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ARCHIVAL REPORT

A Note on Photographic Archival Collections on Northern Ghana

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Abstract

This note offers a preliminary survey of archives containing photographic material – both digitized and nondigitized – related to northern Ghana. Despite the region's historical marginalization, this condition has not necessarily resulted in a scarcity of sources. On the contrary, numerous archives preserve rich and underexplored photographic documentation. By identifying and describing key collections across institutions such as the White Fathers *phototèque*, the Ministry of Information in Accra, the University of Cambridge, the British Museum, the Bodleian Library, the Imperial War Museum, the National Archives in London, and the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, this note seeks to illuminate underexplored visual sources.

Résumé:

Cette note propose une étude préliminaire des archives contenant des photographies, numérisées ou non, prises dans le nord du Ghana. Malgré la marginalisation historique de cette région, cette situation n'a pas nécessairement entraîné une pénurie de sources. Au contraire, de nombreuses archives contiennent une documentation photographique riche et peu explorée. En identifiant et en décrivant les fonds clés de diverses institutions telles que la photothèque des Pères Blancs, le ministère de l'Information à Accra, l'université de Cambridge, le British Museum, la Bodleian Library, l'Imperial War Museum, les Archives nationales à Londres et le Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, cette note vise à mettre en lumière des sources visuelles peu explorées

Keywords: photographic collections; Ghana; Gold Coast; digitized collections; colonial photography; visual archives

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Introduction

At a time when material and digital sources increasingly coexist, the aim of this note is to provide a preliminary mapping of archives that held photographic material (both digitized and nondigitized) related to northern Ghana – many of which have received little scholarly attention to date. Regular updates are essential, as archives are today digitized at an increasingly rapid pace.[1] This note aims, therefore, to offer a preliminary (and necessarily partial) contribution – one that, it is hoped, will form part of a growing series of notes on the topic. Precisely because digitized materials are continually being updated, it is essential to track and periodically map these resources to grasp the evolving possibilities now available to anyone through the sole use of an internet connection.

Taking this journal (among others) as a platform through which historians, researchers, scholars, students, and all those interested in African history engage with archival materials, it is possible to observe the striking absence of references to collections specifically documenting archives with material on northern Ghana.[2] The northern region of Ghana has long experienced a condition of marginalization, reflected across many dimensions of its historical development.[3] In terms of archival reports, for example, although many recent publications have addressed Ghanaian archives, none have focused specifically on

[1] For a discussion of the possibilities and limitations of digital archives in relation to Africa's past, see Terry Barringer and Marion Wallace, *African Studies in the Digital Age* (Brill, 2014); Marion Wallace, "Digital Sources in Europe for African History," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History* (2018), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.338 (accessed 9 September 2025); Jon Olav Hove and Jonathan Allen Brindle, "Digital Archives and Ghanaian History: Potential and Challenges," *Contemporary Journal of African Studies* 3, no. 2 (2016): 135–56. For a reflection on the challenges involved in digitizing Ghana's national archives, see Azindow Bawah Fuseini, "Digitizing Public Archives in Ghana: What Is Praad's Problem?" *Bobcatsss*, 2023, 106–113.

[2] A significant portion of the holdings at the Public Records and Archives Administration Department (Tamale and Bolgatanga branches) has been digitized through the Endangered Archives Programme of the British Library. For the branch of Bolgatanga see: https://eap.bl.uk/collection/EAP935-8 (accessed 9 September 2025). Unfortunately, no scholarly work has yet been published on the contents of the Bolgatanga branch of the PRAAD. It is likely that this branch holds photographs as well, as during a visit in 2015, I found several photographs in some of its file folders. For the digitized contents of the PRAAD (Tamale) see: https://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP541 (accessed 9 September 2025). For classic notes on the contents of Tamale archives see: Iddirisu Abdulai, "The Ghana Public Records and Archives Administration Department-Tamale: A Guide for Users," *History in Africa* 27 (2000), 449–53; A. K. Mensah, "A Descriptive List of the Records of the Chief Commissioner Northern Territories in the Tamale Regional Archives 1897–1969" (Diploma in Archive Administration, University of Ghana, 1981); K. David Patterson, "The Northern Regional Archival Center, Tamale, Ghana," *History in Africa* 3 (1976): 181–85.

