mainly focused on preservation, the latter included a large scale digitalisation, the result of which will hopefully be made available online in the near future.

The digitised material, while not representative of all the material held in the different branches of the PRAAD in Ghana, cover a wide range of

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[13] The Imperial War Museum in London have digitised a considerable amount of material relevant to the war effort by Gold Coast/Ghanaian soldiers in the Second World War, in written, audio as well as visual form. See www.iwm.org.uk (Accessed 01/12/2015).

[14] For descriptions of the various holdings of regional branches of PRAAD, see Henige (1973), Silver (1978) and Abdulai (2000).

[15] One pilot project called EPA256: Preservation of endangered historical records in the Public Records and Archives Administration (PRAAD) in Tamale, Northern Ghana; and one full project called EPA541: Digitalisation and preservation of historical archives in the Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD) in Tamale, Northern Ghana. See eap.bl.uk (Accessed 01/12/2015)

[16] These are EAP474: Regional Archive at Cape Coast, Ghana: pre-colonial and colonial documents preservation project; and EAP569: Safeguarding Nzema history: documents on Nzema land in Ghanaian national and local archives. See eap.bl.uk (Accessed 01/12/2015)

topics and provide researchers and students interested in the local history and culture a great opportunity to access the Ghanaian past. Furthermore, the four endangered archives projects undertaken in Ghana have saved and preserved invaluable archival material that could otherwise have been lost to decay. In this sense, the digital archives constitute a necessary supplement to the original and primary documents that potentially might disappear. Yet, we should also keep in mind that digital archives are vulnerable, especially those located at a single storage. Servers might crash or break down due to technical problems or natural disasters, storage device may degrade, accidents may occur, etc. Besides the obvious fact that infrastructure (e.g. workstations, retrieval systems, servers, etc.) degrades if not maintained, the digitised documents and associated meta-data must follow suitable open standards for them to be processed by future software. For this reason proprietary data formats should be avoided in favour of open data formats for archival purposes. To sum up, we should not consider digitalisation as a simple panacea to the complex issues of preservation.

Digital archives and non-public written sources

So far, this article has focused on primary sources located in official archives. However, other types of archives exist, with material relevant to the history of Ghana. For example, several newspapers have been digitised in recent years. The British Library has at present digitised close to 12 million pages from 512 British newspaper titles covering a period from the 18th century to the Second World War.[17] Several British newspapers, in this period, carried news from the colonies, including the Gold Coast, which makes it possible to read reports about, among other things the Accra Earthquake that happened in 1939, in the *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, the *Western Daily Press*, and the *Aberdeen Journal* among others. Yet, it must be kept in mind that quantity does not imply quality. Many British newspapers relied on the large news agencies such as *Reuters*, therefore reports in British newspapers were in many cases variants of the original stories. Also, British newspapers selected stories for their British

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[17] See www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk (Accessed 01/12/2015).

audience.[18] Stories reaching Britain from the Gold Coast were therefore not representative of the preoccupations of the people of the Gold Coast but of the perceived interest of readers in Britain.

It is also possible to access the Ghanaian past through digitised Ghanaian newspapers. In collaboration with the Centre for Research Libraries in the US, Readex has created an online archive called "African Newspapers, 1800-1922". This includes several notable newspapers from the Gold Coast, such as *The Gold Coast Times* from the 1870s and 1880s, *the Gold Coast Chronicle* from the 1890s, and *The Gold Coast Leader* from the early 1900s.[19] These newspapers provide us with African voices and are an invaluable source of information to the Ghanaian past. The digital newspaper archives' main drawback is largely practical. Users get access to the digitised newspapers through rather costly subscriptions. Consequently, access is often reserved to researchers affiliated to the wealthy institutions, while researchers at less wealthy institutions as well as independent scholars may find the costs a deterrent. Yet, when compared to the price of intercontinental flights and lengthy visits to libraries and archives, many might find the price of the subscriptions competitive.

