

## THE PRIVATE PAPERS OF A GHANAIA N TEACHER, POLITICIAN AND CHIEF: J. K. MBIMADONG, A.K.A. NANA OBIMPE<sup>1</sup>

Samuel Aniegye Ntewusu, Senior Research Fellow/Head, History and Politics Unit,  
Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana

### Abstract

Nana Obimpe, known in private life as Joseph Kwesi Yumpo Mbimadong (1908-2013) was an educator, politician, academic, advocate and traditional ruler. This paper seeks to present the life story of Nana Obimpe and how local, national and global politics made him establish his own archives. The paper argues that his collections are of historiographical essence and could be valuable additions to information from some of the state archives in Ghana.

**Key Words:** Archives, Ghana, Politics, Chief

### Introduction: A brief on Nana Obimpe

Kwesi Yumpo was born around 1908 into the Kabesu clan of the Balai Nawuris in the Kpandai District of the Northern Region of Ghana.<sup>2</sup> His father was called Mbimadong and his mother was a Chala from Agou, in present day Nkwanta District of the Oti Region. Nana grew up in an area which was administered by both the Germans and British until the plebiscite of 1956 that made the area part of Ghana.<sup>3</sup> Nana received both traditional and Western education. At the traditional level he learned the language, culture and history of his people. He also received Western education in Kete Krachi from primary school through to the Standard Seven exams under Wilhem Henkel, an educator with a German and Ghanaian background, where he learned German, English, history, algebra, civics and civilisation. Later he attended teacher training college in Pusuga near Bawku in the Upper East Region of Ghana.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 1. Photo of J. K. Mbimadong when he was the Parliamentarian for Kpandai constituency.

- 1 I shall use the name Nana or Nana Obimpe throughout the paper. This was the name that became popular in his last years.
- 2 Nana's date of birth was reported as 1922. But interviews with some family members point out his date of birth as 1909.
- 3 For systems of administration in Ghana in the Colonial and post-Colonial period see Bening R.B. *Ghana Regional Boundaries and National Integration* (Accra: Ghana Universities press, 1999).
- 4 Ntewusu, S.A., (2016) 'Between Two Worlds: a biography of honourable Nana Obimpe, a.k.a. J. K. Mbimadong of Ghana'. Leiden: *ASC Working Paper* 132.

In the 1950s he became a teacher and taught in several schools in Ghana. In 1969 he stood for the parliamentary elections on the ticket of the National Alliance of Liberals party and won, becoming the first Member of Parliament in the Kpandai Constituency to be elected into the Parliament of Ghana's Second Republic. However, Nana could not finish his four-year term in office. The military government under I.K. Acheampong overthrew the democratically elected government in a coup d'état in 1972.<sup>5</sup> Nana went back into teaching, at the same time working for the Nawuri Youth Association, which he and other Nawuris founded in the 1950s. In the 1990s he was made chief of Balai, an aboriginal Nawuri community in the Kpandai District of Northern Region of Ghana, a position he held till his death in 2013.

