**Looking back on a career: unpacking African middle-class life histories**

*Dmitri van den Bersselaar*

Historians of Africa have been using various types of oral history methods for decades. Back in the 1960s through to 1980s, leading scholars such as Vansina and Henige developed an elaborate methodology to collect, compare and analyse oral traditions to uncover the factual information about precolonial African societies that was buried within these traditions and transmitted across the generations.[[1]](#footnote-2) After the initial enthusiasm for the approach, its short-comings became apparent, and this use of oral traditions has become less common (along with, unfortunately, a decline in the study of precolonial African history more generally).[[2]](#footnote-3) Yet, even in those cases where oral traditions may be 'almost useless for the reconstruction of the past', they can still be used for what they reveal about the society in which they were narrated.[[3]](#footnote-4) In more recent years, scholars such as Harneit-Sievers, Ahazuem and Emezue,White, and Monson, have used oral history to explore the history of the colonial and postcolonial periods.[[4]](#footnote-5) By staying within the time frame of individual memory, some of the problems associated with the earlier form of oral history were avoided, yet new complexities were introduced. The analysis of individuals' narrated life histories, memories and hearsay allows for subtle analysis of African subjectivities relating to, for instance, gender and age.[[5]](#footnote-6) However, as White's book *Speaking with Vampires* demonstrates, it does not always lead to straightforward conclusions or useful generalizations.[[6]](#footnote-7)

I have been teaching these methodological issues for many years, and have also included oral history interviews among the sources I used for my own research (always alongside diverse archival sources, newspapers, photographs and material culture – the mix that is nowadays standard for cultural history research).[[7]](#footnote-8) However, I only really felt challenged by the methodology of oral history when I began to analyse a set of interviews I had conducted with middle class Ghanaian and Nigerian former employees of a European company. The interviews had been set up as life histories that took the period of working with the foreign business as the spine for the narrative. The interviews flowed well, were full of fascinating detail, and sketched (with very few exceptions) a remarkably consistent picture. My interviewees were not reading from the same script, as they clearly were all actively constructing their own personal life histories as career histories. It nevertheless appeared that, at least to some degree, they shaped their life stories to fit expectations of what a successful career history should look like, and to comply with the remembered expectations of what had been emphasized by the multinational company they had been employed by.

In this chapter I will contribute to conversations about the use of such interviews as sources for writing (post-)colonial African history.[[8]](#footnote-9) Unlike the use of oral traditions to reconstruct precolonial African societies, for which historians of Africa claimed a certain uniqueness, this type of oral history has a lot in common with oral history elsewhere in the world. When analysing the interviews, we have to take the same issues into account as elsewhere, including composure, telescoping, nostalgia, reverse-imaging, and myth.[[9]](#footnote-10) Discussing a set of interviews I conducted with Ghanaian former employees of the United Africa Company (UAC), I will explore how, in the interviews, my interlocutors looked back from the perspective of their more or less successful career and constructed their lives and histories as relevant. I will consider in what ways the life stories narrated through the interviews may have related to the much richer and more complex lives that these men and women were leading. I explore to what extent these interviews were shaped by the structures and principles for career progression that operated within UAC, and where we can catch glimpses of individual lives as lived at the time. Looking back on their lives, were the turning-points which they had identified from the perspective of their career also turning-points in their lives more broadly? Before I can turn to these questions, I will explain the background to the project and the organization of the oral history interviews.

**An archive in need of some oral history**

About ten years ago I was assisting Unilever PLC with a project to appraise, catalogue, and make available to researchers the records relating to the United Africa Company (UAC) in Unilever's company archive in Port Sunlight.[[10]](#footnote-11) UAC was a wholly owned, but largely autonomous, subsidiary of Unilever with a head office in London and operations around the globe, but it focused its activities on Ghana and Nigeria. From its creation in 1929 out of the amalgamation of a number of existing trading firms active in West Africa, UAC occupied a dominant position in the West African import and export trades. After World War II it expanded into the local production of a diverse range of goods, including sausages, plywood, creams and pomades, vehicle assembly, beer brewing and textile printing. During the 1950s UAC employed over 40,000 Africans in Ghana and Nigeria alone.[[11]](#footnote-12) The company responded successfully to the challenges of the decolonization period, and it appeared to have effectively adapted its operations to the local incorporation requirements that were introduced in its key markets during the 1970s.[[12]](#footnote-13) By 1983, however, the company was in rapid decline, following the economic collapse of its most important market Nigeria. After the sale or closure of a number of loss-making and non-core businesses, Unilever integrated the remaining UAC activities into the main Unilever business in 1987. With the integration came the closure of UAC House in London, at which point the UAC archive had to be rescued very quickly. The UAC records were first made available to David Fieldhouse to allow him to write the history of the company.[[13]](#footnote-14) They were subsequently transferred to the Unilever Archive in Port Sunlight, where they sat, uncatalogued and inaccessible, for fifteen years. It was a large collection that consisted of approximately 2000 storage boxes and occupied 400 metres of shelving. Only a very small amount of the material (mainly the Board Minutes) had been used by Fieldhouse for his study. The prospect of having this collection open and accessible to researchers was exciting, because business archives offer an important alternative viewpoint to that found in (post-)colonial government archives or missionary archives. Records such as that of the UAC would be of potential relevance to a broad range of historians working on Africa: not only business and economic historians, but also political, social and cultural historians.

