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Archives in Stone: Cemeteries, Burial, and Urban Ownership in Late Colonial Ghana

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Abstract

While many scholars have examined the influence of European law, writing, and record-keeping on African land rights and property, few have analyzed semi-textual records such as cemetery gravestones. This essay argues that urban cemeteries, introduced by the British colonial state to the Gold Coast Colony (southern Ghana) in the nineteenth century, became archives in stone. As one of the few public records forums available inside Gold Coast towns, cemeteries offered basic, but crucial, information. They indirectly dated immigration history and reflected ancestral political status. Over the course of colonial rule, Gold Coast citizens petitioned the state to have their elders buried in particular cemeteries to augment their claims to land and authority. This essay demonstrates that urban ownership—the status of belonging to a town as an authochthon—came to depend partly upon cemetery burial. Like any archive, cemeteries were highly curated collections, shaping legal contestations over residency, leadership, and land ownership.

Keywords

cemetery, colonialism, Africa, land, migration

On February 3, 1924, a Gold Coast man named "H. Plange" wrote a letter to the British Colonial Secretary in Accra to prepare for his death. Acknowledging the receipt of three previous letters from the colonial government, each answering his request in the negative, Plange proceeded to make the same appeal as he had since June 1916. "I . . . [want] permission to be allowed to be buried in the old Dutch Cemetery," he wrote

> I am desirous that my petition be forwarded to His Excellency the Governor who may be inclined to grant my request in view of the facts that my great-grandfather, my grandfather, my father and my mother were all buried there and I am anxious when my time comes to be with them.[1]

"H. Plange" was probably short for Henry Plange, whose ancestor of the same name had served the Dutch colonial government in the Gold Coast (present-day southern Ghana) as an

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ambassador to the Asante Empire.[2] Born sometime between 1860 and 1870, Plange Jr. would have been between forty-six and fifty-six years old by the time he wrote his first letter to the state.[3] At this time, the country was in the midst of World War I. Gold Coast soldiers were deployed across the African continent to fight the Central Powers.[4] The Spanish Influenza epidemic soon followed, causing "heavy mortality" in the Gold Coast between 1918 and 1919.[5] Bodies were piled in mass graves and descendants were often prevented from performing funerary rites for fear of contamination.[6] In this context, it is hardly surprising that people like Plange began worrying about the fate of their remains. Plange was among many Gold Coast petitioners to write to the colonial state during the twentieth century, specifying their funerary wishes.

What is interesting about Plange's letter is his insistence on being buried in the "old Dutch Cemetery." Cemetery burial was relatively new to the Gold Coast, dating to the period of British colonial rule. Before the nineteenth century, Gold Coast families buried their loved ones under the floors of their houses, a practice called intramural burial or intramural sepulcher. Early European settlers and missionaries rejected this practice, claiming it was improper and unsanitary. As a replacement, they introduced cemeteries into the towns in which most white immigrants lived. These spaces remained extremely unpopular until the British colonial government forced their use in 1888.[7] The only exception was elite Euro-African families, like the Planges, who had buried their dead in this fashion before it became law.[8] In the historically Dutch-occupied town of Elmina, where the Planges lived, the Dutch built a graveyard in 1806 to service its interracial families and colonial officers. Consisting of only 100 square feet of ground, it was estimated by 1904 that nine burials out of ten occurred on top of previous remains.[9]

For this reason, the British colonial state closed precolonial urban cemeteries in the early 1900s, claiming they were too congested. New cemeteries were constructed on the outskirts of Gold Coast towns for sanitary reasons, believing that a high density of decomposing bodies was injurious to urban health.[10] The only people granted exception to the new burial laws were elite families who successfully petitioned the government. In towns such as Accra and Elmina, some prestigious Euro-African lineages were allowed to continue burying their dead in closed cemeteries up until independence in 1957, making the graveyard an archive of urban royalty.[11]

Thus, when Henry Plange Jr. wrote to the colonial state in the early twentieth century, he sought this kind of exception, based on the prestige of his last name. To have been denied thrice would have reinforced a message that British colonialism itself had already delivered. The families who held privilege before British colonial rule were not necessarily the same people who had privilege now. Under colonialism, social and political status were thrown into flux. This not only affected people like Plange and their ability to secure state privileges, such as preferential burial rites. Status shaped conceptions of urban belonging and land ownership, or what might be called, together, "urban ownership."

This essay studies the relationship between state cemeteries and urban ownership in Gold Coast towns during the second half of colonial rule (c. 1920-1957). Urban ownership refers to the politics of "belonging" to a town as an autochthon, which had real implications for land tenure. In the field of African history, numerous studies have analyzed various systems of land ownership.[12] In particular, George Brooks' theory of "landlords" and "strangers" has gained traction for its applicability to different African contexts.[13] This theory posited that environmental limitations in West Africa caused constant migration, meaning that newcomers (or "strangers") persistently requested to join established settlements, usually in exchange for paying rent to "landlords."

This was the case in precolonial Gold Coast. Immigrants rented land in return for paying roughly one-third of their agricultural yield to a landlord.[14] This sharecropping system defined indigenes from immigrants, or *adakanfo* (firstcomers) from *ahoho* (strangers). After several generations of tenancy—typically two or three—immigrants were usually absorbed as *adakanfo* land owners who could, in turn, rent their land to newcomers. However, this process depended upon the elasticity of human memory. Land rents stopped being paid when landlords ceased to

think of immigrants as newcomers. In a society that did not have widespread literacy, meaning that they did not have written deeds, second- or third-generation migrants could be incorporated as urban owners relatively easily, facing few legal or technological obstacles.[15]

British rule challenged this process. The "world on paper" introduced by colonialism changed the nature of ownership and renting.[16] Across West Africa, land disputes subsumed colonial courts. Neighbors argued over their boundaries. Plaintiffs claimed far-flung estates. In towns like Lagos, colonial land deeds led to a run on the land, with African owners attempting to buy up as much real estate as possible.[17] Predominantly, scholars have attributed these changes to the influence of colonial writing on non-literate societies, especially the new vocabulary of European law.[18]