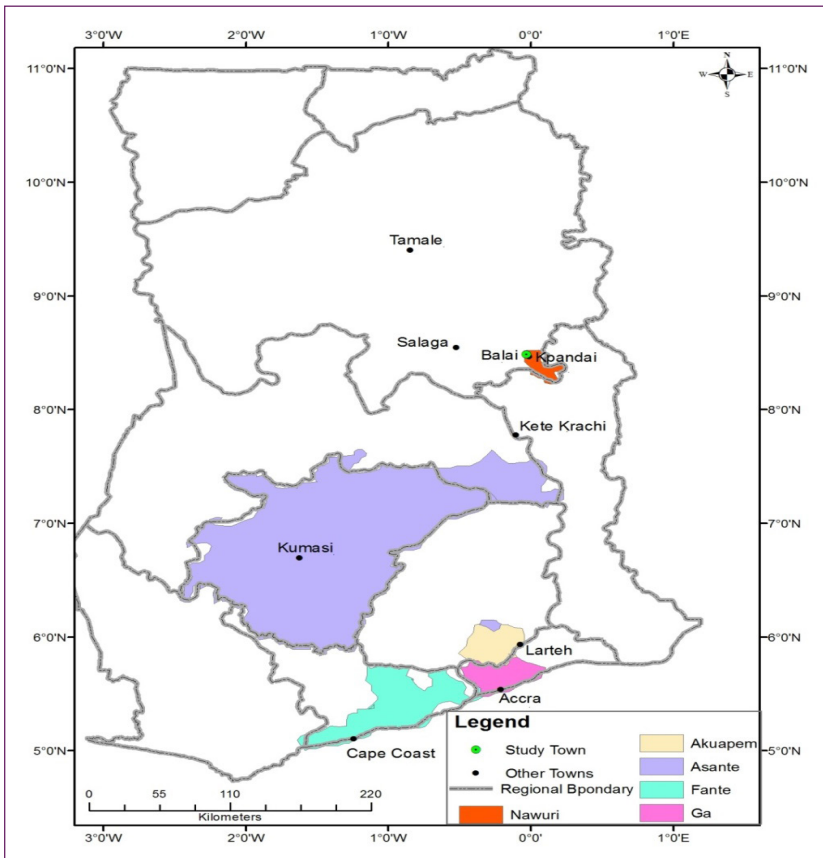


Figure 1. Map of Ghana showing J. K. Mbimadong's ethnic group, birth place marked in red. This is also the area where the documents were kept until their transfer to Accra.

Nana left behind a number of documents, papers and audio-visual material which are of historical and social importance. For the sake of this write-up, we shall call the documents the Nana Obimpe Papers and Audio-Visual Materials.

5 For more on the political history of Ghana see Buah, F.K., (1980). *A History of Ghana*, London, Macmillan.

### Keeping Documents: A conversation with Nana Obimpe

In Ghana, there are broadly speaking two kinds of archives: state or government archives and private archives which are kept by individuals, families or missions. The most popular are the state archives, usually designated as national or regional archives, located in Accra and other regional capitals in Ghana.<sup>6</sup> Within the same category of the state archives are those that are identified as institutional archives kept by various Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs), the majority of which are sometimes transferred to the National Archives in Accra or kept at the regional capitals throughout the country. Some of the private archives include: The Bells Photo Archive kept by Professor Esi Sutherland and the Mmofra Foundation in Accra, the Presbyterian Archive at Akropong, in the Eastern Region of Ghana, and the Roman Catholic Church Archive in Navrongo in the Upper East Region of Ghana.

It is important to point out that collections of individuals are rare in Ghana, and for those who do keep their papers, usually the papers are of limited size. The reason is that the ability to keep documents in good condition and in order is always a challenge. The weather, limited space, and the general idea of lack of monetary rewards that will accrue to an individual as he or she keeps the documents are enough factors that limit the interest of many people to keep personal documents.

Also, there is a cultural element to this. In most Sub-Saharan African countries including Ghana, information and records are often kept in oral form. Ghanaians privilege the oral over the written, which directly affects the value that is attached to written documents. Even though academics such as Thomas Spear share a contrary view on the issue of orality as a historiographical source, arguing that the oral is recorded in the past and passed down unchanged into the present, oral traditions have to be remembered and retold through successive generations to reach the present. Such a process poses problems of accuracy, especially as the subject matter may be subject to lapses in memory and falsification in the long chains of transmission from the initial report of the event in the past to the tradition told in the present.<sup>7</sup> In spite of the limitations, many still hold on to oral forms of record keeping because of the personal connection that it provides: information is usually passed on from one family member to another.

Although there are numerous challenges of keeping physical records, some families and individuals, including Nana Obimpe, still keep documents that they or other families generated. It is on this basis that the private papers of Nana Obimpe demand academic attention and discussion.

When Nana was alive, I visited him a number of times to research the history of Ghana. From 1996 until 2013 I would visit him in his hometown in the north of Ghana, or whenever he was in Accra, the capital of Ghana, he would call me to meet him so he could pass a 'piece of history' to me that he would have forgotten in our previous meeting. The fact that he would also add information to what he had already given me shows how, in spite of the documents he had, he still considered them inadequate in explaining a particular issue.