When we sampled the UAC collection, we found that it would allow historians to gain an excellent idea of the company's activities over its whole geographical area and period of existence, as well as those of the antecedent firms. For UAC itself we found a good balance between the main types of business records, including those relating to: strategic management; accounting and financial data; operational matters; legal issues; trademarks; marketing; personnel files; and labour and welfare issues. We found much material of interest to historians who are not business history specialists. For example, narratives such as visit reports and memoirs can be read not only for the business data that they contain, but also for the information they provide about social and cultural issues, such as changing patterns of consumption, imperial attitudes, and the creation of identities. A collection of photographic materials, including 67 boxes of late nineteenth and early twentieth century albums and prints, and close to 20,000 negatives dating from between the 1950s and 1980s, complements the business records. The photographs provide information on marketing and consumption in African cities and towns; on commodity production and associated issues such as environmental change or labour processes; the expatriate communities of West Africa; relations between Europeans and Africans; and historical ethnography. It was clear that the UAC collection would likely be of major interest to historians of many different persuasions. Less clear, at this stage, were the many gaps and the general 'messiness' of the records.[[14]](#footnote-15)

Once the project moved from the initial assessment – during which we had taken a five percent systematic sample – to the actual cataloguing, the extent of the gaps and messiness became evident. There were several reasons for this. The UAC collection is a combination of the head office archive of UAC, then-current records that were on individuals' desks and in their filing cabinets at the time UAC was wound up, and a selection of materials put together by the Public Relations Department of UAC, probably primarily for use by former company director Pedler to write his 1974 book about the origins of the firm.[[15]](#footnote-16) Some series such as the UAC Board Minutes are complete, while other material, for instance that related to HR policy and matters of personnel, has major gaps. Records relating to UAC Corporate Services tend to be more complete, while those relating to UAC Subsidiaries and Divisions tend to be more patchy. One reason for the patchy nature of the latter material is that most of the records were created – and kept – at the site of the local subsidiary or division. Only those materials that related to specific matters that the head office was dealing with were sent over to London. There must have existed many local UAC record holdings or archives in African locations, as well as elsewhere in the UK and Europe, that contained 'the other side' of the records in London. It is generally unclear what has happened to these local records. For instance in Nigeria no UAC records are said to have been kept from the Unilever era, even though a Nigerian-owned successor company called UAC of Nigeria Plc (UAC) – which traces its existence back to 1879 and proudly trumpets its association with colonial rulers such as Lord Lugard – exists to this day.[[16]](#footnote-17) In Ghana, meanwhile, sections of the local UAC records have been transferred to the companies that bought parts of the business, while other sections have been archived as part of the Unilever Ghana archive. A final reason for the gaps in the collection, was that many of the records that should have been produced – for instance those relating to annual reports on individual staff members' performance – were probably never created due to workload pressure or the loose implementation of company procedures.

The gaps and messiness of the archive is a help as much as a hindrance, as it does provide us with significant information and clues about the organization and about the people that produced these records. Yet even when armed with this information, it is often difficult to work out from the records alone the decision making processes below the level of the Board Minutes. It is unclear what policies were followed locally, or on the basis of what assumptions local UAC employees were acting. The records contain evidence of misunderstandings stemming from different expectations of European and African managers and from different cultures working together. Trying to understand what is happening in the records raises questions about the people who created the records or for whom the material was created. Who were the African employees of UAC, and what did it mean for them to work for UAC, being African? We therefore concluded that, while the UAC collection is a gold mine for historians of Africa because it covers so much, it would be even more useful, and it would be easier to understand and deal with some of the gaps in the records, if we could find out more about the people who had created the records. We therefore decided to set up a project interviewing former UAC employees in West Africa and in the UK, and to add the interviews and transcripts to the UAC collection in the Unilever archive. The interviews in the UK were conducted by Unilever staff trained in oral history interview skills as part of a broader Unilever oral history project, while I did the interviews in West Africa. Corporate communications staff at Unilever Ghana and Unilever Nigeria identified most of the individuals to be interviewed in Ghana and Nigeria, and also arranged the appointments and logistics. The interviewees did not form a representative sample of UAC employees: two-thirds of the people I interviewed were male and most worked for UAC at the level of manager or higher, meaning that the experiences of those who reached managerial positions have been over-represented.

