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COLONIAL ARCHIVE PRACTICES AND THE POLITICS OF HISTORICAL SILENCE IN BRITISH WEST AFRICA

Erasure, Classification, and the Governance of Knowledge in Nigeria, Ghana, and Sierra Leone, 1850–1960

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ABSTRACT

Background: Colonial archives constitute foundational instruments through which British imperial administrations in West Africa constructed, organised, and selectively preserved historical records. The governance of colonial knowledge production involved systematic decisions about what was documented, classified, withheld, or destroyed, producing historiographical silences that continue to distort contemporary understandings of precolonial and colonial African societies.

Aim: This study examined how British colonial archive practices in Nigeria, Ghana, and Sierra Leone produced structured historical silences through selective record-keeping, classification regimes, and document destruction policies, and how postcolonial archival scholarship has sought to recover suppressed histories.

Methodology: The study employed a qualitative historical methodology drawing on primary source analysis of colonial administrative correspondence, dispatch registers, and inventory records held at the National Archives of Nigeria, Public Records Office of Ghana, and the Sierra Leone Public Archives, supplemented by analysis of secondary literature and postcolonial archival theory from 2022 to 2026.

Findings: Colonial archival governance systematically privileged administrative utility over historical completeness, resulting in the suppression of African-authored records, the reclassification of indigenous political documents, and the destruction of materials deemed security risks during decolonisation. Postcolonial archival scholarship has partially recovered these silences through oral history integration, diaspora archive collaboration, and digital repatriation projects.

Contributions: The study contributes to colonial historiography and archival theory by providing comparative evidence of silence-production mechanisms across three West African contexts, and by theorising the political economy of historical knowledge governance under British colonialism.

Keywords: Colonial archives, Historical silence, British West Africa, Archival governance, Postcolonial historiography, Knowledge erasure.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Archives are not passive repositories of the past. They are political instruments through which states, institutions, and empires exercise power over historical memory by determining what enters the record, how it is classified, who may access it, and under what conditions materials are preserved or destroyed. This insight, foundational to postcolonial archival theory since the influential formulations of Stoler (2009), has been substantially enriched by a new generation of scholarship that examines colonial archives not merely as sources but as objects of historical analysis in their own right (Bhambra & Santos, 2023; Trouillot, as revisited by Zinn & Adjaye, 2022).

British West Africa — comprising the colonial territories that became Nigeria, Ghana (Gold Coast), Sierra Leone, and the Gambia — was governed through elaborate bureaucratic correspondence systems linking district commissioners, provincial residencies, secretariats, and the Colonial Office in London. These administrative networks generated enormous volumes of documentation, but the selection, preservation, and subsequent accessibility of records was governed by logics that systematically marginalised African voices, suppressed evidence of indigenous political structures, and destroyed materials considered dangerous to imperial authority during the transition to independence (Afolabi, 2024; Dery & Abankwah, 2022).

This study examines how these archive practices produced structured historical silences across three interconnected colonial contexts, and how postcolonial historians and archivists have developed methodological strategies to recover what was erased, obscured, or rendered inaccessible.

2.0 THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Archive as Political Technology

Derrida's notion of archive fever, revisited in postcolonial contexts by Bhambra and Santos (2023), posits that archival institutions exercise a radical power of selection that shapes historical consciousness. What is archived confers existence; what is excluded is condemned to the historical margins. For British West African colonial archives, this power was exercised through classification hierarchies that reserved the most comprehensive record-keeping for administrative and economic matters directly serving imperial governance, while relegating indigenous political life to the category of ethnographic curiosity or security threat.

Politics of Silence

Trouillot's concept of historical silences, revisited and extended by Zinn and Adjaye (2022) in the African context, identifies four moments at which silences enter history: the moment of fact creation (what becomes a source), the moment of fact assembly (what is archived), the moment of retrieval (what is found), and the moment of retrospective significance (what is narrated). Colonial archival governance intervened at all four moments, producing layered silences whose effects persist in contemporary West African historiography.

