



African Contributions to Global Health

Video Transcript

Methods of a medical historian

My name is Andrea Azizi Kifyasi, I'm a lecturer and researcher at the Department of History, University of Dar es Salaam. For my PhD at the Department of History, University of Basel, I am currently on a study leave. To write my thesis on the History of China's Medical Assistance to Post-Colonial Tanzania, I am examining several medical projects such as the Chinese Medical Teams programme, pharmaceutical industries in Tanzania sponsored by the Chinese, Chinese research for an HIV/AIDS cure, and China's influence on Tanzania's health policies. Between 1968 to this very day, the Chinese government sent medical doctors from the Shandong province to Tanzania.

Historians who conduct research in Tanzania usually consult archives and University libraries, especially the East Africana section at the University of Dar es Salaam and the Tanzania National Archive. To learn more than written sources contain, historians also conduct oral history interviews with key respondents. The library of the University of Dar es Salaam has a rich collection of books, dissertations, newspapers, parliamentary proceedings and government publications.

It is easy, for instance, to examine peoples' perceptions of the medical services offered by Chinese doctors, since their activities were broadly covered in local newspapers and discussed in parliament. The Tanzania National Archives also holds rich colonial and post-colonial collections. Here, I consulted medical-related sources in documents from the Ministry of Health and its departments. Fortunately, most of the files I ordered were accessible, while a few could not be found.

This is a problem that historians frequently encounter – missing evidence. So, what do we do?

Are sources missing, misplaced or is access restricted, researchers have to find other sources of information. In my case, I looked for alternative sources in different archives – and I was lucky to find newspaper archives at the University library and to locate helpful information in China's national archive in Beijing and in the Shandong Provincial Archive. Such gaps in a collection can often be explained by the archive's history: The Tanzania National Archives was founded in 1963.

Like many archives in Africa, the Tanzania National Archives is weaker for the postcolonial periods, especially the 1960s and 1970s, because archiving was not a priority for the young independent nation and collection and preservation tasks were still at an early stage.



The German and the British colonial powers in Tanzania kept very good and organised records, but this should not obscure the fact that much is missing from those periods as well. Colonial powers would systematically destroy certain documents to prevent them from falling into the hands of enemies. Other valuable files were taken back to Europe after Tanzania's independence. Also, many voices are not represented in the sources, especially those from ordinary Tanzanians.

Researchers can consult Zonal Record Centres, which preserve records collected in zonal areas during most of the postcolonial period. There are six zones in Tanzania: Western Zone – Tabora, Eastern Zone – Kibaha, Lake Zone – Mwanza, Southern Highlands Zone – Mbeya, Northern Zone – Arusha, and Southern Zone – Mtwara. Researchers may also get missing information from newspapers, archives outside Tanzania as well as seek out historical actors – so people who lived in the period that you study – to interview them about their experiences.

In an interview situation, many things need to be considered: Who is the person I am talking to? How can I establish a relation of trust? What is he or she likely to remember and prepared to share? What could he or she possibly try to hide? Such reflections are called “source criticism”, and that of course applies to written sources as well. It is crucial to examine the context of each source in order to assess what information it can possibly yield.

Such processes take time and missing information can further complicate historical research. Sometimes, historians just have to acknowledge where the silences are, what questions will remain unanswered. But in many cases, such challenges have pushed me to dig deeper and find alternative sources, in different places, and eventually, have enriched my research.