

EAP266: History of Bolama, the first capital of Portuguese Guinea (1879-1941), as reflected in the Guinean National Historical Archives

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2009 award - Pilot project
£9,900 for 6 months**

Survey report and sample digitised records

Further Information

You can contact the EAP team at endangeredarchives@bl.uk



INSTITUTO NACIONAL DE ESTUDOS E PESQUISA

Final Report EAP 266 Pilot Project:

“History of Bolama, the first capital of Portuguese Guinea (1879-1941) as reflected in the Guinean National Archives”

Execution time: 1 November 2009 to 30 June 2010, 8 months

Main objectives:

The main objectives of the pilot project were successfully implemented in spite of the sudden tragic death of the Archive's director, Mr. Carlos Alfredo, in late December 2009. We managed to fill the gap left by Mr. Alfredo, by intensive group work and for my part by overtime. We also recruited additional support staff, which allowed the two full-time archivists to take over – as far as possible - the duties of the archive's director.

The tasks 1 to 7, mentioned on page 4 of our application, were carried out as envisaged. In the following I will highlight the most important steps of our work:

Document Evacuation from Bolama Island

The documents still existing on the island of Bolama were examined by two archivists in December 2009. All transportable documents were shipped and taken to Bissau. They are now stored in the National Historical Archives at INEP and have been integrated as far as possible into the already existing Bolama collection.

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The evacuated documents consist mainly of issues of the *Bulletin Oficial*, which are partially damaged moderately, partially severely. These Bulletins have rarity value, there exist only a few specimens, even the library has no full series. Only a few other documents were found in Bolama in transportable condition and evacuated as well. Local

authorities on the island were very friendly and offered their help. But due to missing storing conditions they could only identify together with the archivists a large amount of colonial documents in a completely deteriorated state, abandoned for decades in an old colonial building in Bolama. After detailed examination the archivists decided to leave these documents behind, as it would be impossible to evacuate them in this state of degradation or to treat them any further with the means at hand locally.

(See images of Bolama)

Reorganization of classified Bolama Collection at INEP

The physical reorganization of the Bolama Collection (classified part, catalogue of 1988, 279 boxes), which was scattered in the war and partly destroyed, continued nearly all over the time of the pilot project and turned out more difficult and time consuming as envisaged in the application and working plan. The documents were painstakingly restored to their original order and rearranged and re-packed in 279 boxes.

Simultaneously statistics was created to hold the total number of documents and the outs per box. Similarly, the condition and conservation status of the documents was checked and they were classified into four groups: very good, good, reasonable, critical.

By closer look to the documents and, in some cases, page to page examination lot of errors in the previous organisation and classification of the documents were discovered. It took additional time to revise individual documents in the boxes in order to confirm their classification. This extra and time consuming work could not be concluded during the pilot project.

Main results of statistical data analysis

The total number of documents is 7273 of which 1024 documents were not found. All of these are documents groups, not individual documents or individual sheets, i.e. the total volume of losses cannot be extrapolated automatically from our statistic. Additionally, we have a complete loss of six boxes, of which the number of documents is not exactly determinable.

Most of these losses go back to destruction in the 1998/99 war in Guinea-Bissau; but some documents seem also to have been removed out of the Archives consciously or were stolen, for example the historically interesting contracts with local kings (*régulos*) of the island of Bubaque.

We can note a total loss rate of 14%; particularly affected are the documents of Bolama port with about 45% losses and the regional hospital of Bolama with about 30% losses.

Status of documents:

About 50% of the documents are classified as good or very good; 2609 documents or 36% were found in a reasonable or poor conservation status. Thus, the endangered documents of the Bolama collection (classified parts) rise up to 50%, if we take into account the actual losses, compared to 50% documents in good / very good conservation status that still do not require urgent conservation action.

As almost all boxes have documents in critical condition, a partial digitization of the collection would make little sense. To our understanding it would be logical and appropriate, to digitize the entire classified collection of Bolama (= 273 boxes).

(see Statistics Bolama City Collection)

Evacuation of court documents from the Ministry of Justice

Contacts were established with the Ministry of Justice, Bissau, which holds the judicial acts of Guinea-Bissau since the mid-19th Century on its attic. The storage conditions are extremely bad, see video and image documentation. During our visit in early 2010 we were shocked by the fact that the roof was being repaired while the documents were directly exposed to wind and weather. This threatening situation prompted us to make the evacuation of the judicial documents related to the Bolama collection our top priority.

A request was made, and after several meetings in the Ministry of Justice, including an audience with the Minister HE Mr. Djallo Pires, we obtained permission to evacuate the documents in late May 2010. In the meantime, we prepared a space of approximately 250ml at the Archives to house these new documents. **The documents have been cleaned and provisionally arranged for the transport** in the Ministry of Justice, then transferred to INEP and organised by type of process and year.