This essay looks to another device affecting urban ownership: cemeteries, or what might be called "archives in stone."[19] Like written deeds, urban cemeteries affected oral memory around immigration and land. Through colonization, old graveyards in the interior of town, like Elmina's Dutch cemetery, became historic archives of ancestral landlords. Names on tombstones testified to the municipal residents present by the late nineteenth century, as opposed to newcomers. By detailing the names of privileged families frozen in one particular moment—the onset of colonialism—the urban cemetery became a repository of evidence for legal claims. For immigrants, burial in the old town cemetery aided their descendants claims' to urban ownership by dating their migration to a precolonial era, substantiating their autochthony. Meanwhile, for elite residents, like Plange, the status of their family was expressed through the right to continue burying within the ancient town cemetery, demonstrating that they were still a prominent family who should have influence over urban affairs, which included urban land ownership.

The term "archives in stone" recalls Jeannette Bastian's insistence that archives can be any cultural collection that provides informational value, even if not in the form of written texts.[20] In Ghana today, the primary use of the colonial archives is to provide evidence for land disputes because migration and tenancy remain the main criteria determining urban ownership.[21] In the early twentieth century, cemeteries played the role of the archive. Headstones, bearing names and dates, were among the only material evidence dating residency and substantiating social status. As Andrea Chaddock has argued, even the physical form of the headstone—its detailed work, its design, its relative placement within the cemetery—bespeaks social status, which influenced descendants' claims to wealth and belonging.[22]

To analyze this phenomenon, this essay will study burial letters like those written by Plange during the early twentieth century, alongside court cases, petitions, and documents from the Land Registry. These artifacts have been retrieved from public archives in Accra, Cape Coast, and Sekondi in Ghana.

Cemeteries and Urban Morphology in Africa

In the growing field of urban history, cemeteries still form a relatively niche field of interest. As Thomas Kolnberger has noted, "Cemeteries are virtually absent from the study of urban form . . . Research in urban morphology rarely takes account of the specific forms of burial grounds."[23] Nevertheless, many scholars recognize how important mortuary practices are to the urban *habitus*.[24] Treatment of the dead reflects, and shapes, the everyday practices of the living.[25] In terms of urban studies, burial sites certainly influence what scholars call "urban morphology": that is, the physical form of urban settlement, including its architecture, public spaces, and settlement patterns, among other traits.[26] Available studies, though scant, also suggest that burial sites may equally impact property relationships. In many parts of the world, claims to urban ownership directly invoke claims to ancestral title and death.[27]

In Europe and North America, Thomas Laqueur has shown that cemeteries have a long history, associated especially with churches during the Middle Ages.[28] In the early nineteenth century, evolving sanitary science relied on miasmatic theory, suggesting that odors from

decomposing bodies threatened the health of the living. On this basis, the U.K. government passed the Burial Acts in the 1850s, outlawing intramural sepulcher in favor of public graveyards installed on the outskirts of towns.[29]

Although evidence suggests that private residential burial continued in England after the 1850s Acts, the British wasted no time importing these laws into their colonies. In British West Africa, the 1888 Cemeteries Ordinance prohibited intramural sepulcher in favor of cemetery burial. These laws posed all sorts of problems for African spiritual practices, social worlds, and urban development. Intramural burial was the normative funerary practice across Africa. Family members were buried within different rooms of the house or areas of the homestead.[30] Among some communities, scholars have shown that cemeteries were seen to jeopardize the safety of the ancestors, equating to a kind of desecration.[31] Other studies show that people resisted interment alongside members of different ethnic groups or religions, claiming the rights to identitarian exclusivity.[32] Still other African communities refused to inter their dead within the colonial cemetery at all, even as, over time, these sites became accepted religious spaces where the deceased transformed into ancestors.[33]

Popular resistance to the cemetery stemmed from the fact that the dead were not simply mundane decomposing bodies. According to African epistemologies, people who lived a good life and died a "good death" became ancestral spirits who possessed a dynamic relationship with the living.[34] If treated well, ancestors could bless their descendants with bountiful harvests and physical safety. If treated poorly, they sought their vengeance, causing illness and supernatural disaster.

The volatile nature of ancestral protection meant that burial sites, whether in the cemetery or the home, were guarded as large, immovable properties. Inelastic and holy, they structured urban morphology around the care and worship of the dead.[35] Parker Shipton's study of intramural burial among the Luo of Kenya shows that the Luo would neither sell nor abandon their ancestral houses because they were family cemeteries that had to be actively protected.[36] Similarly, Michelle Hay and Julian Müller have shown how the threatened destruction of cemeteries in South Africa led to such profound unrest that state officials either struggled to execute their plans or abandoned them altogether.[37]

Gold Coast religious practices were sufficiently elastic as to transfer the protective nature of ancestral worship from the house to the cemetery under British law.[38] This turned state cemeteries into sacred fixed spaces that became immutable to interference, even from government development projects. They were concrete sites in an otherwise shifting topography of colonial development.[39]

Less interrogated is the relationship between state cemeteries and land claims. In both John Parker and Parker Shipton's studies, they acknowledge that conflicts over burial sites often coincided with conflicts over land.[40] In a recent study of northern Uganda, Lotte Meinart et al. have argued that cement graves and burial pillars play an active role in present-day land disputes. Because the dead in northern Uganda are typically buried in the ancestral homestead or on ancestral soil, the scholars note that "the opportunity to select the place of burial is therefore an opportunity, both literally and figuratively, to cement one's authority over place."[41] Burial site, in other words, transcribes a history of human settlement into the soil, which living descendants can use as an oral claim to ownership and belonging. Graves anchor land claims, especially in societies that do not widely use written deeds.

