



Future Directions in *History in Africa*

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With the 50th volume of *History in Africa*, the journal is not quite fifty years old. As we prepare for the 50th anniversary of the journal next year, it is a perfect time to examine the present and imagine the future of our field. Conceived as a journal concerned with historical method, scholarly debate, and sources, *History in Africa* has both generated and reflected significant epistemological change. But we also recognize that African history and African Studies, more generally, are engaged in longstanding and ongoing struggles to move beyond colonial ways of knowing.¹ How can *History in Africa* actively reorient and reimagine its role in this crucial intellectual work?

This year's volume showcases the ways that scholars of African history are finding paths between old certainties and novel approaches borrowed from other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. This is also an era when new technologies are reshaping education and scholarship such that our methods, access to sources, and approaches to historiographical debate are vastly different than they were just a few years ago. As part of this cycle of change, with this volume, *History in Africa* ceases hard-copy, paper production and becomes an online-only publication. We will continue some of our initiatives including general and thematic calls, the History from Africa series, and upcoming online features to encourage scholarship from Africa-based scholars, emergent researchers, and innovative thinkers. As we reflect on the history of *History in Africa*, we intend to expand upon the forward-looking conversations and debates envisioned when the journal began in 1974.

¹ Toyin Falola, *Decolonizing African Studies: Knowledge Production, Agency, and Voice* (Rochester: Rochester University Press, 2022); Chambi Chachage, "From Ghettoizing to Gentrifying African Studies," <https://udadisi.com/from-ghettoizing-to-gentrifying-african/>.

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Tellingly, we close this year's volume with a multi-authored piece featuring a community-based learning project in Ghana that supports and encourages the work of students not only as potential future historians but also as co-creators of knowledge.

Our first section looks back and forward at the same time, using new approaches to linguistics and oral sources to investigate both the recent and deeper African past. Joshua Castillo's perspective on a thorny problem in Congolese history similarly urges historians to not overlook language and the study of linguistics to explicate political agency. In "The Power of Language and the Language of Power: Sociolinguistic Methods and Social Histories of Language and Political Power in Mobutu's Congo-Zaire (1965–1997)," Castillo considers how Lingala came to consolidate both national and political identity in Mobutu's Zaire while simultaneously fomenting a fracturing dynamic. Castillo intertwines oral history, sociolinguistics, and political science to analyze how pressures from above interacted with diverse voices and communities to produce a range of linked, but contradictory social outcomes.

Addressing the field of oral history, Jonna Katto's article raises questions regarding voice, gender, and power in Mozambiquan historical memory. In "Chiefs and Other Great Female Ancestors: Voice, Authority, and the Politics of Gendered Temporality in Northern Mozambique," she examines memories of female political power among the Yaawo people. Focusing on oral history encounters, Katto explores what they can tell us about the complex processes of communication between past and present that are evident when the researcher looks beyond just words to examine "voice," which also comprises the tone and bodily gestures of the speaker. She argues for the particular importance of this approach for uncovering marginalized narratives, including gendered histories of power.

The authors of the next set of articles each focus on a series of archives or sources that, when put in conversation with other materials, can be seen from a new perspective, understood in their own light, or presented as a new type of repository. In his article, "Writing a Colonial Legal History of Northern Nigeria: An Analysis of Methods and Sources," Femi Owolade revisits the field of colonial legal history – and its limits – by examining three bodies of legal texts in northern Nigeria. While he notes the ways that colonial legislation and memoranda generally privilege Western perspectives, case law can provide some insight into local practices and ideologies, especially when used in conjunction with other materials.

Also in relation to colonial Nigeria, Okechukwu Nwafor interrogates the multiple purposes of obituary notices in colonial African newspapers in his article, "A Class of Their Own: Newspaper Obituaries and the Colonial Public Sphere in Lagos, 1880–1920." He demonstrates how from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, African and colonial elites in Lagos, Nigeria, used obituaries as a platform to convey a variety of messages, ranging from religious practices to the critique of colonial policies. They did so to lodge

themselves, their families, and their deceased loved ones into the public sphere created by colonial newspapers. Besides providing the opportunity for African correspondents and columnists to achieve equality in a racialized colonial setting, newspapers enabled colonial subjects to define class hierarchies across racial borders through their obituary pages.