Creation of some Samples from the various document collections;

We have digitised some samples which can give you a first impression of the material and its historical value.

These illustrative samples were saved as JPEG files, because they are only temporary illustration material.

Description of files:

- 1.) A sample of different documents in bad conservation status (mau estado)

- 2.) Correspondence received by Bolama City Council in 1888, C1.5-A,29.693
- 3.) Indigenous Policy, some quarrels C1.5-A7.240
- 4.) Notebook on the minutes of election of deputies for the Bolama Assembly, 1901, various documents, C1.4-A9.332
- 5.) Process, documents of the Ministry of Justice
- 6.) British Anthropologists visiting Bolama for research

Conclusion

We have achieved the main aim of the pilot project: All existing documents of the Bolama Collection are now stored in the National Historical Archives of INEP. Thus, these documents are protected from further decay and could be saved from further imminent threats.

We now have four major sections in the Bolama Collection:

1. All available **Documents of the City of Bolama**: City Council (202 boxes), post office (13 boxes), regional hospital of Bolama (9 boxes)
2. All available **court documents** about the processes that were conducted in Bolama courts from 1879 to 1941, i.e. **all judicial records** on the national level, as far as they were not sent to Lisbon for further decision.
3. All available documents of **Bolama Port**, reflecting trade on the national, regional and international level; 10 boxes with classified documents (C1.1), other 30m with unclassified materials, evacuated previously from Bolama island (mission before 1998/99 war).
4. All available documents of **Bolama Custom office**; C.1.4, catalogue pp. 21-24, 45 boxes, and unclassified material, approximately 150m.

To our knowledge there does not exist in any other archive, whether in Portugal (*Arquivo Historico Ultramarino, Arquivo Historico Militar*), nor in Senegal, or on the Cape Verde islands, such an extensive collection of Bolama. The particular value of the Bissau-Guinean collection consists in the fact that it contains many documents of local history and daily life of the

Africans and of the colonialists, sometimes from documents generated by Africans themselves.

We have to bear in mind that the Portuguese colonial administration centered in the capital Bolama from 1879 and the few dispersed garnison towns (like Geba, Farim, Cacheu, Bissau) did only partly correspond to an efficient functioning state entity, especially if compared to the British and French neighbor colonial administrations in Senegal and Gambia. Likewise its archives also lack a lot of sophistication and are not comprehensive. Nevertheless, the importance of the Bolama collection cannot be underestimated, as it includes substantial amounts of detailed reports and information at the grass-roots level about local conditions as well as important economic and legal documents.

What to do next? – some preliminary aspects of main project proposal

Training first

Before we can continue work on the Bolama collection the Archive's personal has to be further trained on historical analysis to facilitate the classification of documents. There is also urgent need for additional formation in digitizing according international standards to satisfy the digitizing conditions of British Library etc.

I noted lack of competence and skills in the following areas:

- a) Identification of handwriting and document content
- b) Sufficient knowledge / reading on historical conditions / background Portuguese Guinea and Portuguese colonial administration
- c) Professional digitizing of documents

Training period: 3 months, 5 persons. Archivists and assistant archivists will pass written and oral examination at the end of the training. Only successful candidates will be approved for future work.

Internal reorganization of individual documents, Bolama City Collection

As the internal organization level of the material classified in the catalogue of 1988 is weak, the respective 279 boxes should be revised on individual document base. As a prerequisite for this work we need better trained archivists who can do this type of work in a reasonable time frame. At this moment it does not make much sense to me to opt for digitization of part a or part b or any part of this collection which are all more or less endangered (see statistical survey), unless we have been able to put them in a definitive order or we have the technical and financial option for complete digitizing of the 279 boxes/ city of Bolama.

Result: reprint of completely revised and enlarged catalogue; digitization of endangered documents

Overview on the court documents of the Ministry of Justice – Bolama courts

1. Transfer into boxes for safer storing
2. First analysis of degradation status, parallel to transfer
3. Analysis of internal order of documents, now collected per year and type of process, with a part of approximately 40ml mixed documents.
4. Production of classification instruments according to principles of colonial Portuguese administration

Result: Provisory catalogue

Survey of Bolama port documents

1. Organization of documents according to basic criteria already applied in the catalogue: administration with three subcategories (A), accountancy (B); add other new classification criteria, if necessary
2. Page by page cleaning and transfer into boxes for safer storing
3. First analysis of degradation status, parallel to transfer

Result: Provisory catalogue

Survey of Bolama Custom Office documents

1. Organization of documents according to basic criteria of Portuguese colonial administration. Elaboration of classification criteria after first analysis
2. Page by page cleaning and transfer into boxes for safer storing
3. First analysis of degradation status, parallel to transfer

Result: Provisory catalogue

These are central objectives and tasks identified for the main project proposal for which we want to apply to very soon.

We would appreciate your comments and critics very much.

Thank you very much in advance!

Bissau, 14 July 2010

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