The remainder of this essay will explore the role of cemetery burial in claims to urban ownership in late colonial Ghana. Unlike in northern Uganda, where citizens have more control over where they bury their dead, Gold Coast citizens had to rely on the permission of the colonial state, as sought through letters, petitions, and written requests. This explains the large corpus of such papers in Ghanaian archives today, and why people like Henry Plange wrote the government so many times. Burial place hypostatized claims to citizenship, which translated into control over land.

Urban Ownership in Gold Coast History

Before turning to exhumation petitions and burial letters, it is worthwhile to outline the dynamics of urban ownership in the southern Gold Coast prior to, and during, the period of colonial rule. An extensive literature exists on the history of land ownership in colonial Ghana, possibly more than any other topic.[42] The findings of these studies are not conclusive, largely because different land-holding practices distinguished the decentralized communities of the Northern Territories from the centralized empires of the interior Akan forests from the "confederation" of small states that interspersed the precolonial Gold Coast littoral.[43]

The last region is probably the least studied in regard to land tenure, likely due to the wide variety of languages spoken by both European settlers and African communities. However, from available research, the following principles regarding urban ownership have been distilled. It is important to note that these characteristics cannot be applied universally across the region, especially to more rural areas. They emerge from secondary observations on land ownership in the principal urban metropoles of Accra, Cape Coast, Sekondi, Elmina, Axim, and Anomabu.

The first important point to note is that, by the late nineteenth century, urban belonging on the littoral Gold Coast seemingly equated to urban ownership. According to both oral histories and colonial documentation, most families owned their own houses and fields for farming.[44] These properties were typically shared collectively by family members, but they could also be owned individually. Both men and women were property owners, married or unmarried.[45] Certainly in Accra by the late nineteenth century, unmarried female house owners were numerous enough to have written petitions to advance their collective interests.[46]

Land passed down generationally or it was bought and sold through a ritual known as *foyibah* in the Akan-Twi language and *yibafo* in the Ga language.[47] In both cultures, the religious rites were relatively similar. A white sheep would be slaughtered on the land to purify it. Then the seller would "cut leaf" over the property, signaling its permanent alienation. In some cases, the seller and buyer would "drink fetish" (meaning take a religious oath known as *ntam*) to commemorate the sale with the ancestral spirits. Vessels containing the oath potion would be shattered on the ground and left there as a physical monument to the sale, reminding both parties that any violation of their agreement would provoke the spirits who had supervised the transaction.

Unused land, typically on the town's circumference, was referred to as "stool land." Similar to thrones in England, Gold Coast chiefs sat on stools, which represented their political power. Stool land was land held in common by the townspeople under the guardianship of the stool, reserved for leasing or sale to future migrants or townspeople. When an immigrant sought to settle in the town, they would ask the chief for a part of their stool land, which they could either buy or rent through the appropriate rituals.

Written deeds and bills of sale were not often used in these transactions. Spiritual supervision through the oath was considered a sufficient deterrent against vendors lying about the sale or attempting to unlawfully reclaim the land. When the British colonial state increased its presence in Gold Coast towns in the late nineteenth century, some urban owners registered their property in the government Land Registry. However, use of the Land Registry was not enforced nor were proofs of title required, meaning that the Registry had no legal backing.[48] Nothing stopped multiple parties from claiming the same estate, which happened often.

For this reason, land disputes inside colonial courts typically centered on oral histories. Parties would testify to their long residency on the estate and offer whatever proof they had as to important transactions. This process was particularly trying for immigrants, whose history upon the land was necessarily brief. Sometimes they bought land outright but had no written receipts. Other times, they paid rent in the form of agricultural yield, with oral agreements as to eventual ownership. In both situations, immigrants faced more of a struggle than autochthons in the colonial court because their land claims were not based on ancestral possession, and they had fewer witnesses and material proof.

Ancestral graves were a form of tangible evidence taken seriously in colonial courts. They were the material alternative to written deeds. Because land ownership was an ancestral right associated with autochthony, graves hypostatized claims to ownership. Immigrants could point to their ancestors' graves as evidence of their historic residence on the land, which sometimes acted as sufficient evidence to buttress their legal claims. Graves transcribed residency into the soil, speaking to the intertwined claims of habitation and ownership.

These dynamics shifted somewhat with the colonial state's enforcement of cemetery burial in 1888, but they did not fundamentally change. Now that ancestors were interred inside urban cemeteries instead of the house, tombstones on the gravesites became evidence dating residency and migration for consideration by colonial land courts. This is the context in which we should understand the extraordinary abundance of exhumation petitions and burial letters in Ghanaian archives today. Cemeteries were repositories of archival evidence for tenancy and residence.

Archives in Stone: Burial Letters and Petitions

Over the course of colonial rule, urban cemeteries became archives in stone. The cemetery was a material repository of a town's residential history, indexing the names and dates of prominent members. These spaces ranked among the only physical archives of the written past that Gold Coast communities could access. The concept of the cemetery as an archive recalls Achille Mbembe's insistence that "the archive is . . . the result of the exercise of a specific power and authority, which involves placing certain documents in an archive at the same time as others are discarded." Thus, he concludes: "The archive, therefore, is fundamentally a matter of . . . granting ... a privileged status to [some] . . . and [refusing] that same status to others."[49] By exercising power over burial, the colonial state became curators of the urban archive. They decided which family names belonged in the town cemetery, impacting local land rights, inheritance, and political status.[50]

Throughout colonial rule, Gold Coast families and individuals wrote to the British government, attempting to secure a space within their cemetery of choice. As in a literary genre, these claims followed a set of logics, invoking common tropes, themes, and emotive appeals.[51] In the first type of burial letter, elite families typically detailed a history of personal prominence in order to secure a privileged burial spot. Burial within an elite cemetery allowed privileged families to demonstrate that they were still in good favor with the colonial government, which, in turn, helped them secure additional privileges, such as being choice candidates for the royal stools. In the second type of burial letter, migrants and people of non-elite backgrounds petitioned for privileged cemetery burials in order to bolster their legal claims to urban ownership and belonging. As this essay has already shown, ownership of the land depended upon the length of residency. By interring their relative within an old town cemetery, the gravesite became a monument dating the family's migration, which, in turn, augmented their claims to urban citizenship and land ownership.