6 Ntewusu, S.A., (2014). 'Serendipity: Conducting Research on Social History in Ghana's Archives'. *History in Africa*, 41, pp 418.

7 Thomas, S, 'Oral Traditions: Whose History?' *The Journal of Pacific History*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Jul., 1981), p. 133.

In my visits to his house, I noticed a stockpile of documents which were kept in the ceiling and in boxes on the table. Any time we had some discussions he would pick up one or two documents to elaborate a point or disagree with an issue. But it never occurred to me to really ask about the historical profile of the documents. It was after he died in 2013 that I asked if the documents could be relocated to a place where they could be stored in a manner that would let them last longer. I had to wait for another year because in most Northern Guan cultures—especially Nana’s ethnic group, the Nawuri—the deceased is still part of the physical community and still holds on to his status and property until the final ritual journey to ancestors (*Nlidra*) is performed. Therefore, it was after the *Nlidra* that traditional clearance was given to his son, Martin Luther King Mbimadong, to bring the documents to Accra.

As earlier pointed out, Nana was born into a community noted for preservation of their tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Traditional histories and cultural objects are specially kept in the Nawuri community and form a fundamental basis for the re-enactment of history whenever such occasions arise. For example, at the death of an individual, singers and drummers called *Alumbepu* and *Alampu* are brought to sing and drum the history of the deceased, especially if the person belonged to the family of hunters, blacksmiths or farmers. Such performances are very close to the way an archive functions, since singers and musicians go back into the reservoir of songs to retrieve those relevant for the occasion. The jaws, tails, horns, and bones of animals that have been kept are also brought out for the performance of the hunter’s dance, where the history behind every bone, and the metal objects or weapons that were used during the hunting expedition is narrated in the dance square. Nana also grew up in a community that had a rich culture of storytelling, traditionally called *Asirikpan* and *Kisirikpan*, which are similar to the Ananse stories of the Akan. Storytelling is said to have originated from the families of hunters and blacksmiths and later spread to the rest of Nawuri society. As an individual that belonged to the family of hunters, Nana himself told a number of stories that emphasised the greatness of individuals in the community as well as the philosophy of life in the area. Nana indicated that since stories were also forms of preserving the culture and language of his people, they were the basis for his initial thoughts for preserving other documents that he came across. One could therefore find a direct transposition of ideas from traditional systems into the modern system of record keeping.

Aside from these cultural aspects that shaped his thoughts on preservation of documents, he was also among the first six people from his ethnic group to receive a Western education, along with Friko of Katiejeli and Agbaji of Nkanchina. Being among the few thus educated in the area meant that when any member of the community wanted to write a letter or if they received any letter or document that they wanted someone to read, that role rested with them. Each letter or document that was received was kept. Furthermore, Nana schooled at Kete Krachi in former German Togoland under Wilhelm Henkel, an educator with German and Ghanaian parentage (his father was German and his mother Ghanaian). Henkel kept every document, especially letters that he received from German and later British administrators. His practice of keeping documents also influenced Nana.

There were also some major historical and social movements at the time that Nana was growing up that influenced his decision to keep documents. At the time of the Second World War, the British relied heavily on propaganda. Information was transmitted to communities by vans with loud public address systems, and there were also propaganda posters. He indicates that these were times that everyone in the community was en-

couraged to keep every form of information that they got from any source, written or verbal, so long as it was related to the war. This practice further shaped his thoughts regarding collection.

Besides all these factors, if there was one singular and most important factor that influenced him to keep records, it was the introduction and progression of Indirect Rule in Ghana under British colonialism. As a policy that relied heavily on chiefs and British colonial officials, communication between these two parties was key. It was during this period that Nana was brought in to write letters of protest against the political regimentation of the north, especially along the lines of ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ ethnic groups, by the British. Such alignments brought sharp divisions between the more Islamised groups such as the Gonja, Mamprui, Dagomba, Wala and Nanumba, who for purposes of Indirect Rule were regarded as the majority against Vagla, Nawuri, Nchumburu, Konkomba, Frafra, Kusasi, Builsa, and Dargati, among others, who were termed as minority. These divisions privileged paper documentation over the oral, and in particular maps that were produced by the Germans, French and British were valued. These initial maps, especially those produced by Germans, represented regions based on the ethnicity of their inhabitants.<sup>8</sup> Nana searched for and collected many such maps.