[3] See for example Moses Diyaane Awinsong, "The Making of a Nation: The Northern Territories and the Colonial Discourse of Nationhood in the Gold Coast, 1897–1950," *African Historical Review* 52, no. 2 (2021): 1–30; Ali Yakubu Nyaaba, and George M. Bob-Milliar, "The Economic Potentials of Northern Ghana: The Ambivalence of the Colonial and Post-Colonial States to Develop the North," *African Economic History* 47, no. 2 (2019): 45–67.

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archives with material related to the northern part of the country.[4] Similarly, although photographs are widely recognized as valuable historical sources, reports and surveys on photographic archives with material pertinent to Ghanaian history remain strikingly scarce, particularly in comparison with those devoted to textual records.[5] Much of the existing literature and available information primarily concerns archives with contents focused on southern Ghana, with an emphasis on nonphotographic and nondigitized materials located either in Ghana or Europe.[6]

However, such underrepresentation does not correspond to a scarcity of sources. This note seeks to address this gap by identifying and examining photographic collections that remain underexplored yet potentially rich in material. The list of archives I propose to explore here supplements the existing body of work by introducing additional collections that have yet to be discussed in the literature. Furthermore, it includes collections held in American and Italian archives that provide further valuable insights.[7]

[4] See, for instance: Manuel J. Manu-Osafo, George M. Bob-Milliar, and Ben Jones, "Urban History in Kumase, Ghana: A Note on Archives," *History in Africa* (2025): 1–14; Samuel A. Ntewusu, Stefano Bellucci, Samuel Andreas Admasie, and Frederick Abraham, "A Short Report on the Ghana Railway Archive in Sekondi-Takoradi," *History in Africa* (2025): 1–8; Frank Afari, "Navigating 'Confidentiality': Ghana's National Reconciliation Commission's 'Sensitive' Records in Perspective," *History in Africa* (2024): 1–21; Judith Opoku-Boateng, Ekow Cann, Samuel A. Ntewusu, and Sandra Owusu, "The J.H. Kwabena Nketia Archive at the University of Ghana-Legon," *History in Africa* 47 (2020): 375–82; Alexander Keese and Annalisa Urbano, "Researching Post-Independence Africa in Regional Archives: Possibilities and Limits in Benin, Cabo Verde, Ghana and Congo-Brazzaville," *Africa* 93, no. 4 (2023): 542–61.

[5] But see Paul Jenkins and Christraud Geary, "Photographs from Africa in the Basel Mission Archive," *African Arts* 18, no. 4 (1985): 56–100; Paul Jenkins, "A Provisional Survey of Nineteenth Century Photography on the Gold Coast and in Ashanti," *Journal des africanistes* 75, no. 2 (2005): 103. For a recent contribution on photographic archives see Ann Cassiman, "Fragments of Affinity: Photographic Archives and the Material Performance of Personhood in a Zongo Community of Ghana," *Journal of Material Culture* 29, no. 3 (2024): 249–67.

[6] For Ghanaian archives see, for example: David P. Henige, "The National Archives of Ghana: A Synopsis of Holdings," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 6, no. 3 (1973): 475–86; Gareth Austin, "The Kumase Branch of the National Archives of Ghana: A Situation Report and Introduction for Prospective Users," *History in Africa* 13 (1986): 383–89; Samuel A. Ntewusu, "The Banana and Peanut Archive of Ghana," *History in Africa* 44 (2017): 285–94; Samuel A. Ntewusu, "Serendipity: Conducting Research on Social History in Ghana's Archives," *History in Africa* 41 (2014): 417–23; Matteo Grilli, "Nkrumah, Nationalism, and Pan-Africanism: The Bureau of African Affairs Collection," *History in Africa* 44 (2017): 295–307. For European archives see Michel Doortmont and Jinna Smit, *Sources for the Mutual History of Ghana and the Netherlands: An Annotated Guide to the Dutch Archives Relating to Ghana and West Africa in the Nationaal Archief, 1593–1960s* (Brill, 2007); Nehemiah Levtzion, "Early Nineteenth Century Arabic Manuscripts from Kumasi," *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 8 (1965): 99–119.