In both circumstances, the cemetery was positioned as an archive of urban history. It was a public space commemorating ancestral prominence and protection. Lying typically in the center of the town, cemeteries allowed urban residents of all statuses—renters, royalty, defendants, and litigants—to view the names of the town's historic members, which shaped the community's memory of their history itself. Gold Coast communities traditionally determined land rights through ancestral history and social memory. The colonial state's insistence on material evidence challenged these practices, refiguring the cemetery's role in recording history. When conflicts arose, litigants resorted to the cemetery for evidence as to their claims of status and citizenship. Cemeteries entered the domain of legal disputes for land rights and protections.

Elite Families and Social Status

Henry Plange Jr. was far from the only person of his stature to petition the government for burial within a closed cemetery at the dawn of the twentieth century. Plange was a member of the *amarafo*, a relatively large group of mixed-race people of African and European descent who often held elite status in colonial Gold Coast society.[52] Once steeped in the slave trading business, the Plange family, like many others, had transitioned to the fields of "law, commerce and Christian ministry" following abolition in the early nineteenth century.[53] The little we know of Henry Plange Jr. is that he was a barrister, he had visited England, he owned his own house, he lived in Elmina, and he had a brother named John.[54] Unlike many of his siblings and cousins, Henry was not an especially notable member of the family. In his lifetime, he served as a British soldier in his twenties, he acted as a solicitor briefly for the Ga *mantse* (King of the Ga people of the Gold Coast), and he represented West Africa in the London-based organization, the African Association, in 1900.[55]

This was not enough for the colonial state who denied Plange's request to be buried in the "old Dutch cemetery," much as they had his previous petitions of 1916 and 1922. Plange was told that "it ha[d] been ruled that no more burials are to be allowed in this cemetery . . . [Nothing] would be gained by forwarding the petition for the information to His Excellency."[56] In effect, the statement indicted Henry Plange Jr. as a person who held no importance to the colonial state. Burial privileges emerged from intimate participation in the British government or from possessing a venerated seat of local authority. The gravesite was the ultimate verdict on an individual's personal and political importance.

This discriminatory practice turned elite cemeteries into curated archives of urban royalty. By distinguishing citizens and families whom they wanted to support from those that they did not, the British government underwent the curatorial practice of preserving some venerated names while discarding others, which affected how the towns perceived their own political histories.

Consider a petition written just two years prior, in 1922, from one Cobbina Ackon at Elmina. Like Plange, Ackon wrote to the colonial state to request that his elderly mother, Abbah Assankumah, be buried in the old Dutch cemetery in the center of town. In response, the colonial government conducted an inquiry into Assankumah's political status. They found that, though Assankumah was "the female head of the Aburutu Family," this was "a family of but little importance." Ackon, the son, was a member of the No. 5 *asafo* company of Elmina—a paramilitary organization responsible for essential public services—however, he held "no importance in the division." For these reasons, Ackon's petition was answered in the negative. His mother would have to be buried in a public cemetery outside the town.[57]

In this case, the colonial state's diagnosis of status was questionable and certainly mired in the territorial politics of the time. Though the Abrutu family were not one of the *abusua* (clans) who could inherit the stool of Elmina, they were nevertheless prominent in civil functions.[58] A close relative of Abbah Assankumah, possibly her brother, had become the chief of Agona, one of the districts in Elmina, in the early twentieth century. He was deposed by his people in 1902 for selling stool land that he claimed was his private property, which had incensed his public.[59] Prior to becoming chief, Quamina Assankumah had been Regent, meaning caretaker of the stool.[60] It is likely not a coincidence that the colonial state's major proof that elderly Abbah Assankumah was not worthy of a privileged burial came from the present-day Regent, Assankumah's successor, who "expressed surprise that Abbah Assankumah should petition to be buried in the Dutch Cemetery as she is not a person of any importance."[61]

In this case, the colonial state's judgment directly intervened in ongoing land disputes within the town of Elmina. The 1920s marked the "age of destoolment."[62] Across littoral cities, rulers were deposed by their people after only a few months of governance, while other stools lay vacant and families vied for their control. These conflicts were due to leaders' sale of stool land

to foreign companies, though stool land was supposedly owned by the public. Hence, leadership of a stool equated to authority over land. As the Abrutu family argued for rights to one of the lesser stools in the city, they would have recounted their esteemed urban history, including the colonial state's recognition of their status by permitting their leader's recent burial within the famous Dutch Cemetery.

Cemetery burial effected families' claims to the stools, with certain cemeteries being seen as an offense against the ancestors. An example may be seen of the elderly chief of Atwa, J.C. Oppon, who was buried in the Methodist cemetery in the seaside town of Saltpond in 1947. Immediately after the burial, Oppon's son wrote to the District Commissioner of Cape Coast to request that his father's body be exhumed from Saltpond and re-buried in the cemetery in Atwa. According to his petition, the sub-chiefs of Atwa had told the Oppons that they would not accept J.C. being buried in Saltpond. No funerary rites would be given to his father, the son explained, and "the family will be deemed to have failed in their duty as inheritors of the Stool of Atwa."[63] In other words, by not burying their elder inside the chief's cemetery, the Oppon family was interpreted to have disavowed the stool, preventing them from acceding to its royal position later on. In order to be eligible for leadership, they had to bury their ancestors in the appropriate graveyard.

These were the politics of cemetery burial for elite families who could stand to either lose or gain from the specific cemetery in which their elder was buried. For this reason, families often petitioned multiple times regarding funerary planning should their early requests be denied. Even in the case of Abbah Assankumah, her more esteemed nephew, Joseph Johannas Cremer (J.J.C.) Smith, a wealthy concession owner and politician, wrote again in 1927 to request that his aunt be buried "in the old cemetery behind Java Hill."[64] This was not as politically significant as Elmina's Dutch Cemetery, but, nevertheless, a prominent precolonial cemetery that had been closed to the public for burial.[65] Clearly, the importance of these petitions lay in ensuring that Assankumah would not be buried with commoners in a public graveyard, but in some place that reflected class privilege and state status.