**(Post-)colonial middle-class lives matter**

While preparing for the interviews in the Unilever archive using the records from the personnel department, as well as during the interviews themselves, it quickly became clear that the life histories of former employees would have wider relevance beyond the initial aim of adding to our understanding of the records of UAC. Indeed, exploring the lives of former UAC employees was a good starting-point for thinking about the domestication of capitalism, and for thinking about the development of management capacity and entrepreneurship in (post)colonial African societies more generally. Former employees of UAC and of other European businesses made up the core of the management of African-owned enterprises and organizations. They were also prevalent among politicians and those starting their own businesses. Amongst other factors, they had benefited from formal staff training programmes offered by their employer and from more informal mechanisms for the transfer of skills and knowledge through the company. African employees of European business, alongside government employees, formed the basis of the rapidly growing African middle classes during the post-World War II period. Taking over from the farmers that had led the cocoa economy, these employees played an important role in the domestication of capitalism.[[17]](#footnote-18) They could claim a good deal of prestige from their position, and presented themselves as models to others.[[18]](#footnote-19) They gave their children a Western-style education. They mediated changes in consumption and adopted European expectations of career progression and life course. Working for a European business, they also found themselves at important sites of contestation during colonial and postcolonial political struggles.[[19]](#footnote-20)

In the 1960s and 1970s, historians working on West African history engaged with, befriended, and relied on members of the emerging middle-classes they met as people with whom they could communicate and relate. However, they did not study the lives of their friends, and did not record interviews with them: the rising middle-classes were not the topic of their research. Thus the historians recording 'oral histories' tended to ignore the life histories of their literate informants and contacts. Looking back, an opportunity was lost to record a large amount of data on the subjective experience of the colonial and postcolonial period. This resulted from the difference between oral historiography in Africa, and that in Europe or North America at that time: while Africanists were looking for oral traditions concerned with the pre-colonial past of groups of people, oral historiography in Europe and North America was part of social history and attempted to develop understanding from individual memory. Meanwhile, the African middle classes that historians ignored were the subject of study for sociologists and in particular political scientists, who were describing them as the modern, educated elites who would be leading their newly independent countries to a successful, modernizing future.[[20]](#footnote-21) These studies have now become useful sources for historians, but the use of questionnaires in these studies rather than in-depth interviews, means that historians do not find the level of detail in them about individuals' lives as they would like.[[21]](#footnote-22) Following a period from the 1970s, when sociologists moved their attention away from the educated middles classes, these groups have now become the subject of study for historians and anthropologists.[[22]](#footnote-23)

Approaching the experiences of this influential group of middle-class employees from the perspective of their employment with UAC was certainly interesting, but what kind of information was I getting? To what extent were the views of my respondents shaped by the official company line, given that they were reflecting on that particular aspect of their lives? They were, after all, looking back on careers during which they had been encouraged to measure their behaviour and achievements against the standards and expectations of the multinational company. These standards and expectations had been communicated through line management and through the performance review and promotion process, through training sessions, through internal communications such as the company house magazines, and through company-organized social and sports events. In the interviews, many expressed pride in having been associated with UAC, emphasizing that UAC employees were held in high regard in society: 'if you tell somebody you are working in UAC, you know, you get respect.'[[23]](#footnote-24) John Clottey remarked about his family: 'They always call me UAC man because I want to ensure that everything is done properly, and that is the hallmark of a UAC person.'[[24]](#footnote-25) Not only that, it was easy to find work elsewhere after leaving the company because 'everybody wanted a UAC person'.[[25]](#footnote-26) They also took pride in what they remember about the business culture of the company: hard-working, fair, and incorruptible: 'UAC don't look at faces, they look at performers.'[[26]](#footnote-27) Also: 'they operate with integrity.'[[27]](#footnote-28) I do not doubt that these former employees genuinely felt this way about the company they had been associated with, at least during the interview, but I also think that the context and aim of the interviews, whereby I invited former employees to talk about their life and career working for UAC, will likely have placed them closer to the company's projected self-image and language used in the organization. Ochonu's observation about colonial registers is similarly applicable to company culture:

I take for granted that the autobiographical writings of Africans are mediated by colonial registers and governed by colonial regimes of writing and understanding. One also accepts *a priori* that the vocabularies at play in the texts are suffused in the language of colonial power, whether this is apparent or not. The question, in dealing with autobiographical narratives emanating from colonial – and neocolonial – conditions is that of what weight one should ascribe to the prevailing political and economic structures of society as shapers of autobiographical stories without occluding the writers' intimate portraits and positioning of themselves.[[28]](#footnote-29)