[7] German archives are not considered here in detail, although fuller notes on these collections would be an important addition in future research. The Frobenius Institute, for example, has digitized a significant body of material, particularly concerning the Kusasi and Gurunsi regions. The collection includes maps, photographs of dwellings, architectural plans, portraiture, and detailed drawings of scarification patterns, gathered during Frobenius's second expedition to the region between 1907 and 1909. These materials are readily accessible through the Institute's online catalog, see: http://bildarchiv.frobenius-katalog.de/ (accessed 9 September 2025). The University of Mainz has also digitized a selection of photographs and visual materials with a focus on the Upper West Region

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The note begins with an overview of collections that have not yet been digitized: the White Fathers' *photothèque* in Rome; the photographic archive of the Ministry of Information in Accra; the Gibbs collection at the Bodleian Libraries in Oxford; and the photographic holdings of the National Archives in Kew. The section concludes with the Rattray collection, which is housed at the Royal Anthropological Institute in London and has been digitized for online access through the Pitt Rivers Museum's website. The second part turns to digitized collections, including those of the Imperial War Museum and the British Museum in London; the Royal Commonwealth Society collections preserved and digitized by the Cambridge University Library; the Fortes collection held and digitized by the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology; and, finally, the Meyerowitz collection curated and made available online by the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in Washington.

White Fathers' *photothèque*, Rome

The archives of the White Fathers (Missionaries of Africa) in Rome have already been the subject of extensive scholarly attention, particularly in relation to their textual materials.[8] However, no comprehensive report has yet been devoted to the photographic holdings of these archives. At the Roman archive, two rooms house the *photothèque*, which contains thousands of photographs taken and collected by the missionaries, spanning from the earliest years of their mission in the late nineteenth century to the early 2000s. Some of these images can be traced through an online catalog; however, none of the collections have been fully digitized or made publicly accessible.[9] Consultation is currently possible only on-site and requires the assistance of the archivist.

Many photographs bear handwritten annotations on the reverse side, offering information regarding location, date, and the activities depicted. Only a limited number, however, include notes on the individuals portrayed. The vast majority of the photographs are in black and white, and they vary considerably in size, quality, and format. Cataloging remains inconsistent: in many cases, the photographer is unknown, the date is uncertain, and locations are not specified. Oral history, photo elicitation, and further archival

that may be of interest. For further information, see: https://www.blogs.uni-mainz.de/fb07-ifeas-eng/departmental-archives/archive-west-african-settlement-history/ (accessed 9 September 2025).

[8] René Lamey, "Les Archives de La Société Des Pères Blancs (Missionnaires d'Afrique)," *History in Africa* 1 (1974): 161–65; Carol W. Dickerman, "On Using the White Fathers' Archives," *History in Africa* 8 (1981): 319–22; David Lee Schoenbrun, "Using the White Fathers Archive: An Update," *History in Africa* 20 (1993): 421–22; Marja Hinfelaar and Giacomo Macola, "The White Fathers' Archive in Zambia," *History in Africa* 30 (2003): 439–45. In Rome, the archive of the White Sisters also holds photographic material related to northern Ghana. Unfortunately, these photographs have not yet been cataloged or digitized (personal communication with the archivist). For further information on this archive, see Michael W. Tuck, "Using the Missionary Sisters of Africa (White Sisters) Archives," *History in Africa* 27 (2000): 499–500.

[9] The library's online catalog also allows users to search through its archival holdings, see: https://romeperesblancs.bibenligne.fr/ (accessed 9 September 2025).

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research could, however, help to clarify authorship, dating, and provenance, thereby enhancing the historical value of these materials. Despite these limitations, the collections related to northern Ghana are substantial and accessible.