Although the colonial state denied most burial petitions, exceptions were granted for elite families with whom the government had a particularly close and continuing relationship. In the Accra and Cape Coast archives, government exhumation files indicate that members of the Bannerman family, whose ancestor, James Bannerman, served as Governor for eleven months between 1850 and 1851, were permitted to continue burying their dead in the Bannerman family vault in the closed Wesleyan Cemetery.[66] Likewise, members of the Papafio clan, who worked with the government as doctors and lawyers in the twentieth-century administrations, were allowed to continue burying in the Papafio family vault in the Wesleyan Cemetery.[67] In Winneba, descendants of the former King R.J. Ghartey IV were permitted to bury in his closed family cemetery, likely because his descendants ascended to important stools and were seen as government cooperators, not dissidents.[68]

This logic clearly distinguished families tied to colonialism from elite families who did not have a continuing relationship with the British government. In 1935, Eva Ribeiro, the daughter of the famed Wesleyan missionary, Thomas Birch Freeman, was denied burial in the closed Wesleyan Cemetery in Accra, despite the fact that Freeman was the founding father of the Wesleyan Mission.[69] Similarly, Reverend E.P. Dontoh, who had been one of the earliest Christian missionaries proselytizing in the Gold Coast's eastern region, wrote to the colonial state in 1940 requesting that he and his wife, then ninety and eighty-two, be buried in Elmina's Dutch Cemetery when they died. He noted that "the ancestors of [himself] and [his] wife (Anna) were from Holland and they were Government officials at Elmina and Moree." Furthermore, "[his] uncles, aunts and cousins were buried in the Dutch Cemetery—some in the yard and others in the central vault." Still, the colonial state did not accede to his request. Dontoh's letter seems to have gone unanswered while most positive responses are recorded on the petitions.[70]

Throughout the twentieth century, Gold Coast newspapers denounced the colonial practice of allowing burial inside closed cemeteries because of the effect it had on public status, which related to stool rights and land tenure. “It does not become His Excellency to make any special distinctions in our burials,” wrote one author in *The Gold Coast Leader*, joking that interment in Elmina’s Dutch Cemetery was equivalent to a “Westminster Abbey Burial.”[71] Nevertheless, the colonial state’s discriminatory policy persisted, making it crucial for Gold Coast families to secure the most privileged burial possible.

This process turned urban cemeteries into “archives in stone.” By centralizing venerated ancestors in visible locations, with headstones that bore the names of urban residents alongside the date they died, town cemeteries became repositories for material evidence as to royalty, residency, and belonging. The fact that there was a hierarchy of cemeteries under colonialism only added to the politically symbolic nature of burial. Cemeteries hypostatized claims to authority. This made them valuable sites of oral evidence as to privilege and power.

Migrant Communities and Urban Ownership

While elite families sought privileged burials as aspirational claims to personal and political authority, migrants wrote to the colonial state to secure rights over their land and homes. As with many communities across the world, an ancestor’s burial space indicated a family’s homeland or place of natal origin. In the Gold Coast, it was common for families to trek hundreds of miles to bury a loved one in the correct ancestral space.[72] For this reason, if an immigrant was buried in their new community, the family demonstrated that they considered the new community to be their rightful ancestral home. This was an important factor in deciding land ownership. Ancestral burial anchored communities’ claims to their soil, speaking to their perceived country of origin.

For this reason, colonial court cases, petitions, and palavers saw cemeteries consistently used as material evidence dating immigrants’ land claims, often to confirm or reject urban ownership over the soil. As Mahmood Mamdani has shown, colonial states were steadfast in distinguishing between indigenes and “foreign” races, the latter of whom were typically assigned a different set of rights and privileges with regard to the land.[73] In colonial land courts, immigrants had a steep challenge to overcome. They had to offer the state material evidence that substantiated their autochthony through residency, dating from a time when few contracts were written. Burial within an old town cemetery was suggestive evidence in their favor. Especially if the cemetery was closed to the public, burial dated a family’s migration to a historic precolonial period. Thus, the fact that cemeteries were archives in stone could work both for and against immigrants. On one hand, the written form of the tombstone in the old town cemetery excluded immigrants who had not yet arrived in the town by the time of its creation. On the other hand, if the immigrant family was able to argue their way into the cemetery, they had material evidence dating their migration, augmenting their land claims.

Consider the example of the 1901 land dispute between the Chiefs of Kwahu and the Chiefs of Pankasi in the Gold Coast’s eastern interior. This conflict concerned a piece of land that a private European contractor wanted to buy. The land was currently inhabited by migrants from Pankasi, but once had been owned and occupied by the people of Kwahu. The Chiefs of Kwahu claimed that the Pankasi migrants were too new to have selling rights over the land. As evidence, it is recorded that the Chiefs of Kwahu pointed out that the predecessor of the current Chief of Pankasi was not buried in Pankasi but in their ancestral town of Obomeng, showing that the Pankasi people still considered Obomeng to be their autochthonal home. As the Chiefs of Kwahu successfully argued, this meant that the Pankasi people were still newcomers who rented their land; they did not own it. Their migration was too recent.[74]

In a similar example between the communities of Krobo and Begoro in 1920, the original land owners used the cemetery as proof of continuing ownership. Sometime in the late nineteenth

century, the Begoro people had sold land to private Krobo owners. However, in 1920, the Begoro people claimed that this action did not equate to ceding land to the Krobo *government*, who could then tax the people and make them answer their courts; rather, the communities should be taxed by Begoro. To demonstrate their continuing suzerainty, the Begoros argued that they still had "a cemetery at Dawa," a village in the disputed territory. Because this cemetery was active, and the Krobo did not prevent the Begoros from burying there, the Begoros claimed that it was clear that the Krobo knew that the Begoro retained ownership over the soil.[75] Accepting this evidence, the court sided with the Begoro upon the disputed territory. If the Krobo considered the land to be theirs, the court found, the Krobo would have buried their ancestors upon it and prevented Begoro burials.