Postcolonial Archival Recovery

Recent scholarship by Afolabi (2024) and Dery and Abankwah (2022) has theorised postcolonial archival recovery as a political act of epistemological restitution, requiring methodological pluralism that combines archival investigation with oral history, material culture analysis, and digital collaboration with diaspora archives. This framework guides the analytical approach of the present study.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study employed a comparative qualitative historical methodology examining British colonial archival practices across three West African contexts. Primary sources consulted include colonial administrative correspondence, dispatch registers, inventory and destruction certificates held at the National Archives of Nigeria (Ibadan), Public Records Office of Ghana (Accra), and the Sierra Leone Public Archives (Freetown). Archival holdings were cross-referenced with relevant Colonial Office series at the National Archives of the United Kingdom to identify gaps, discrepancies, and evidence of deliberate destruction.

Secondary analysis drew on postcolonial archival theory, historiographical reviews, and recent empirical scholarship published between 2022 and 2026. Analytical categories were derived inductively from archival materials and theoretically from the frameworks of Bhambra and Santos (2023), Zinn and Adjaye (2022), and Afolabi (2024). Comparative analysis across three jurisdictions enabled identification of shared colonial archival logics as well as context-specific variations in record governance.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Selective Record-Keeping and Administrative Utility

Analysis of colonial dispatch registers across all three territories confirms that record preservation was systematically structured around administrative utility rather than historical completeness. Tax collection records, judicial decisions affecting European commercial interests, and internal security intelligence were preserved with meticulous consistency. By contrast, records of indigenous legal proceedings, traditional governance structures, and African-authored petitions were irregularly preserved, frequently summarised by European administrators in paraphrased form, or entirely omitted from official dispatch sequences. This pattern is consistent across Nigeria, Ghana, and Sierra Leone, suggesting a shared imperial archival logic rather than idiosyncratic local practices, supporting the theoretical framework advanced by Bhambra and Santos (2023).

Classification and the Suppression of Indigenous Politics

Several categories of indigenous political documentation were systematically reclassified as security-sensitive materials under the colonial Intelligence and Security Classification system introduced across British West African territories from the 1930s. Records documenting African nationalist political organisation, correspondence with Pan-Africanist networks, and materials relating to labour unrest were classified at levels restricting access and frequently retained by the Colonial Office rather than transferred to territorial archives. Dery and Abankwah (2022) documented a comparable pattern of classification suppression in Gold Coast materials, identifying what they term the administrative invisibility of nationalist politics in official archive series.

Document Destruction During Decolonisation

The most systematic silencing occurred during the period 1955 to 1961, when British colonial administrations implemented the Operation Legacy document destruction programme — confirmed in recently declassified Colonial Office memoranda — which mandated the destruction of materials deemed embarrassing to the British government or useful to post-independence administrations in ways contrary to British interests. Afolabi (2024) estimates that Nigerian colonial archives lost approximately 30 to 40 percent of their pre-independence record volume to this programme. Similar destruction rates are indicated by inventory discrepancy analysis in Sierra Leonean archival registers.

Postcolonial Recovery Strategies

Postcolonial historians have responded to these silences through a range of recovery methodologies. Oral history integration has been particularly productive in Nigeria, where the Ibadan School of History pioneered the systematic collection of oral traditions from the 1960s onward, a tradition recently reinvigorated through digital audio archive projects documented by Falola and Heaton (2023). Diaspora archive collaboration, particularly with the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York and the Archives Nationales in Paris, has recovered materials relating to French colonial interconnections with British West African territories. Digital repatriation of colonial materials held in UK institutions represents the most recent and contested frontier of recovery, with ongoing negotiations documented by Zinn and Adjaye (2022).

5.0 CONCLUSION

British colonial archive practices in West Africa produced structured historical silences through selective record-keeping, security classification regimes, and systematic document destruction during decolonisation. These silences are not accidental absences but deliberate products of an archival governance system designed to serve imperial administrative and security interests. Postcolonial archival scholarship has developed significant methodological tools for recovery, but the extent of loss in Nigeria and Sierra Leone in particular represents an enduring challenge for West African historiography. Future research should extend comparative analysis to French West African archival practices and examine the role of digital technologies in transforming archival access and recovery.

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