### The collection

The collections that were brought by Mbimadong Martin Luther King are kept at the Kwabena Nketia Archives located at the Institute of African Studies. The Institute of African Studies (IAS) is part of the College of Humanities and is located on the main Legon campus of the University of Ghana. The IAS was established in 1961 as a semi-autonomous institute within the University. The mandate of the institute is to conduct research on the history of the peoples of Africa, including their cultural and artistic heritage, and to disseminate the findings through teaching and outreach programmes. It made sense to bring the boxes to the Nketia Archive, since it is one of the units within the University that is dedicated to the protection of historical collections. The family through Mr. Jones Atabasu Mbimadong and Martin Luther King Mbimadong agreed verbally for the documents and audiovisual materials to be made available for research purposes. Arrangements are being made for a formal donor agreement to be made with signatories.

### The boxes and an overview of their contents

As noted earlier, the documents are kept in three containers. One of the boxes measuring about four feet long and two feet high was bound with a thick plastic rope that measured about seven feet long. The rope was used to tie the plastic box to prevent the documents from falling out. The other containers were two plastic sacks popularly referred to as ‘Ghana Must Go’ bags.<sup>9</sup>

8 See for example Basel Mission Archive (BMA) 97255 “Karte von Togo. C1. Bismarckburg”, 1906.

9 In the 1970s Nigeria had an economic boom following windfall from their Oil Industry. The economic success made several nationals within the West African Sub-region to move into Nigeria to work. By the early 1980s relationship between the migrants and their host grew sour particularly Ghanaians and Nigerians. The Nigeria government decided to deport Ghanaians. Articulator vehicles usually meant for transportation of goods and cattle were lined up in most of the major cities in Nigeria to transport Ghanaian migrants to Ghana. Since time was not on the side of Ghanaians they went in for the plastic made bags which were not only cheap but large enough to contain their belongings. The name given to the plastic carrier bags was ‘Ghana Must Go’ referring to the order that was given to them to leave within the shortest possible time.



Figure 3. The metal boxes popularly referred to as *trunk* in Ghana and a plastic bag where the documents are kept.

The documents in the containers include letters, court records, reports of commissions of enquiry, maps, audio recordings, and photographs. Some of these document sets are beyond the scope of this paper, but special attention will be paid to letters, reports, maps, write ups and audio-visual recordings.

### Letters

Letters comprise about seventy percent of all the documents. They cover the 1940s to 2013 with some of the letters written and received just two weeks before Nana's death. The period of intense correspondence was from the 1950s to the mid-1990s. This is not accidental at all. The physical distance between Nana and his networks, especially at a time that there were no mobile telephones, meant that much of the transactions and communications had to be conducted through letters. The letters could further be categorised into several fonds. Those that he exchanged with his friends and family had broad subjects revolving around the activities of individuals and their families including marriage, births, deaths, education, children; general information about cultural activities such as the celebration of festivals and funerals, travels outside of their communities; and occasionally more unusual topics including curses, broken taboos, and the planting and harvesting of crops, among others.

The second set of letters relate to issues of land, chieftaincy and British colonialism. In this set of letters Nana wrote and received letters which were addressed to him personally, or sometimes addressed to the Nawuri Ethnic group or its Youth Association which he co-founded. Most of the letters were complaints, strategies and protests, especially against the British system of government and the subjugation of Nawuris under Gonja Rule. When he was made the chief one finds also letters to other ethnic groups in the area on the issue and need to celebrate festivals together. These were invitation letters to people to join in the celebration of the yam or guinea corn festivals. In the early part of the 2000s there had been a number of inter-Nawuri conflicts that shook and continue to shake the unity of the ethnic group. Some of the letters address these divisions and the way to move forward.



Figure 4. The author with some of the letters from the boxes (Picture taken by Mr. Nat, Senior Technician at Nketia Audio-Visual archive, University of Ghana, Legon).