The digitisation of primary sources has the potential to create new knowledge. Most importantly, it can facilitate the capture, analysis, and visualisation of large amounts of data. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, for instance, contains information on more than 35 000 slave voyages across the Atlantic.[20] By compiling data from all of these voyages, it is possible to assess the slave trade in ways unthinkable a few decades ago. The database offers estimates of how many enslaved people were taken out of Africa and landed in the Americas and Europe; where the enslaved people were taken from and who took them across the Atlantic. This digital archive is still growing: in addition to educational resources, it now also includes an African Names Database which identifies approximately 90 000 Africans taken from captured slave ships or African trading sites. The Names Database is a valuable supplement to the Voyages

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[18] And also, more generally, for their proprietors (Herman and Chomsky, 1988).

[19] Accessible through the "World Newspaper Archive" at www.readex.com (Accessed 01/12/2015).

[20] See www.slavevoyages.org (Accessed 01/12/2015).

Database: while the latter largely anonymises the enslaved Africans by reducing them to numbers of embarked or disembarked, the former gives the names, ages and origins of at least some of the enslaved.[21]

Yet, while digitisation might create new knowledge, it must be remembered that the quality of the output depends on the quality of the input. For instance, the World DataBank provided by the World Bank offers a wide range of data and statistics, including Gross Domestic Production (GDP) and population going as far back as the 1960s. But, as anyone who has worked with Ghanaian history in this period knows, there were no procedures for measuring or estimating GDP at the time, and the population censuses can still, for some areas, be unreliable.[22] Also, since 1960, five censuses have been undertaken in Ghana. Population statistics from the periods between these censuses must therefore be treated as conjecture rather than fact and the figures drawn based on population statistics as estimates.[23]

Digital archives and photographs, films, audio and oral traditions

In addition to written sources, the British National Archives has digitised a great number of photographs in the so-called "Africa through a lens" collection.[24] These photographs span a century, the oldest dating back from the mid-1800 and the newest dating from the 1950s, and depict a wide range of scenes: women's hairstyles, new and dilapidated buildings, pictures of the developing Gold Coast used by the Convention People's Party in various publicity materials, etc. Also, the Basel Mission's archives, known as the BM Archives, hold thousands of pictures, maps and drawings from Ghana, a collection that has been digitised and made available online.

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[21] For an explanation of the material found in the African Names Database, see Schwarz (2010). The database is also part of the African Origins Project which can be found at www.african-origins.org (Accessed 15/02/2016).

[22] For a constructive critique of past and present development statistics, see Jerven (2013).

[23] See the 2010 Population & Housing Census, National Analytica Report, published by the Ghana Statistical Service in 2013, available at www.statsghana.gov.gh (Accessed 01/12/2015)

[24] The photographs can be seen on Flickr. See link on the "Africa through a lens" page at nationalarchives.gov.uk (Accessed 01/12/2015). The collection includes more than 700 pictures from the Gold Coast/Ghana.

The Basel Mission was active in modern-day Ghana from the first half of the 19th century to the present and a considerable amount of the picture collection illustrates the first years of the mission.[25] In addition to depicting the activities of Basel missionaries, the photographs and drawings depict scenes from African villages and royal households. This is of relevance to researchers and students interested in past material culture and customs, among other things. Furthermore, pictures of the Basel Mission reflect the encounter between European and African life as the former acclimatised and acculturated to African conditions and latter adapted to and modified the workings of the European mission.[26] Indeed, the missions were to some extent a hybrid space, the result of both African and European culture. The extent and nature of this hybridity is reflected in the photographs through dress, houses, arrangement of persons in the picture and the names of those in the photo, sometimes written on the back of the picture.

However, it is important to keep in mind that the pictures included in the digital archives presented above are not neutral reproductions of reality. On the contrary, pictures taken in the late 19th and early 20th century reflect the mentality and prejudice of the European men (in most cases at least) behind the camera. In short, the images do not show reality but the authors' arrangement and depiction of reality. This depiction would include the selection and staging of the "object" in those images. Therefore, we must be aware of tendencies in many of these pictures to present Africa as exotic or even erotic, not to mention primitive and barbaric as compared to Europe which in contrast was generally considered to be both civilised and rational. In this manner, the photographs tell us just as much or more about the mind-set of the person taking the picture as they tell us about the person(s) and object(s) in the picture.

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[25] In 2001, the activities of the Basel Mission were taken over by Mission 21, an organisation founded in 2001. In addition to the Basel Mission, the Bremen Mission was active in German Togoland, half of which was administered by the Gold Coast colonial government following the First World War and became part of Ghana in 1957. For their archive, see www.staatsarchiv-bremen.findbuch.net (Accessed 01/12/2015).