The main collections relevant to this region are three: Fonds Ghana; Fonds Collection DARS; and Fonds Albums Missions P.B. The first collection, Fonds Ghana (Chambre 54, Lettre J, Casier 7), contains approximately one hundred photographs, the majority of which date from the 1930s, with a smaller number from the 1970s. They were primarily taken in Navrongo, Wa, Tamale, Wiaga, Jirapa, and Nandom. Subjects include White Fathers and White Sisters, mission staff, seminarians and students, individuals associated with mission life, buildings and dwellings, and local crafts and trades. The second collection, the Fonds Collection DARS (Chambre 54, Lettre O, Casiers 1–16), comprises around one hundred photographs taken in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. This collection features images taken in Nandom, Navrongo, Wiaga, Bolgatanga, Jirapa, and Tamale. Key subjects include missionary buildings and churches, markets, masses, and schools, seminaries, crafts and trades (mechanics and carpentry), ecclesiastical events, and traditional authorities. The last collection, Fonds Albums Missions P.B. 1 (Chambre 55, Lettre R, Tiroir 1), contains photographs from the journey of Joseph Birraux in West Africa in the late 1930s. Sixteen photographs relate specifically to northern Ghana, depicting church-related activities such as masses and confessions in Navrongo, Jirapa, and Nandom.

Part of these pictures have already been digitized in an internal database, and further information may be requested from the archivist. A digitized collection is the Fonds Namur Country Portfolio Ghana, which includes sections on both southern and northern Ghana. The collection on northern Ghana consists of approximately ninety undated color photographs taken in Tamale, Damongo, Seripe, Bole, Kaleo, Lawra, Jirapa, Nandom, Tumu, Navrongo, Bolgatanga, Tongo, and Bawku. The images predominantly depict villages, agricultural scenes, and local dwellings. In addition to photographs, the *photothèque* also preserves a significant number of films made by the White Fathers. Many of these have been digitized and cataloged within an internal database. The films, which vary widely in length, were produced between the 1930s and the early 2000s and include both black-and-white and color footage. Their main themes and geographical scope extend beyond northern Ghana, encompassing evangelization, medical and educational missionary activities, and everyday life within the missions, as well as scenes of local life, reportage, and interviews with missionaries and Christian converts. A catalog is available. Most of the films are in French, though some are in English.

Ministry of Information, Accra

The Ministry of Information in Ghana traces its origins to 1939, when a branch of the Colonial Government Secretariat was established to inform the Gold Coast population about World War II.[10] Initially focused on wartime news, it evolved

[10] For more information see: https://isd.gov.gh/about-isd/ (accessed 9 September 2025).

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into the Department of Information in response to postwar political reforms, serving as a key communication link between the government and the public. After independence in 1957, Kwame Nkrumah expanded its role in nation-building and propaganda, making it central to the distribution of films, print, and audio materials.[11] In 1966, following the coup, it merged with the Department of Information Services and later restructured in 1971 into its current form to support government communication and public outreach.

The current condition of the archive in the Accra branch is, unfortunately, severely deteriorated.[12] This note focuses only on the photographic contents of the archive, which I was able to consult. It is difficult to determine the precise number of photographs it contains. The catalog lists fifty-six distinct files, many of which comprise multiple folders. Each folder may include anywhere from a few dozen to several hundred photographs. Among the files that certainly include material on northern Ghana are F38 – *Market Scenes*, F6 – *Communications*, F24 – *Development*, and F19 – *Regions*, though it is highly likely that additional files also contain relevant photographic documentation of the area. Each folder houses several photographic collections, typically identified by a subject heading that outlines the content, along with an archival reference. In many cases, the name of the photographer and the date the photographs were taken are also recorded. The photographs are individually numbered and often accompanied by further descriptive details. The majority are black and white, varying in quality, format, and dimension.

Bodleian Libraries, Oxford

Within the Bodleian Libraries at the University of Oxford, and specifically in the Weston Library, is housed a photographic album from the personal collection of George Howard Gibbs, donated to the library by his estate.[13] Gibbs entered the Colonial Administrative Service in 1920 and was posted to the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast, where he served as Assistant District Commissioner and later as District Commissioner. Nearly fifty photographs were taken between 1921 and 1931. The earliest set, dating from 1921–22, focuses primarily on Zuarungu. It includes images of colonial administrative sites, such as government residences in Navrongo, Gambaga, and Zuarungu, as well as prisons, scenes of everyday life, and various colonial intermediaries – including soldiers and interpreters. This section of the album also contains photographs taken in Leo, Ouagadougou, and Freetown. The 1923 photographs document areas such as Tongo, Gambaga, Walewale, and the Togoland territory. Gibbs also captured official events, most notably the arrival of the Prince of Wales in

[11] Rebecca Ohene-Asah, "Remnants of the Central Film Library and the Rethinking of Ghana's Audio-Visual Heritage," in *Accidental Archivism: Shaping Cinema's Futures with Remnants of the Past*, ed. Stefanie Schulte Strathaus and Vinzenz Hediger (meson press, 2023): 423–38.