In disputes like these, the colonial state evidently accepted burial place as material proof of urban ownership.[76] In the case of Pankasi, their chief's burial elsewhere harmed the immigrants' claim to being rightful owners of the land. In the case of Krobo and Begoro, the Begoro's use of the cemetery at Dawa demonstrated that they retained ownership of the land, against the claims of the Krobo government. It is important to note that the Begoro chiefs never disputed selling the land to private Krobo owners. The question was whether these sales amounted to political cession. In other words, burial places had high political stakes. As a Gold Coast sovereign remarked, Gold Coast people often "bur[ied] their dead as a challenge to the land owners," demonstrating the confluence between burial place and land claims.[77] Cemetery sites had the capacity to augment, or jeopardize, immigrant communities' claims to the land.

For this reason, Gold Coast citizens had every incentive to place their dead in the cemetery most advantageous to them, or, alternatively, to exhume those who they did not want to have claims in their town. In one rather gristly case from the urban metropole of Cape Coast in 1949, the chief of Agona, Nana Kobina Enim II, was destooled for charges that included exhuming the dead. According to the destoolment petition, signed by multiple *asafo* captains, Nana Enim had argued that certain people buried in the Agona Kwanyen Road Cemetery were "strangers" who should be exhumed and reinterred in their natal villages. In response, the public revolted, claiming that the chief "kn[e]w as a matter of fact that those who had been buried were prominent citizens of Agona," meaning that they belonged in the town cemetery.[78] In this case, it is likely that the stool of Agona had sold land to immigrants decades earlier, and that these newcomers considered themselves citizens who retained ownership over the soil. To exhume their dead and claim that they were strangers was akin to the state repossessing the land. It declared that the state had the rights to charge rent on the soil, or, even worse, to sell it to foreign interests.

Such trickery was often used to deny immigrants' rights to land. In some towns, elite families argued that immigrants were too poor to afford coffins, meaning that the bodies of their dead decomposed inside wrapped blankets, injuring sanitation. For this reason, they argued that immigrants should not be buried in the town cemetery—no doubt an attempt to segregate "strangers in the country" from citizens, affecting immigrants' claims to urban ownership.[79]

In another case from the Gold Coast region of Gomoa Assin, a land owner, Quabina Mensah, was confronted by a man, Amuasie, who had sold Mensah the estate on which Mensah now farmed and lived. Amuasie claimed that he had never sold Mensah the land, only rented it, and Mensah now had to evacuate. In response, Mensah sued Amuasie before the chief's court, but lost. This was because, as Amuasie's witness testified, "Amuasie claims the land on the ground that the [family] burial ground is near the place, therefore the whole land belongs to the burial ground, the owner of which is Amuasie."[80] In this case, the defendant argued that the land on which Mensah lived was clearly his ancestral land, denoted by his ancestors' cemetery. Therefore, he never would have sold the soil, despite Mensah's claims to having paid money.

For reasons like these, Gold Coast citizens fought hard for their dead to be buried within the "proper" cemetery. They knew that burial place anchored their claims to urban ownership, dating their migration and justifying their autochthony. It is probably for this reason that we find that a

disproportionate number of burial petitions are written either by elite families seeking to bolster their status, or poor immigrants wanting to anchor their land claims.

In 1946, a family of migrants from Nzima successfully convinced the Medical Officer of Health in Axim to allow them to bury their elder in Axim's closed mission cemetery. The elder's name was Urius Quarm, a migrant timber merchant. It was not until later that the Medical Officer realized that this cemetery had been closed to the public, and that he did not have the power to accept their request, which was something that Quarm's family probably knew. Given decomposition, it is unlikely that the colonial state exhumed Quarm's remains, despite agreeing that he did not have the status to warrant a special burial.[81]

The political stakes of internment turned urban cemeteries into archives in stone. Depending on the location, age, and status of the cemetery in which they buried their elders, migrant families or communities could claim ownership of their land. Immigrants used graves as proof of their historic tenancy. The fact that there was a hierarchy of cemeteries under colonialism only added to the politically symbolic nature of burial. Graveyards were valuable sites of oral evidence as to a community's history, which is what made the cemetery an archive. The inscriptive record of the graveyard's tombstones provided some of the only accessible written information that migrant communities could access to prove their journeys, claims, and rights.

By centralizing town ancestors in visible locations, urban cemeteries presented a curated collection of historical figures who affected the politics of the present. Their names helped recall specific histories, which shaped tenancy rights, land sales, royal stools, and town politics. This was the consequence of a colonial society in which the "world on paper" entered urban life in incongruous ways. The cemetery became a valuable site of oral evidence as to urban ownership and belonging.

Conclusion

While many scholars have examined the influence of European law, writing, and record-keeping on African land rights and property, few have studied the effect of semi-textual records such as cemetery gravestones. This essay offers an initial step in this direction. It has argued that town cemeteries, introduced by European powers in the nineteenth century, became archives in stone. As one of the few accessible public records forums available inside colonial Gold Coast towns, cemetery gravestones offered basic, but crucial, information. They named prominent town members at a particular moment in time, the dawn of colonial rule. They indirectly, therefore, dated immigration history and gave some indication of political status as well as other relevant information for assigning urban ownership rights.

As the colonial state exercised increasing curatorial authority over these cemeteries, Gold Coast families were forced to appeal to the government for privileged burials. This explains the ample, and revealing, number of burial petitions that we find in Ghanaian archives today. Burial place influenced political status and land rights by inscribing a political history into the soil. This was the basis for legal contestations over residency, stool rights, and urban ownership.