The third category of letters are institutional and governmental in nature. One finds letters related to his education—those written by his school authorities, teachers and classmates as well as application letters to, and responses from, a number of Christian and governmental agencies for jobs. Out of the several applications, some were successful and others were not. Two particular jobs worth mentioning are as a teacher with the Presbyterian Mission Schools and later the Local Authority schools and also as administrator of the Ghana Farmers' Co-operative. As an administrator there was a lot of communication that dealt with his job, especially his work schedule, treks, problems and their resolutions. The same holds for his employment as a teacher where there was correspondence related to the establishment and administration of schools.

Within this category one also finds some of the letters related to politics in Ghana, especially the formation of political parties and elections. In all cases one finds a lot of tensions regarding politics in Ghana.

### Reports, maps and write-ups

Aside from the letters, one finds reports, maps and short write-ups in Nana's collections. Popular among them is the Dixon Report.<sup>10</sup> While he was alive this was the most important document that he relied upon to deal with issues related to land and chieftaincy. There is also the German map *Karte von Togo* of 1904, a map which has already been referred to in the previous pages and which he consulted on the land claims in

10 J. Dixon, 'Report of Mr. J. Dixon, Administrative Officer Class I, on the Representations Made to the Trusteeship Council of the United Nations Organisation, Concerning the Status of the Nawuris and Nanjuros within the Togoland Area of the Gonja District, (1955).

the Nawuri and Gonja area. Nana also attempted writing a history of the Nawuris. Some of the information was used during the Justice Ampiah Committee, which was set up in 1991 to investigate the root causes of the ethnic clashes between the Nawuri and Nchumburu against the Gonja, and to provide possible solutions to the problem.

### Audiovisual materials

Nana's collection has audiovisual material on compact cassettes and CDs. The compact cassettes are two and contain stories. These were stories narrated by the elderly to children. The stories which featured human beings, animals, insects and vegetation offered insights into the philosophical world of the Nawuris, and was narrated by elders in Balai to children in the community. The CDs are also two in number and deal with the celebration of funerals and their associated rituals. The first CD, which likely dates to the early 200s, contains video recordings of the final funeral rites performed for over ten people in the Village of Balai, where Nana was chief. The second CD was produced during the funeral of Nana Obimpe himself and would have been added to the collection by one of his sons. The CDs are in good condition, but there are portions of the videos where brightness, sound and picture quality is poor. The Kwabena Nketia Archive will digitize the CDs to ensure future access. Permission was sought before the recordings were made and therefore families do not have a problem with researchers being granted access to the material.

### Importance of the documents to researchers

As the records of someone who served his community and Ghana in several capacities, the documents are of valuable importance to researchers and historians. The historical records offer a unique opportunity to analyse a number of issues by connecting the various histories between the periods that Nana lived to the present. For example, the early years of his correspondence dealt with the culture of the Northern Guans as well the way and manner traditional institutions functioned in the area.<sup>11</sup>

Letters relating to his job as a teacher with the Ghana Education Service and as an administrator also provide very useful insights into the way and manner in which the Ghanaian civil service operated. In essence some of the correspondence revealed quite some level of nepotism and tribalism in the civil service, a factor that greatly affected his application for jobs for a number of years.

Since he was a Member of Parliament until the military coup d'état of 1972, his documents reveal that turbulent period of Ghana's history. Most of his communications to friends and members of the civilian government that was overthrown went on until his death. He corresponded with most of his parliamentary friends, too. Researchers interested in Ghana's political history especially after the overthrow of the Busia government will find the correspondence highly useful. Above all, his correspondence is an important addition to important documents that are held by the state archives among which include:

- Public Records and Archive Administration (Hereafter, PRAAD), Tamale, NRG 8/1/2, Boundary dispute, 1921;
- PRAAD, Kumasi, ARG 1/1/106, Transfer of Kratchi, Mandated area to the Northern Territories Administration, 1922-28;
- PRAAD, Tamale, NRG, 8/1/2, Boundary Disputes, Togoland, 1921;
- PRAAD, Kumasi, ARG 1/1/106, Transfer of Kratchi, Mandated area to the Northern Territories Administration, 1922-28;

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11 Guans are a group of ethnic groups that claim to be the original inhabitants of Ghana.