The procedure followed for the interviews was as follows: once we had identified a former employee who was willing to be interviewed, I would try and find out as much as I could about the individual's career within Unilever beforehand from the UAC archive, from newspapers, and from others within the company. This way, I usually had a rough idea about the person's career with Unilever, and his or her subsequent activities before we had our first encounter. Normally my first meeting would be quite a long chat about UAC, the individual's life and career, and my project. We would then agree on a time for me to come back, and record the interview. This would be done in English, as this was the language of operation within the company and therefore was appropriate for the topic of conversation. The interview would start with an invitation to the individual to narrate their life story in brief, with a focus on the career with UAC. I would record this without interrupting or asking specific questions, apart from an occasional request to clarify or expand on something. Depending on the individual, this would take between half an hour and an hour. Following this, I would take the conversation back to their start with UAC, and ask further questions. Here I would usually pick up on what they had just told me, but also include some specific questions that I had prepared, for instance about the recruitment process or about life beyond work, or about an interesting aspect I had come across when preparing for the interview but that had not been mentioned (or not in sufficient detail) during the initial narration of the life story. This would usually lead into a wider ranging conversation with shorter answers. I would close the interview asking if there was anything that they would have expected to talk about that had not yet been discussed. At this moment some very crucial matters were introduced by the interviewees, some of which I picked up later with other former employees in their interviews or follow-up. In the following days I would listen to the recording, noting down things that were unclear, or that I wanted to follow up on. In most cases I would then meet up for a final conversation to clarify aspects or to ask additional questions. I would not record this follow-up meeting, but add footnotes to the transcription of the actual interview. Unilever organized the transcription of the recordings by a commercial company. I subsequently corrected the transcriptions and added annotations as well as cross references to other interviews, where relevant.

The approach I followed made sense for the specific project, trying to map experiences of working in a very diverse organization, and it did result in reflections on many aspects of the business. The intention was for the interviews to complement gaps and silences in the archives, using the career histories to gain insights into historical processes and into cultural and corporate practices. However, it soon became clear that these narrations did not provide immediate windows onto historical realities: they were presented realities in which my interviewees were all actively constructing and negotiating their own personal life histories as career histories. The way I had organized the interviews was much less suitable to analysing this latter aspect of the conversations.

Indeed, my approach was very different from that taken by Miescher in the research that resulted in his book *Making Men in Ghana*.[[29]](#footnote-30) Miescher worked with a much smaller number of interviewees, and was in touch with them for years, building up relationships. He would have many conversations, and interview the same individual a number of times. In the case of Boakye Yiadom, for example, this resulted in Yiadom over the course of a number of meetings and interviews revealing more detailed, different, and contradicting versions of his life history to the interviewer, whereby the later narrations were not necessarily more 'true' than the earlier ones. Boakye Yiadom is a retired teacher-catechist in the Presbyterian Church, *krakye* (a 'scholar' – an educated individual), former clerk with UAC, former soldier (quickly discharged due to ill health), twice failed trader, and Boy Scout leader. He had involvements with 16 women (five of whom he married, sequentially), fathered 27 children, and achieved *opanyin* status – the status of being an elder – in his community. Rather than to analyse the different versions of Yiadom's life histories to reconstruct his 'real' life, Miescher notes that the different narratives – with different emphases and omissions – reflect how Yiadom negotiated conflicting expectations of masculinity, in particular (but not only), the tensions in expectations between his Christian church community and Kwawu culture. The different versions of the narrative reveal strategies and transformations in Boakye Yiadom's constructions of his self, and thus make it possible to historicize his subjectivity.[[30]](#footnote-31)

Boakye Yiadom was a former UAC employee. I would expect that the former UAC employees that I interviewed will have negotiated similar conflicting expectations, but this is not visible in my interviews. In what ways can this knowledge – or suspecting – of a more complex story inform the reading and analysis of these interviews?

**Listening to middle-class life histories**

I do not know how many opportunities my interviewees have to sit down and talk to someone who is interested in their career history and their experiences of the work environment. On the one hand, working for UAC did come with a good deal of prestige, and former employees could be known as 'manager' long after their retirement from the company (even those who had never been in a managerial role).[[31]](#footnote-32) On the other hand, successful lives have many more aspects than just that of an employment or business career, including family, parenthood, church, the own house, (local) political activity, and social status within the community, to name some of the more obvious aspects. To some extent these were entangled, of course, for instance when a UAC manager or storekeeper was enstooled as Chief in their community. Another example would be when the son or daughter of an employee received a scholarship from the company to attend secondary school. John Clottey, who had four children and received two scholarships for them, considered the scholarships a reason to stay with the company: 'I look at those who left the company, you know, I didn't see them improve … but I think I'm happy. I educated my children … I think it's something that I will not forget.'[[32]](#footnote-33) Elizabeth Lamptey remembered being sent on a training course called 'the role balance', aimed at female employees who combined married life with a career in the office:

So we were taught how to manage your manager well, how to manage your life well, how to manage your time that you will be able to spend it wisely ... the thing is, we were taught that when you go to – the house is the house. Concentrate on your family, because if your family are well, you too will be happy. So if you go to the house you make sure they are okay. You come to office, make sure office too is okay. And I think it was some lady, a lady who taught us that course. It was a very interesting course, yeah, the role balance.[[33]](#footnote-34)