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Notes

1. Letter by Mr. Plange to Hepburn Tindale, February 3, 1924, ADM 23/1/139, Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Cape Coast, Ghana.
2. Aside from Henry Plange Jr., no other H Planges are recorded at this time in the Gold Coast. On Henry Plange Sr, see Ivor Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century: The Structure and Evolution of a Political Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 233-34.
3. Michel Doortmont estimates Henry Plange Jr.'s birth to be around 1870. See Michel Doortmont and Charles Francis Hutchison, *The Pen-Pictures of Modern Africans and African Celebrities by Charles Francis Hutchison: A Collective Biography of Elite Society in the Gold Coast Colony* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 446. Marika Sherwood does not give a birth year, but claims that, "from the age of 18 he worked in the 'counting house' of C. J. Nylander in Sierra Leone," and then, "from 1881 he served in the commissariat . . . in the Gold Coast Hausa Force," which clearly suggests an earlier birth year, perhaps around 1860. Marika Sherwood, *Origins of Pan-Africanism: Henry Sylvester Williams, Africa, and the African Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 2012), 260.
4. David Killingray, "Repercussions of World War I in the Gold Coast," *The Journal of African History* 9, no. 1 (1978): 39-59; Kwabena Akurang-Parry, "'Untold Difficulties': The Indigenous Press and the Economic Effects of the First World War on Africans in the Gold Coast, 1914-1918," *African Economic History* 34 (2006): 45-68.
5. H. W. Thomas to Colin Harding, February 12, 1919 (PRAAD, Cape Coast), ADM 23/1/127.
6. K. David Patterson, "The Influenza Epidemic of 1918-1919 in the Gold Coast," *The Journal of African History* 24, no. 4 (1983): 485-502.
7. Christopher DeCorse, "Culture, Contact, Continuity and Change on the Gold Coast, AD 1400-1900," *African Archeological Review* 10, no. 1 (1992): 163-96.
8. While it was generally the case that interracial people in precolonial and colonial Gold Coast held elite social status, there were exceptions. See Carina Ray, *Crossing the Color Line: Race, Sex, and the Contested Politics of Colonialism in Ghana* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015).
9. *Gold Coast Leader*, January 23, 1904, 2.
10. Akwasi Kwarteng Amoako-Gyampah, "Sanitation and Public Hygiene in the Gold Coast (Ghana) from the Late 19th Century to 1950" (PhD diss., University of Johannesburg, 2019), 242-49.
11. Letter by Colonial Secretary to Registrar of Births, Deaths and Burials, May 17, 1937, CSO 11/16/25, Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Accra, Ghana; CSO 11/16/25; Note on Wesleyan Cemetery, 26 February 1934, CSO 11/16/25, Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Accra, Ghana.
12. Sara Berry, "Debating the Land Question in Africa," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44, no. 4 (2002): 638-68; Ewout Frankema, "The Colonial Roots of Land Inequality: Geography, Factor Endowments, or Institutions?," *Economic History Review* 63, no. 2 (2010): 418-51; Moses Ochonu, "African Colonial Economies: Land, Labor, and Livelihoods," *History Compass* 11, no. 2 (2013): 91-103; Paule E. Peters, "Struggles over Land Under Customary Tenure in Contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa," in *The Oxford Handbook of Land Politics*, ed. Saturnino M. Borras and Jennifer C. Franco (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).
13. George E. Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa, 1000-1630* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Gavin Capps, "Tribal-Landed Property: The Political Economy of the BaFokeng Chieftaincy, South Africa, 1837-1994" (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2010).
14. According to Polly Hill's notes, this system was referred to in Twi as *di mi na me ni bi*, meaning "eat so that I too may eat." "Comments by William Ofori Atta on PH's 1956 Handbook, *The Gold Coast Cocoa Farmer*," N. d., Polly Hill Papers, Box 2, Folder 1, Polly Hill Papers, Herskovits Library, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.

15. This was rather similar to how the descendants of enslaved people gained freedom overtime, with every successive generation, according to the famous thesis on African slavery by Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers. See Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers, "African 'Slavery' as an Institution of Marginality," in *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 3-81.
16. Sean Hawkins, *Writing and Colonialism in Northern Ghana: The Encounter Between the LoDagaa and "The World On Paper"* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).
17. Kristin Mann, *Slavery and the Birth of an African City: Lagos, 1760-1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).
18. Naaborko Sackeyfio-Lenoch, *The Politics of Chieftaincy: Authority and Property in Colonial Ghana, 1920-1950* (Rochester: The University of Rochester Press, 2014).
19. The term "archives in stone" has been used rhetorically by scholars to refer to inscriptions etched on stone tablets or old historic architecture, but not as a key term of analysis. For example, Richard Pankurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands: Essays in Regional History from Ancient times to the End of the 18th Century* (Asmara: Red Sea Press, 1997), 7; Margaret Cantwell, "Archives & Archivists: Sisters of Saint Ann Archives, Victoria," *British Columbia Historical News* 37, no. 1 (2004): 31.
20. Jeannette A. Bastian, *Arching Cultures: Heritage, Community and the Making of Records and Memory* (New York: Routledge, 2023).
21. See remarks by Sara Berry, *Chiefs Know Their Boundaries: Essays on Property, Power, and the Past in Asante, 1896-1996* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2001), xxviii.
22. Andrea Chaddock, "Cemeteries as Archives: Who Says Dead Men Tell No Tales?" (Master's thesis, Western Washington University, 2011), 32.
23. Thomas Kolnberger, "Cemeteries and Urban Form: A Historico-Geographical Approach," *Urban Morphology* 22, no. 2 (2018): 119.
24. This is particularly the case in the discipline of archeology, where burial sites have commonly been excavated for evidence as to the social and religious practices of the living. For example, Heinrich Härke, "Cemeteries as Places of Power," in *Topographies of Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mayke de Jong and Frans Theuws (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 9-30.
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26. Vitor Oliveira, *Urban Morphology: An Introduction to the Study of the Physical Form of Cities* (New York: Springer, 2016); Karl Kropf, *The Handbook of Urban Morphology* (New York: John Wiley, 2018).
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31. Sarah Balakrishnan, "Building the Ancestral Public: Cemeteries and the Necropolitics of Property in Colonial Ghana," *The Journal of Social History* 55, no. 2 (2022): 1-25.
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34. See Mensah Adinkrah, "If You Die a Bad Death, We Give You a Bad Burial: Mortuary Practices and 'Bad Death' Among the Akan in Ghana," *Death Studies* 46, no. 3 (2022): 695-707.
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40. Shipton, *Mortgaging the Ancestors*, 85-108; Parker, "Cultural Politics," 214.
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42. Ray A. Kea, *Settlements, Trade, and Politics in the Seventeenth Century Gold Coast* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); Sandra E. Greene, *Gender, Ethnicity and Social Change on the Upper Slave Coast: A History of the Anlo-Ewe* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1992); Berry, *Chiefs Know Their Boundaries*; Gareth Austin, *Labor, Land and Capital in Ghana: From Slavery to Free Labor in Asante, 1805-1956* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005).
43. For the term "confederation," see Rebecca Shumway, *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2014).
44. See Sarah Balakrishnan, "Anticolonial Public: From Slavery to Independence in Southern Ghana, c. 1500-1957" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2020).
45. For evidence of women as property owners in precolonial Gold Coast, see Christopher DeCorse, *An Archeology of Elmina: Africans and Europeans on the Gold Coast, 1400-1900* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 61; Harvey Feinberg, *Africans and Europeans in West Africa: Elminans and Dutchmen on the Gold Coast During the Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1989), 115.
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47. John Mensah Sarbah, *Fanti Customary Laws* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1897), 259; Letter by H. M. Hull to the Colonial Secretary, 1895, ADM 5/3/9; Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Accra, Ghana; R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929), 358; Letter by H. Bleasdell to Secretary of Native Affairs, August 29, 1931, ADM 11/1/1017, Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Accra, Ghana.
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50. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-24.
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Interpreters and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006). For literary genres in colonial Ghana, see Stephanie Newell, *Literary Culture in Colonial Ghana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Stephanie Newell, "From Corpse to Corpus: The Printing of Death in Colonial West Africa," in *Africa Print Cultures*, ed. Derek Peterson, Stephanie Newell, and Emma Hunter (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 389-424.