[12] For a discussion and additional details on the history of this archive, see Jennifer Blaylock, "Audiovisual Artefacts: The African Politics of Moving Image Loss," *Social Dynamics* 50, no. 1 (2024): 60–75.

[13] Bodleian Library, Oxford, Photographs belonging to George Howard Gibbs, MSS.Afr.s.1958.

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Asante in 1925. The album continues with photographs taken in Lagos and Kumasi in 1930. Unfortunately, many of the later photographs in the album remain uncataloged.

The National Archives, London

At the National Archives in London, the INF 10 collection – entitled *British Empire Collection of Photographs* – comprises 8,472 photographs and film stills compiled by the Central Office of Information between 1945 and 1965. Each image has been individually cataloged. The collection is organized topographically, primarily by country, colony, dominion, or territory, and within each section, thematically. This structure is thought to mirror the original classification system prior to the archive's acquisition. The thematic categories are broad and reflect prevailing colonial concerns, including education, military, "racial types," transport and communications, health and medicine, agriculture, architecture, and so on.[14]

With regard to Ghana, several key sub-collections within the INF 10 series contain valuable photographic material pertaining to the northern part of the country. Among these, INF 10/117 comprises forty-five photographs documenting "Social Conditions" in the Gold Coast, including numerous images taken in Gurensi (particularly in Bolgatanga), Builsa, Konkomba, and Kusasi (notably Bawku). INF 10/118 contains ninety-five photographs under the theme "Occupations and Services"; several noteworthy photographs depict the White Fathers in Nandom and Jirapa, as well as kola nut traders traversing the border with French territories. The file INF 10/122, titled "Communications and Transport," includes forty-six photographs, with some scenes captured in Tamale. INF 10/125, containing ninety-six photographs on "Agriculture and Food Production," features images of agricultural shows held in Zuarungu and the Kusasi area, as well as the Gonja Development Scheme and cattle rearing at Pong-Tamale. INF 10/129 includes 102 photographs under the theme "Events," depicting colonial ceremonies in Tamale and scenes from the 1956 elections in the Northern Territories. Lastly, INF 10/131 comprises fifty-four photographs on "Architecture," including images of missionary churches.

In addition to the INF 10 series, the National Archives also holds the photographic album of Arnold W. Hodson, colonial administrator and Governor of the Gold Coast (1934–41), which illustrates a journey from Dakar to the Gold Coast via Timbuktu in 1935.[15] The album includes seventy-eight photographs, some of which were taken in Navrongo, capturing scenes of road conditions and ferry crossings. Particularly significant is also the album CO 1069/49, entitled *Gold Coast Photographs Nangodi Gold Mine Northern Territories*, which contains thirty-five images taken in 1935.[16] These photographs, produced by the managers of the

[14] For more information see: https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C9326 (accessed 9 September 2025).

[15] TNA CO 1069/17, "AFRICA WEST 1. Album of 78 photographs taken by Sir A Hodson illustrating a journey from Dakar to the Gold Coast via Timbuktu in 1935."

[16] TNA CO 1069/49, "GHANA 22. Album of 35 photographs and 2 papers entitled 'Gold Coast Photographs Nangodi Gold Mine Northern Territories,'" 1935.

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first gold mine established in the Northern Territories at Nangodi, document both mining activities and the individuals involved in the site's daily operations.