[26] The potential of accessing the Ghanaian past with the Basel Mission photographic archive is discussed in Jenkins and Geary (1985), Jenkins (1993), Jenkins and Theye (1995), Jenkins (2002) and Albrecht, Arlt, Müller and Schneider (2004).

Furthermore, the act of taking a picture does not necessarily entail a neutral relation of power between the photographer and the "object" which in many instances were young women. In fact, we should be sensitive to the fact that in some cases the photography could constitute an abuse and this should inform our use of these pictures today. The pictures of the two women shown in Figure 1 are found in the "Africa through a lens" collection and are representative of the depiction of young African women in the early 20th century.[27] We can assume that it would be difficult for these women to refuse the request probably made by a European male photographer for a picture. Also, it is highly unlikely that the women had any saying in or control of the staging of the pictures taken and their use afterwards. It is therefore not unreasonable to argue that the act of taking the photograph in some instance constituted an exploitation or even abuse of the people being the "object" in the picture. By uncritically reusing these pictures we can become guilty of re-inflicting the original abuse.

Figure 1: The original caption reads: "Type of Adangbe girl (between Pram Pram [sic] and the [River] Volta" and "Houssa [sic] girl, carrying water".

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[27] Creator unknown dated 1901 (CO 1069/34/63, London: The National Archives). The pictures can be seen at www.flickr.com/photos/nationalarchives/5418565801/in/album-72157625975820108/ (Accessed 01/12/2015).

The British National Archives has obviously been aware of problems related to its digital photographic archive. A disclaimer is included on the British National Archives webpage, asking viewers to "Please note the pictures and captions attached to them are representative of their time and may use terms that would not be used today." [28] Furthermore, by publishing the pictures, the British National Archives seeks to increase our knowledge of the photographs; who are depicted, and where and when they are depicted and thus provides the opportunity for source criticism. The "Africa through a lens" collection is published on the photo sharing tool Flickr, which offers opportunity to tag, share and post comments on individual pictures.[29] In this manner, the interactive potential of the Internet is exploited as viewers of the pictures can contribute to the archives knowledge concerning the photographs. Hopefully this can transform the nameless "objects" of many pictures into named "subjects".

For historians and others interested in the more recent Ghanaian past, films can be of great value. One digital archive which provides films relevant to Ghanaian history is the webpages of British Pathé, a newsreel archive that holds 85,000 items from around the world dating to the period from the end of the 19th century to the present.[30] This includes several films from the British colonies, including the Gold Coast, as well as from the independent Republic of Ghana. With the use of these films, we can glimpse the news from the past. We can see footage and listen to speeches by Ghanaian and British politicians, and we can feel the spirit of the age when for example Harold MacMillan visited Ghana and South Africa and made his speech about "winds of change".

Another digital archive specialising on film is the Colonial Film database, a project that combines the film archives of the British Film Institute, the Imperial War Museum and the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum. The films in the Colonial Film catalogue about the Gold Coast include educational as well as feature films intended for both British and African audiences. One of the education films available

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[28] See "Africa through a lens" at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk (Accessed 01/12/2015).
[29] See the National Archives' collection on Flick called "World through a lens" on www.flickr.com.
[30] See www.britishpathe.com (Accessed 01/12/2015).

online is the 1943 production *Africa's Fighting Men* which depicts the role of African servicemen in the Second World War. One of the best known feature films available is *Boy Kumasenu*, a film issued in 1952, focusing on the tension between the traditional village and modern city.

Like the photographs, films also reflect the mind-set of the non-African creators of the films. However, many of the films to be found at Colonial Film were created under the auspice of Ghanaian politicians. Films like *Progress in Kojokrom* or *Mr Mensah Builds a House* were made when the Convention People's Party was in power and reflect the political ambitious as well as the publicity strategies of the Nkrumah government.[31] In this manner they show Ghanaian depictions of issues relevant to Ghanaians at the time.