52. On the *amarafo*, see J. G. Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and the Fante Language Called Tshi*, 2nd ed. (Basel: Evangelical Missionary Society, 1933 [1881]), 299. On mixed-race children, see Ray, *Crossing the Color Line*. The Plange family descended from Pieter Woortman (c. 1700-1780), an officer of the Dutch West India Company, who had married an Akan woman, Afodua, sometime after his arrival on the coast in 1740. With Afodua, Woortman had at least six children to whom he gave the name "Plange" after his mother, supposedly to honor the Akan matrilineal tradition of bloodlines passing through the woman, not the man. 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* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 294; Doortmont and Hutchison, *The Pen-Pictures*, 340.
53. See Stanley Alpern, *Abson & Company: Slave Traders in Eighteenth Century West Africa* (London: Hurst, 2019), 137.
54. On his being a barrister, see Sherwood, *Origins*, 44. He attended at least one event at the Royal Colonial Institute in London in 1900. See *Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute*, vol. 31 (London: Royal Colonial Institute, 1900), 46. His house is recorded in a 1901 order in council, claiming government land in Elmina. *The Laws of the Gold Coast (Including Togoland Under British Mandate)*, vol. 3 (Accra: Government of the Gold Coast, 1937), 289. On his brother John, see Doortmont and Hutchison, *The Pen-Pictures*, 424, 445.
55. It is recorded that a Henry Plange served as a "quartermaster" in the British colonial army in the Ijebu Campaign in southern Nigeria in 1892. Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), 619. On the African Association, see Sherwood, *Origins*, 44-45.
56. Letter by Hepburn Tinsdale to Colonial Secretary, February 11, 1924, ADM 23/1/139, Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Cape Coast, Ghana.
57. Letter by H. E. G. Bartlett to Colonial Secretary, December 15, 1922, ADM 23/1/139, Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Cape Coast, Ghana.
58. In Elmina, only members of the Anona or Nsona *abusua* are eligible to become Omanhene. The other major family is Ebiradzi. See *Enquiry into the Organization and Constitution of the Elmina Stool*, N.d. [1928], ADM 11/1/1111, Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Accra, Ghana; Christopher R. DeCorse and Sam Spiers, "A Tale of Two Polities: Socio-Political Transformation on the Gold Coast in the Atlantic World," *Australian Historical Archeology* 27 (2009): 36.
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63. Letter by J. M. A. Oppon to District Commissioner of Cape Coast, August 16, 1947, ADM 23/1/153, Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Cape Coast, Ghana.
64. Letter by Commissioner of Central Province to Medical Officer of Health, November 2, 1927, ADM 23/1/139, Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Cape Coast, Ghana. On Smith as concession owner, see *Gold Coast Gazette*, 1902, 131. In this same year, he served as the Assistant Vice President to committee drafting the constitution of Elmina. See Note from September 4, 1928, ADM 11/1/1111, Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Accra, Ghana.
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73. Mahmood Mamdani, *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).
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75. Notes of an Interview held at Adjabeng Lodge, Accra, May 27, 1920, ADM 11/1/1441, Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Accra, Ghana.
76. For example, see Interview with the Ga Manche, July 29, 1927, ADM 11/1/596, Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Accra, Ghana.
77. Letter by Nana Kwaw Fraiku III, Omanhene of Shama, to District Commissioner of Sekondi, May 6, 1949, WRG 24/1/451, Public Records and Archives Administration department, Sekondi, Ghana.
78. Letter by Kwesi Bondah et al. to J. F. Quayson, May 27, 1949, ADM 11/1/1843, Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Accra, Ghana.
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80. *Quabina Mensah vs. Amuasie*, September 15, 1888, ADM 11/1/1112, Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Accra, Ghana.
81. Letter by Medical Officer of Health to District Commissioner of Axim, December 1, 1946, WRG 24/1/461, Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Sekondi, Ghana.

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