Royal Anthropological Institute, London

The Royal Anthropological Institute in London holds the field notebooks, photographs, and research materials produced by Robert Sutherland Rattray during his work in Asante and with Victor Aboya in the Northern Territories in the 1920s.[17] Many of these have been cataloged, which considerably facilitates archival research. The catalog is accessible online, and although the photographs have been digitized and stored in an internal database, they are also publicly available on the Pitt Rivers Museum website.[18] Robert Rattray was an avid photographer from a young age and equally a committed ethnographer.[19] The work regarded as inaugurating academic ethnography in the Northern Territories is his *The Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland*, published in 1932.[20] Part of the photographs Rattray took during his fieldwork between 1927 and 1930 were published in this book. Upon his death in 1938, his photographic collection was transferred to the Royal Anthropological Institute, where it remains preserved and partially digitized. Of particular interest is Collection MS 445, which contains approximately 1,200 images produced during his extended stays in Ghana.

Imperial War Museum, London

A digitization program is currently underway at the Imperial War Museum, and it is therefore likely that the availability of online contents will continue to expand over time.[21] The holdings of the Museum related to Ghana are predominantly focused on military themes, but the most notable exception on northern Ghana is the 1944 film *A Mamprusi Village.*[22] This black-and-white film, with a runtime of approximately twenty minutes, was produced by the British Ministry of Information, directed and photographed by John Page, and edited by Jim Mellor. The film portrays scenes of tax collection, daily market activities, and various aspects of everyday life in the Northern Territories during the 1940s. Though

[17] Royal Anthropological Institute, London, Rattray, Robert Sutherland (MS 101–9; MS 445). The archive also contains a significant body of textual material, presumably produced directly by Victor Aboya in the Gurune language. Although this corpus has not yet been the subject of any scholarly analysis, it likely constitutes one of the earliest known written sources in Gurune, and as such represents a valuable and unexplored resource for both linguistic and historical research.

[18] For the search tool of the RAI see: https://therai.org.uk/archives-and-manuscripts/manuscript-contents/ (accessed 9 September 2025). For the Pitt Rivers Museum's website see: https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/collections-online#/search (accessed 9 September 2025).

[19] For further biographical information on Rattray, see Noel Machin, *Government Anthropologist: A Life of R.S. Rattray* (Centre for Social Anthropology and Computing, University of Kent at Canterbury, 1998).

[20] Carola Lentz, *Ethnicity and the Making of History in Northern Ghana* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 94; Robert S. Rattray, *The Tribes of the Ashanit Hinterland*, 2 vols. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1932).

[21] For further information, see also Hove and Brindle, "Digital Archives and Ghanaian History," 149.

[22] See https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060007283 (accessed 9 September 2025).

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accompanied by a voiceover that reflects the racist and paternalistic tone characteristic of colonial narratives, the visual content nonetheless remains a valuable source of historical information on the period. Despite the title, it is highly probable that the footage was not filmed in the Mamprusi area, but rather in what is today the Upper East Region of Ghana.[23]

British Museum, London

Among the photographic holdings related to northern Ghana and preserved at the British Museum is the album Af,A14 titled *Gold Coast Northern Territory Ashanti 1936 – Mary S. R. Sinclair*, photographed and donated by Mary Simpson Robertson Ferguson (later Sinclair).[24] This volume is part of a broader series of photographic albums documenting Sinclair's travels across Africa and was acquired by the museum in 1968.[25] This album in particular comprises sixty-one photographs, with a focus on scenes from Kumasi, Pong, Tamale, Navrongo, and Salaga. Its principal themes include colonial residencies, indigenous settlements, and a ceremonial procession and gathering of chiefs in Kumasi.

Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and Royal Commonwealth Society collections, University of Cambridge

Fortes collection

Among the most substantial collections related to northern Ghana is the photographic archive of Meyer and Sonia Fortes, whose black-and-white photographs are held at the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. This is an exceptionally rich repository, comprising around 3,000 images, which offers invaluable insights into the social, cultural, and material life of northern Ghana. The majority of the photographs were taken between 1934 and 1937, with additional images possibly dating from 1963 and the 1970s, during the Forteses' later visits to the region. The collection is fully searchable through the museum's internal search tool, and many of the photographs are well cataloged, often accompanied by detailed information describing their content.[26] The primary locations include Tongo and surrounding settlements, such as Nangodi, Zuarungu, and Gambaga. The subjects covered are remarkably varied, ranging from daily life, ritual and ceremonial practices, market scenes, and portraits of colonial administrators, intermediaries, and traditional authorities, to extensive documentation of landscapes, agricultural activities, and more intimate moments such as childbirth and funerals.