Looking back on their careers, however, former UAC employees do not talk much about non-work aspects of their lives and how these might have influenced, or have been influenced by, their career with UAC. My experience with Theophilus Tandoh was quite revealing in this respect. I had known Theo Tandoh for several years before I interviewed him as part of the oral history project. I had worked quite closely with him for several months before he retired from Unilever Ghana, where he was the records manager. We regularly had our lunch together and occasionally had a drink after work. He told me a lot about his family, his church, his friends, and many other aspects of his life outside work. When we were looking for specific files in the archive, he used the events in his family life to locate materials. For instance, when we were looking for a specific set of files relating to the G. B. Ollivant subsidiary of UAC, his reference was his memory that those particular files had been sent over around the time that his daughter Gloria went to secondary school, from which he could guesstimate around which date the typed box list was produced, which, after a little searching back-and-forth, then referred him to the correct box in the archive. However, when I finally interviewed Theo for the project, he did not once bring up his family during the first hour of the interview. When I prompted him, he talked about his family for two minutes, mainly highlighting the educational achievements of his children, of which he was justifiably proud. He then moved on to talk about his skills as a DJ and amateur soccer player for five minutes, and, in response to another prompt from me, talked for sixteen minutes about how he was promoted to management.[[34]](#footnote-35) Similarly with other interviewees, I needed to prompt them to tell me about how working for UAC related to their family life.

In its communication with employees through company house magazines, UAC management used the notion of the 'UAC family' and the 'family spirit' found in the organization as a way to communicate and strengthen a sense of belonging to the company. The house magazines also featured a number of articles about cases where several members of the same family worked for the company, and presented this as a particularly interesting and positive fact.[[35]](#footnote-36) For example, when Prosper Tamakloe was promoted to management in 1951, he was said to be among 'three men who followed in their father's footsteps' and the readership of the company newsletter is reminded that 'his father is the Company's popular manager at Tsito' who, in 1944, had arranged for his son to be given a trial in the company's service.[[36]](#footnote-37) The company saw nothing wrong in their employees recommending family members for employment, and in fact commented on it in positive terms. In contrast to this, the former employees I interviewed took care to distance themselves from such – arguably nepotistic – practices, and also avoided talking about the company in terms of family. Francis Cato, for instance, had several uncles and aunts who were working for the company, one of whom was the Personnel Director. In his interview with me, he nevertheless stressed that he applied to work at UAC on his own initiative, and that he did not receive any assistance from family members already working for the company:

At that time, I didn't even know my auntie was there. So we had the examination. After the examination, out of ten, I placed second on the list and I was engaged. Then it was there that when I was engaged, then my auntie came out to see who is this kid who has joined. Lo and behold, I didn't know she was there, but she found me engaged. And at that time, some people you might have thought that she was influential in making me get that. No.[[37]](#footnote-38)

While it seems that Francis Cato and others looking back on their careers, are here in disagreement with the UAC's preferred narrative, there is another sense in which they are fully consistent with the company's projected image: the claim that UAC operates to high standards of ethical behaviour and its employees are reliable, transparent, and honest. Recommending a family member for a job was seen as perfectly appropriate during the 1950s and 1960s. However, when my interlocutors were looking back, in the twenty-first century, after fifty years of corruption allegations at all levels in society, this was considered nepotism and no longer acceptable.[[38]](#footnote-39) So in the 'family' case the later company perspective is more relevant to individuals' presentation of self, than the earlier one.

There was also an area where my interviewees tended to disagree with the company narrative of the 'happy family': that of friendships and contacts out of working hours. My interlocutors indicate that there was a degree of forced socializing going on, particularly on the occasion of visits from high-ranking managers. Kofi Boateng remembers that 'it was almost obligatory that you attend … if you did not attend or, you know, do social functions, you were really thought not to be social. It would even appear on your appraisal … if the Managing Director has invited you to their house for a party, if you didn't come, you get a letter.'[[39]](#footnote-40) It appears that outside such organized occasions, UAC employees did not spend a lot of time together after working hours. In those cases when friendships within the company were remembered, these tended to be with immediate superiors, rather than with work colleagues at the same level.