The Colonial Films database does not only include digitised films but also metadata that can be of considerable assistance to students and researchers alike. The digitised films are accompanied by technical details, production credits and a short synopsis explaining the content of the film. In addition, short essays are included explaining the context in which the film was produced and screened, giving us valuable information about the intended audience and reception; for example, by citing reviews or other reactions to the films. A short analysis follows, giving the researcher or student further insight into whether for instance the film reflects a traditional European stereotypical presentation of Africans and Africa.

As everyone with an interest in history is aware, oral traditions are helpful and sometimes necessary sources of information to the past, particularly when written records are lacking or non-existent. This is also true with regard to the Ghanaian past. Indeed, the Institute of African Studies (IAS), University of Ghana (UG), has been a pioneer in the collection of oral traditions.[32] IAS's J. H. Kwabena Nketia Archives was named after the renowned musicologist Emeritus Professor Kwabena

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[31] The Convention People's Party Government was very conscious of its self-presentation, particularly its development activities. See for instance the planning of development publicity by both British officials and CPP politicians in RG 7/1/928 (Accra: Public Records and Archives Administration Department).

[32] Thanks to Judith Opoku-Boateng for providing the information on the J. H. Kwabena Nketia Archives. It can be visited at http://iasarchive.ug.edu.gh:1600 (Accessed 01.12.2015).

Nketia.[33] Although the core of the archives' collection was actually assembled by Nketia himself, research expeditions by fellows of the IAS and visiting scholars further expanded the collection. The J. H. Kwabena Nketia Archives recently embarked on a digitisation project called Making African Academic Resources Accessible (MAARA).[34] At this stage the project digitises audio from 1⁄4-inch-wide recording tape/reels and replicates the digital assets onto the UG's digital storage environment for redundancy. A local copy of the digital assets is made available for listeners at the listening station set up within the archive at the IAS. A second phase plans to ingest the audio assets in the UG's institutional repository for wider access. When this is achieved, the J. H. Kwabena Nketia Archives will become without a doubt the most important repository of Ghana intangible cultural heritage publicly accessible online.

Despite these recent efforts, relatively few digital oral tradition archives exist. The explanation might be that the pioneers in the creation of digital archives have largely been archival institutions in the US and Europe with better funding and access to technical equipment and know-how. These archival institutions have generally focused on written records. Yet, the relative dearth of digital oral tradition archives does not imply a lack of potential. On the contrary, as existing online collections show, oral traditions are exceptionally suitable for digitalisation. The project "Verba Africana: African Language and Oral Literature: DVDs and Internet Materials" at the University of Leiden, for instance, illustrate this potential.[35] This digital archive contains, among other things, Ewe oral traditions. The material in this collection entitled *Ewe Stories and Storytellers from Ghana* takes several forms and are consistently supplied with relevant metadata. Especially relevant to historical research is the oral narratives of migration (called *xotutu* in Ewe). Since experienced language documenters are responsible for its design and maintenance, the quality of the visual, audio, textual and metadata elements, gives this collection a

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[33] Professor Kwabena Nketia collected and preserved oral traditions as far back as the early 1950s.

[34] See www.apexghana.org (Accessed 01.12.2015).

[35] The Verba Africana project can be accessed at http://www.hum.leiden.edu/research /africanliteratures/verbaafricana/verba-africana.html (Accessed 01/12/2015).

great value, but most importantly it makes possible for others to understand the provenance of the oral archival material.

In recent years, documentation on vulnerable linguistic groups has brought linguists and other scholars in communities across Ghana to record various types of narrative. Migration memories, family lineages, old political boundaries, among others, are themes of historical narratives frequently highlighted. In pledging for transparency and accountability in linguistic research, the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP) and DOBES programme *(Dokumentation bedrohter Sprachen)* require their grantees to archive their research content and to provide the agreed-upon access protocol consented by the community members /speakers. Language data archives which hold material of several endangered Ghanaian languages are the Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR) and The Language Archive (TLA).[36]

One of the reasons why material in ELAR and TLA may be useful for historians is the fact that since documentation projects focus on the voices of minorities whose languages are endangered, their narrative of past events may be framed and interpreted differently than the more "official" version, not to mention the urgency to record their memories. In addition, the crucial perspective on many historical events is usually unknown to the general public by the simple fact that there is a bias towards written records and that those perspectives are only available orally. ELAR and TLA include collections which are linguistically rich with transcriptions and translations of videos and audio files. Even though the language documenters are not primarily concerned with historical accounts, a substantial part of the material in those collections contains perceptions of the past by keepers of often unique historical knowledge.