[23] For further details on the film, see the dedicated entry in the Colonial Film Database: http://colonialfilm.org.uk/node/5735 (accessed 9 September 2025).

[24] See, for example, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/EA_Af-A14-12 (accessed 9 September 2025).

[25] The other album on Ghana is Af,A15, titled: "Gold Coast Ashanti to Keta 1936 Mary S. R. Sinclair."

[26] For accessing the collection see: https://collections.maa.cam.ac.uk/photographs/ (accessed 9 September 2025).

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Institute of Education collection

The *Institute of Education Collection – Ghana* (Y3011U), comprises a series of loose photographic prints.[27] Of particular relevance to northern Ghana is the sub-album titled *Native Treasury – Northern Territories*, which contains twenty-two black-and-white photographs (nos. 177–92) focused on tax collection practices during the 1940s, along with two additional images depicting scenes in Tongo (nos. 241–2).[28] These photographs were commissioned by the British colonial government to document and promote the operations of Native Authorities, specifically the tax collection processes carried out by local treasuries. The images were taken primarily in the Kassena-Nankani District, with a particular focus on Navrongo. Subjects include colonial officials, but more significantly, the numerous local intermediaries employed in the Navrongo local treasury, offering a rare visual record of their roles and presence within the colonial administrative framework.

George S. Cansdale collection

In Cambridge, a notable photographic collection related to northern Ghana is that of George Soper Cansdale (1909–93), British zoologist, writer, and broadcaster, who served in the Colonial Forest Service of the Gold Coast from 1934 to 1948. Two photographic collections taken by Cansdale during this period are held at the University of Cambridge, with one (Y30448K) fully digitized and accessible through the website of the Cambridge Digital Library.[29] The images primarily document everyday life, occupations, market scenes, crafts, and public events. Of particular interest for northern Ghana are photographs numbered 60 to 140, taken in 1939 between Tamale and Bawku. These images focus largely on market scenes, transport, and street life, though they do not provide identification of the individuals portrayed.

Wilfred Court collection

Another resource preserved within the Royal Commonwealth Society collections is the slide collection of Wilfred Court (RCS/Y302Q), presented to the archive in March 2022 and digitized in 2023.[30] Comprising approximately 2,250

[27] Institute of Education Collection, GBR/0115/RCS/Y3011U, Cambridge University Library.

[28] The collection can be accessed via: https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/PH-Y-03011-U/1 (accessed 9 September 2025).

[29] For access to the digitized collection, see: George Cansdale's collection on the Gold Coast [i.e. Ghana] 1938–1948, GBR/0115/RCS/Y30448K. Cambridge University Library, https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/PH-Y-30448-K/1, (accessed 9 September 2025). The nondigitized collection consists primarily of images depicting woodland and logging activities. See George Cansdale's collection on the Gold Coast [i.e. Ghana] 1938–1948, GBR/0115/RCS/Y30448V, Box RCS Digital Carriers Box 1: Series GBR/0115/RCS/RCMS 103/15; Series GBR/0115/RCS/Y3031M/A. Cambridge University Library.

[30] Access to the collection is available at: https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-RCS-Y-00302-Q/1 (accessed 9 September 2025). For more information on the digitization of this collection see: https://specialcollections-blog.lib.cam.ac.uk/?p=28604 (accessed 9 September 2025).

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photographic negatives, this extensive collection documents Court's professional and personal travels across West Africa – particularly Ghana, Nigeria, Togo, and Dahomey – as well as South Asia, including India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. An architect by training, Court began his career in Ghana in the 1950s and participated in the country's independence celebrations in Accra in 1957. His slides capture architectural projects and everyday life in Tema, Tamale, and Accra, as well as subsequent work in Nigeria, notably at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria. The collection also includes images from later return visits to Ghana, particularly in 1999, with scenes from Cape Coast, Elmina, and Accra. The slides and prints have been cataloged according to Court's original numbering and labeling system, preserving the internal logic of his documentation.