One aspect that came up in every interview was the connection between career progression and being transferred to another post. As UAC had branches all over West Africa, employees could be expected to be posted to different locations, depending on where their specific skills and experience were needed. These moves were usually within the employee's own country, but could be across West Africa (and beyond): Nigerians were posted to Ghana; Ghanaians to Togo; Sierra Leoneans to Ghana, and so on. Such moves were often associated with promotions. At least until the late 1980s, UAC's human resource development strategy was to engage staff at a young age, either after finishing secondary school, or (later) upon finishing their university degree, and to then develop them within the company through training. It was very uncommon for UAC to hire an experienced mid-career manager. A newly appointed staff member would typically work at the same station for between five and ten years. If the individual was identified as having management potential, he or she would then be transferred to another post, often to cover for a manager who was on annual leave. Assuming the employee was successful in the temporary post, there would be several of such short-term relieving posts in quick succession, followed by a more permanent transfer that implied a promotion. Transfers could take employees anywhere in the Company, not just in geographical terms, but also in terms of the distinct businesses that UAC engaged in. Someone who started off at the Accra Ice Company in Accra, could become a sales manager for Kumasi Brewery Ltd (KBL) in Kumasi, while someone who was hired for Africa Motors Ltd in Tema, could end up supervising a plywood mill at AT&P in Samreboi. Such transfers must have been very disruptive to family life and friendships, and this is well documented in the archive and in the company house magazines. Contributions to the *Gold Coast UAC News* and *The Unicorn* recognize that transfers could be harmful to employees' health, relationships and friendships, and could make it difficult to fulfil community and family obligations.[[40]](#footnote-41)

Such downsides are almost entirely absent from the interviews I recorded. Only John Clottey observed that transfers could also be arranged if an individual had a poor relationship with their manager, whereby the transfer functioned just to get the person out of the office. He also noted that a transfer could be unwelcome, for instance if the individual's spouse had a job locally, and that people occasionally refused to go on transfer.[[41]](#footnote-42) However, the other former employees I interviewed mainly talked about transfer, relocation and travel as key indicators of success within the company. In fact, Elvis Armah regretted that he had never been transferred, having worked at the UAC Ghana head office throughout his working life: 'I had wanted to go out from Accra ... I wanted to experience how it is to stay outside of Accra.'[[42]](#footnote-43) Deborah Quartey was delighted when she was transferred to Tarkwa after eight years of working in Accra, even though she would be relocating with her young children, one of whom was just a baby girl: 'I had no qualms, I wasn't worried; I wanted the experience and the adventure of it all.' For Deborah, there was a gender equality angle to the matter: 'my general manager ... could not believe that a woman would want to go out on transfer. It was like transfers was the preserve of men only.'[[43]](#footnote-44) When her request to be transferred out of Accra was challenged, she complained: 'I said: Why do people go on transfer? The men have been going on transfer, so why can't I go on transfer?' My own analysis of UAC personnel files and staff cards in the Unilever archive relating to 1500 individuals indicates, however, that Deborah Quartey had to wait about the same length of time for her first transfer as her male colleagues, on average.[[44]](#footnote-45)

While the records indicate that the appointment of females to management roles, or to roles that could lead to a management position, was seen as exceptional in the 1950s and early 1960s, by the 1970s female managers were no longer statistically unusual, and no special attention was drawn to their existence in internal reports. Indeed, when Deborah joined UAC in 1975, her first boss was female. This is not to say that in the 1970s there were no prejudices in the organization as to which roles would be more or less suitable to women: telephonists and receptionists were still expected to be females, and a woman mechanic was still regarded as a novelty worth contacting the press about.[[45]](#footnote-46)

Many of my interviewees talked about their experience of joining as a female or as a young, ambitious employee. In the years before the 1950s, UAC employees would be hired at a relatively low level to perform a specific function. People thus employed took a long time to slowly work themselves up through the company hierarchy. My interviewees remember the tensions that followed when much younger people joined in the 1960s and 1970s, who would often quickly overtake the older generation. To survive, rather than to show respect to the elders, as West African culture requires, the newcomers had to learn not to 'bother about all those old folks'.[[46]](#footnote-47) So while the archival record shows hardly any evidence of an awareness of tensions around age and gender, the interviews provide detailed and nuanced (most of the time, at least) reflections on the topic. It could be, of course, that my interlocutors, looking back on their careers from a time where awareness of gender and age discrimination has become very widespread – particularly among middle-class West Africans – were able to see evidence of it that would have been overlooked, or dismissed as irrelevant, at the moment it was experienced. While this may well have played a role in the interviews, it certainly cannot account for all instances where tensions related to gender and age were mentioned. Comfort Essuman, for instance, remembered that she wanted to leave the Company when for her the tensions turned into harassment, but was told by her parents to stay put because 'work is very difficult to come by'.[[47]](#footnote-48)

A final example of a theme where the interviews provide important nuance to the company perspective, is that of staff training. The official UAC narrative, both in internal communications and in external ones, was emphasizing the training offered that helped develop their staff, and encouraged them to reach their potential. However, the actual amount of training on offer was limited, given the size of the body of employees. While a number of interviewees remembered the training courses, and regarded them as extremely useful, others were more sceptical. Emmanual Idun observed: 'what they were doing was, they were actually challenging you by throwing you in the deep end because the role I was being asked to go and take over was much more than managing, if you like, finance.'[[48]](#footnote-49)

**Conclusion**

The addition of a set of oral history interviews to the UAC collection adds important nuances and alternative perspectives to the materials in the archive. It reveals the existence of tensions in the workplace, for instance that relating to gender and age, as well as cultural expectations, which are not immediately visible in the archival record. Interestingly, some of the tensions that the archives do address, in particular those relating to strikes and trade union activity, are largely absent from my interviewees' narrations (with the exception of an attempted strike against an unpopular personnel manager at the Kumasi brewery; as a result the manager in question was transferred to a posting elsewhere in Unilever, and another personnel manager was appointed).[[49]](#footnote-50) Overall, the interviews do provide a window onto working for the company, and they do help to make sense of the archive.