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[36] The Endangered Languages ARchive (ELAR) is situated at SOAS, University of London. The languages of Ghana can be accessed at http://elar.soas.ac.uk/deposit-list-by-country (Accessed 01.12.2015). The Language Archive (TLA) is a unit of the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen, and can be accessed at https://tla.mpi.nl/. Another highly interesting oral archive has been created by the British Imperial War Museum, an archive that combines interviews from British and African soldiers who served in the Gold Coast Regiment during the Second World War. See www.iwm.org.uk (Accessed 01/12/2015).

Despite philanthropy- and university-supported projects, it is predominantly individual efforts and goodwill that make knowledge publicly accessible, especially to third world community members. Researchers may use their institutional privileges in the service of the communities to provide them with the easiest possible access to existing material related to their history. One such individual is Mark Dingemanse who collected material that is of interest to the people of Akpafu/Kawu (Volta Region). Still images retrieved from the *Bremen Staatsarchiv* and digitised out-of-print and/or obscure publications are among the material collected and some of it is published on his blog.[37] As a dissemination medium, blogging and blog commenting allow for the expression of alternative stories and framings on redistributed archival material, as mentioned above with respect to the "Africa through a lens" collection.

Concluding remarks

As this article has shown, a wide range of digital archives relating to Ghana exists. In today's global open-access and open-data discourses, online publicly accessible digital archives play an important egalitarian and democratic role in the access to information resources, resources which were previously reserved for the professional historian. Now, anyone with an access to the World Wide Web can do research and writing based on primary sources and assess the writings of other scholars. Yet, as this article has shown, different digital archives provide insight into different aspects of the past from different perspectives. It both creates new and revives old theoretical and methodological issues.

Taken together, digital archives have the potential of providing a relatively balanced understanding of the Ghanaian past. While some collections, like the Cabinet Papers found in the British National Archives, give a top-down perspective on Ghana's past from the metropolis, other collections, like the Endangered Archives Projects funded by the British Library, enable researchers and students to see Ghana's past to a greater

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[37] Personal communication with Mark Dingemanse (19/01/2016). His blog can be accessed at http://ideophone.org.

extent from below, the perspective of the local government officials as well as local inhabitants. Also, newspaper collections provide us with African voices to the Ghanaian past. Yet, access to these archives varies. While newspaper collections can be costly, and the Endangered Archives Projects consist only of digital scans, the Cabinet Papers consist of digital data that is not only free but also indexed for search. It is therefore important not to be tempted to take the methodological "highway" but to try, as much as possible, to utilise all sources to the past. If not, sources representative of elite perspectives might unduly influence our understanding of the past.

In addition to texts, digital archives can consist of audio and images (video and still), that also shed light on Ghana's past. When using these digital resources we also have to be aware of issues of representativeness. In particular, the creation of still and video images has traditionally depended on expensive technical equipment and technical knowledge. Thus, films and photographs have generally been representative of the gaze of the privileged, such as the male colonial administrator or missionary. Oral traditions, on the contrary, have been the indigenous means to transfer historical (as well as other) knowledge. As we have seen, digital archives have a considerable potential for capturing oral traditions and making them available to researchers and students. However, oral traditions have yet to benefit from the institutional strength which written material has received from archives and libraries. Instead, existing language data collections are the result of not-permanently funded projects like ELAR and TLA, and of individual researchers. Hopefully, language data archives will continue and expand and oral history projects will develop. In this manner, our understanding of the past, through digital archives, will become more balanced.

Finally, the prevalence of digital archives and other online resources revives the issue of historical knowledge production. Students are constantly bombarded with information about the past through different online media. Web search engines do not differentiate webpages with a view to the quality of the archival material, as defined by humanities and social scientists. Therefore the task of assessing the quality of the available information is for the individual to decide. The tools (i.e. methodology and critical approach) to make such assessments can be taught in schools and in

particular at the university. Thus, the greatest challenge posed by the digital archives to researchers and students is how to teach and learn these tools, not only how to access the information. Herein lies also the greatest potentiality: the digital archives increase the relevance of source criticism, historical theories and methodology.

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