The core of photographic slides dedicated to northern Ghana within the collection comprises over 500 images, distributed across more than twenty sub-series.[31] These slides offer an exceptionally rich visual documentation of the region's landscapes, infrastructure, architecture, official ceremonies, and aspects of everyday life during the 1950s and 1960s. The most frequently represented locations include Tamale – with images depicting the so-called "model village," the central market, the town, as well as educational and health facilities – followed by Zuarungu, Navrongo, Bolgatanga, Paga, Walewale, Wa, Larabanga, Damongo, and Mole. Some images extend into areas of present-day Burkina Faso, such as Ouagadougou.

The photographic series encompasses a wide range of subjects, from rural and road landscapes (RCS/Y302Q/KR, KS) to historically significant moments in Tamale such as the Independence Day celebrations (KD), official events like the Colours Ceremony (KK), and institutional visits, including that of Ahmadu Bello (KH). Other sequences document sites of interest, such as the Tongo Hills (KM), the Paga crocodile pond (KL, LL), and the mosque of Larabanga (LK, X/99-15).

Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington

The Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art houses a significant number of digitized photographic collections related to the African continent. Among these is the collection of Eva Lewin Richter Meyerowitz, donated by the author in 1986 and digitized in 2019.[32] Comprising approximately 285 black-and-white photographs, the collection documents Meyerowitz's travels in 1936–37, when she visited her colleagues Meyer and Sonia Fortes during their fieldwork in Tongo. The digitization of this archive is part of the broader initiative *Women Photographers in Africa, 1930s–1970s*, undertaken by the Smithsonian to recover and make

[31] These collections are RCS/Y302Q/JK–JL; KC–KS; LG–LL; X/99-14–X/99-15.

[32] Eva L. R. Meyerowitz photographs, EEPA 1987-009, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution. For more information on Eva Meyerowitz and her collection at the Smithsonian see: https://sova.si.edu/record/eepa.1987-009 (accessed 9 September 2025).

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accessible visual archives produced by female photographers on the continent.[33] An accompanying catalog is available for download from the museum's website, providing direct links to the individual images and information about the collection.

The collection includes negatives and photographic prints taken in Nigeria, Benin, and Ghana. The subjects are broadly identified as Akan, Fon, Konkomba, and Tallensi, although in many cases no detailed information is provided to allow for more precise identification.[34] The images depict a variety of themes, including artisans at work, blacksmiths, market scenes, dance performances, pottery, architecture, shrines, and artworks once housed in King Béhanzin's palace in Abomey. Equally compelling are the images of artisans and markets, which offer vivid insights into daily life and labor of the 1930s in northern Ghana. The collection also includes informal portraits of Meyerowitz herself, as well as Meyer and Sonia Fortes, both in the context of their research and during moments of leisure.

Concluding remarks

Despite northern Ghana's historical marginalization, the existence of a substantial body of photographic material offers promising avenues for future research that moves beyond textual sources alone. The ongoing digitization of many of these collections – scattered across Europe, the United States, and Africa – further enhances their accessibility and dissemination. While the inherent challenges of colonial archives, both visual and textual, will require critical analysis beyond the scope of this note, the aim here has been to offer a preliminary step toward a broader effort to document and map the expanding range of visual archives now becoming accessible online or through archival consultation.

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[33] The project has so far digitized the collections of Constance Stuart Larrabee, Natalie Knight and Suzanne Priebatsch, Marvin Breckinridge Patterson, Marilyn Hammersley Houlberg, and Marli Shamir. For more information on the project see: https://africa.si.edu/research/eliot-elisofon-photographic-archives/; https://si-siris.blogspot.com/2018/10/pioneering-women-photographers-in.html; and https://www.smithsonianmag.com/blogs/american-womens-history-initiative/2019/03/27/photographing-africa-womans-view/ (accessed 9 September 2025).

[34] For instance, many photographs of women taken in northern Ghana are labeled as depicting "Akan women," despite contextual and visual evidence strongly suggesting that the subjects are, in fact, women from northern areas.

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relationship between African planning, political changes, currencies, and commercial and infrastructural transitions. He has conducted both ethnographic and archival research in Ghana and across Europe. His work has appeared with international publishers and in leading journals, including the *African Economic History, International Journal of African Historical Studies* and *The Journal of African History*.

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