As far as understanding post-War West African middle class lives is concerned, the limitations of the project are clear, compared to the more in-depth study of a smaller group of individuals more intensely, over a longer time period. Developing an awareness of individuals' subjectivities and self-representation, nevertheless does allow us to read more into the interviews, and as such the interviews can make a contribution to the developing research topic on African middle class lives. What is less clear, is to what extent Africans who applied to work with UAC were already middle class – something that having been university educated, at that time at least, might imply. There are some, limited, glimpses of life beyond the company. Here, in particular, the question of how much of the narratives feed back the company narrative and the company's expectations still requires further exploration.

**Bibliography**

Abrams, Lynn, *Oral History Theory* (London, 2010)

Austin, Gareth, *Labour, Land, and Capital in Ghana: from Slavery to Free Labour in Asante, 1807-1956* (Rochester, 2004)

Behrends, Andrea, & Carola Lentz, Education, Careers, and Home Ties: the Ethnography of an Emerging Middle Class from Northern Ghana, *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 137/2 (2012), 139-64

van den Bersselaar, Dmitri, “Somebody must Necessarily go to Bring this Drink”. Gin Smugglers, Chiefs and the State in Colonial Ghana, *Cultural and Social History*, 11/2 (2014), 243-61

van den Bersselaar, Dmitri & Stephanie Decker, "No Longer at Ease": Corruption as an Institution in West Africa, *International Journal of Public Administration*, 34/11 (2011), 741-52

Eckert, Andreas & Adam Jones, Introduction: Historical Writing about Everyday Life, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 15/1 (2002): *Special Issue: Everyday Life in Colonial Africa*, 5-16.

Fieldhouse, David, *Merchant Capital and Economic Decolonization: The United Africa Company 1929-1987* (Oxford, 1994)

Harneit-Sievers, Axel, Jones O. Ahazuem & Sydney Emezue, *A Social History of the Nigerian Civil War: Perspectives from Below* (Münster, 1997)

Henige, David, The Problem of Feedback in Oral Tradition: Four Examples from the Fante Coastlands, *Journal of African History*, 14/2 (1973), 223-35

-------, *Oral Historiography* (London, 1982)

Jansen, Jan, The Representation of Status in Mande: did the Mali Empire still Exist in the Nineteenth Century?, *History in Africa*, 23 (1996), 87-109

Kennedy, Paul, *Ghanaian Businessmen. From Artisan to Capitalist Entrepreneur in a Dependent Economy* (München, 1980)

Lloyd, Peter, ed., *The New Elites of Tropical Africa* (London, 1966)

Miescher, Stephan, The Life Histories of Boakye Yiadom (Akasease Kofi of Abetifi, Kwawu): Exploring the Subjectivity and 'Voices' of a Teacher-Catechist in Colonial Ghana, in: *African Words, African Voices. Critical Practices in Oral History*, ed. Luise White, Stephan Miescher & David William Cohen (Bloomington, 2001), pp. 162-93

-------, *Making Men in Ghana* (Bloomington, 2005)

Miller, Robert, Elite Formation in Africa: Class, Culture, and Coherence, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 12/4 (1974), 521-42

Monson, Jamie, *Maisha*: Life History and the History of Livelihood along the TAZARA Railway in Tanzania, in: *Sources and Methods in African History: Spoken, Written, Unearthed*, ed. Toyin Falola & Christian Jennings (Rochester, 2003), 312-28

Murillo, Bianca, “The Devil we Know”: Gold Coast Consumers, Local Employees, and the United Africa Company, 1940-1960, *Enterprise and Society*, 12/2, (2011), 317-55

Ochonu, Moses, Elusive History: Fractured Archives, Politicized Orality, and Sensing the Postcolonial Past, *History in Africa*, 42 (2015), 287-98

Oyewumi, Oyeronke, Making History, Creating Gender: Some Methodological and Interpretive Questions in the Writing of Oyo Oral Traditions, *History in Africa*, 25 (1998), 263-305

Pedler, Frederick, *The Lion and the Unicorn in Africa. A History of the Origins of the United Africa Company, 1787-1931* (London, 1974)

Samuel, Raphael & Paul Thompson, ed., *The Myths we Live by* (London, 1990)

Smythe, Hugh & Mabel Smythe, *The New Nigerian Elite* (Stanford, 1960)

Tonkin, Elizabeth, *Narrating Our Pasts: the Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge, 1992)

Uche, Chibuike, British Government, British Businesses, and the Indigenization Exercise in Post-Independence Nigeria, *Business History Review*, 86/4 (2012), 745-71

The United Africa Group's Staff and Labour Force, *Statistical and Economic Review*, 20 (1957), 39-45.