- PRAAD, Tamale, NRG. 8/2/5. Native Administration, 1925;
- PRAAD, NRG 8/2/1 The History and Organisation of the Kambonsi in Dagomba;
- PRAAD, NRG 8/2/217 M.M. Read, Essay on the Peoples of North-West Province, n.d.;
- PRAAD, NRG 3/2/1 History and Constitution of the Mamprusi tribe, 1922;
- PRAAD, NRG 3/2/4 History of the Buli, Nankani, and Kassina people in Navrongo area of the Mamprusi District, n.d.;
- PRAAD, Tamale, NRG, 8/3/36, General Report, 1933-1947;
- PRAAD, Tamale, NRG 8/3/125, Gonja District Report, 1944-1945;
- PRAAD, NRG 8/2/210, Nawuri and Nanjuro (NTs) Under United Nations Trusteeship. 1951-1954.

### Importance of the Audio-Visuals

The audiovisual materials, though very limited in number compared to the paper documents, have a lot to offer to researchers. For example, the stories enable one to understand Nawuri epistemological issues in relation to life: they reveal a central part of the Nawuri knowledge system, especially the nature of power dynamics in Nawuri society. Storytelling and proverbs are expressions of personal and social experiences, hence for a researcher to be able to understand their way of life, one must have recourse to their stories. It is in this that the tapes become very important to researchers.<sup>12</sup>

The CDs on Nawuri funerals are also very important. The final funeral rites of Nawuris are avenues through which one can learn a lot about their religious life and belief systems. For example, in the videos one finds the processes of transferring the spirit of deceased members of the community to the 'spiritual world'. The CD on the funeral of Nana Obimpe himself offers insights into the Nawuri 'Warrior Cult' and the performance of 'Onyinawu', a dance which is reserved for accomplished hunters, chiefs and earth priests. The CD reveals the historical connections between the Nawuri and other ethnic groups such as the Gonja, Nanumba, Dagomba and Konkomba. Each of the ethnic groups attended the funeral with their leaders and cultural dances.

### Conclusions

Nana Obimpe's papers and audiovisual materials are critical to the study of the social history of Northern Ghana. The papers cover a wide range of issues that are of past and current relevance. Indeed, with the papers much of the correspondence relates to the so-called negative consequences of Indirect Rule, a factor that till this day continues to have a very interesting impact on the people of Ghana. For example, the conflicts in Northern Ghana that began in the 1980s and 1990s continue to be a part of the social tensions and intermittent wars even in the present. Some of the letters and correspondences in the 1960s already pointed to the likelihood of such conflicts in the future if the state and state institutions did not address such negative colonial and post-colonial policies. Of greater interest is the way the letters could help one visualize the historical changes that have taken place in the area during and after the conflicts in northern Ghana. For example, some of the communities and settlements that were referred to in the correspondence have undergone some significant changes due to destruction and migration during and after the wars. In the same way there has been a general shift in

12 Ntewusu, S. (2021), 'If you want to understand Africa's Politico-epistemological world, Look at the Chameleon'. In' Francis B. Nyamnjoh, Patrick Nwosu and Hassan M. Yosimbom Being, eds. *Becoming African as a Permanent Work in Progress: Inspiration from Chinua Achebe's Proverbs*. Langaa RPCIG, Bamenda, Cameroon.

discourses on land and chieftaincy in the area. The inter-ethnic conflicts that characterized the exchanges of letters soon shifted to intra-ethnic and inter-family conflicts and disputes. Researchers can easily track down these changes due to the letters that have been kept.

The papers are relevant in filling out the missing links from the state archives, especially when it is evident that today many of the relevant documents that are related to chieftaincy and land in the state archives are continuously being weeded out from the archives by litigants who are paid by chiefs, families and politicians to pick out and destroy documents that do not favor their cause.

The audio-visual material though few are most important. They serve as permanent recordings and therefore could easily be used to track the social and cultural changes among the Nawuri.

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