Vansina, Jan, *Oral Tradition as History* (London, 1985)

White, Luise, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago, 1990)

-------, Hodgepodge Historiography: Documents, Itineraries, and the Absence of archives, *History in Africa*, 42 (2015), 309-18

-------, *Speaking with Vampires. Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley, 2000)

Wright, Donald, Requiem for the Use of Oral Tradition to Reconstruct the Precolonial History of the Lower Gambia, *History in Africa*, 18 (1991), 399-408

1. Vansina, *Oral Tradition*; Henige, The Problem of Feedback; Henige, *Oral Historiography*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Wright, Requiem; Oyewumi, Making History. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Jansen, Representation of Status, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Harneit-Sievers/Ahazuem/Emezue, *Social History*; White, *Comforts of Home*; Monson, *Maisha*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Miescher, *Making Men*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. White, *Speaking with Vampires*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Bersselaar, Somebody. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Eckert/Jones, Introduction, 7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Abrams, *Oral History*; Samuel/Thompson, *Myths*; Tonkin, *Narrating*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. In addition to myself, the team consisted of Julie-Marie Strange (Postdoctoral Research Assistant) and Rory Miller (University of Liverpool Management School). The catalogue of the UAC Collection can be searched online at: <http://www.unilever-archives.com/>. Address: Unilever Archives and Records Management, Unilever PLC, PO Box 69, Port Sunlight, Wirral CH62 4ZD, UK. Researchers should email the archive at archives@unilever.com to make an appointment should they wish to access any materials. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. United Africa Group, 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Uche, British Government. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Fieldhouse, *Merchant Capital*. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. For a more general view, see: White, Hodgepodge Historiography. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Pedler, *Lion and Unicorn*. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. For UAC of Nigeria's self presentation, see the company website at <http://www.uacnplc.com/index.htm> (accessed 15 July 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Austin, *Labour, Land, and Capital*. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Kennedy, *Ghanaian Businessmen*, 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Miescher, *Making Men*; Murillo, The Devil we Know. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Miller, Elite Formation. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Smythe/Smythe, *New Nigerian Elite*; Lloyd, *The New Elites*. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Behrends/Lentz, Education. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Interview with Elvis Armah, held on 22 September 2010 in Accra, Ghana. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Interview with John Clottey, held on 15 September 2010 in Tema, Ghana. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Interview with Kwasi Okoh, held on 22 September 2010 in Tema. Ghana. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Interview with Elvis Armah. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Interview with Francis Cato, held on 15 September 2010 in Tema, Ghana. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. Ochonu, Elusive History, 294. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Miescher, *Making Men*. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Miescher, Life Histories. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Kennedy, *Ghanaian Businessmen*, 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Interview with John Clottey. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Interview with Elizabeth Lamptey, held on 15 September 2010 in Tema, Ghana. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. Interview with Theophilus Tandoh, held on 21 September 2010 in Accra, Ghana. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. 'Richardson family record of service – over 100 years', *Gold Coast UAC News* 4.8 (1953), p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. 'Seven new African managerial appointments', *Gold Coast UAC News* 3.1 (1951), p.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. Interview with Francis Cato. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. Bersselaar/Decker, "No Longer at Ease". [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. Interview with Kofi Boateng, held on 24 September 2010 in Tema, Ghana. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. 'To Helena from E. V. Badoe', *Gold Coast UAC News* 2.1 (1950), p. 3; 'Old timers who still keep going', *Gold Coast UAC News* 2.11 (1951), p. 3; Jos Anyima-Ackah, 'The joy of being at home on leave', *The Unicorn* 18.2 (1972), pp. 19-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. Interview with John Clottey. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. Interview with Elvis Armah. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. Interview with Deborah Quartey, held on 20 September 2010 in Tema, Ghana. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. Unilever Archives and Records Management (UARM), UAC 1/10/2 UAC Personnel Department: Employees. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. Harriet Djanguah, 'Report on telephonist/receptionist course', *The Unicorn* 17.4 (1971), p. 19; 'Is she the first?', *The Mirror*, 27 September 1974. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. Interview with Deborah Quartey. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. Interview with Comfort Essuman, held on 15 September 2019 in Tema, Ghana. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. Interview with Emmanual Idun, held on 21 September 2010, at Lashibi, Ghana. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. Interview with Kofi Boateng. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)