Elite engagement with French colonial policies looked different from the perspective of a “lost” set of reports by Africans barred from attending the 1944 Conference in Brazzaville – despite its conference’s agenda on colonial reform. In her article, “‘African Opinions’ at the Brazzaville Conference: *Evolué* Politics, Representation, and the Future of French Colonialism in Africa,” Danielle Sanchez explains how the set of African essays were to be presented on their behalf by Félix Éboué, the colonial administrator who was a Black man from French Guiana. Rather than ignore the essays given the limited significance of what the conference did, Sanchez uses their letters or “Africans opinions” as a window into how African debated ideas about colonialism, assimilation, and citizenship.

In many ways, Ibrahim Bâbatúndé Anoba proposes a new type of archive and set of archivists in “Cyber Metahistory: Homespun Historians, Ethnonationalism, and Recasting Yorùbá Oral Traditions in the Age of Social Media.” He interrogates the contestation over historical accuracies in Yorùbá oral traditions and the right to assert epistemic power on social media. At the core of this development are Yorùbá netizens who function as activist- interlocutors. Using the Facebook debate between two key Yorùbá public figures – a titled official and a local historian – the author shows how social media is increasingly becoming the new frontier for history negotiation. At the same time, such conversations, he argues, are transforming social media platforms into a collective locus for the performance of “responsible netizenry” and netizen actions. In his view, as these homespun historians recast Yorùbá oral traditions – infused with ethnonationalist sentiments – with the intent of helping the Yorùbá public understand their place in contemporary Nigeria, mainstream historians must examine the consequence of such debate in social media and the effects on oral traditions and memory as methods of historical inquiry.

The 1970s was a pivotal decade when communities and activists across Africa and the Global South sought to redefine themselves and their relationship with the world. But while activists and artists were trying to create a postcolonial, transnational vision, a protracted and anticolonial struggle continued in the southern region of the African continent, in particular. The section juxtaposes how historians have gathered and analyzed – and, according to these authors, overlooked – source materials during two very different, charged historical contexts of celebration and war. Etienne Lock writes about the controversial expulsion of Senegalese intellectual and activist Alioune Diop from the 1977 Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) that took place in Nigeria. Arguing for a more expansive approach to archives, Lock suggests inclusion of underutilized

sources held by UNESCO and Diop's journal *Présence Africaine*. By incorporating those additional records, Lock suggests that the conflict points to disputes around the role of the intellectual beyond the narrower political conflict between Senegal and Nigeria often repeated in most studies.

In "Wiriyamu and the Colonial Archive: Reading It Against the Grain? Along the Grain? Read It at All!," Andreas Zeman takes issue with what he argues has become a litany about the silences of colonial archives. In the case of the Portuguese massacre in the Mozambican village of Wiriyamu in 1972, carried out at the height of the liberation struggle, the historical canon has been that the Portuguese did not record the details of their atrocities – or if they did, such documents were not archived. Therefore, one either had to only infer details by reading archival sources against the grain – or simply write off the archives as unhelpful and silent on this matter. Challenging five crucial assumptions about the massacre, Zeman urges historians to look again at what he finds to be rich sources in the Portuguese archives. While there certainly are some distinct and glaring archival silences, better use of existing materials can lead to important revisions of existing historiographical contours of the massacre.

The next section highlights a common refrain in African history: historiographical debate revolves around problematic yet necessary archives. Caught between sources that can be expansive yet limited in vision, scholars often share ways to repurpose and reimagine them. Missionary accounts – sometimes deep in detail but often troubling because of their perspective – have long been one of these challenging sources of African history. The kingdom of the Kongo has an unusually rich corpus of sources from Capuchin missionaries from the seventeenth century, but John Thornton uncovers a new late sixteenth-century source from the Carmelite order in his archival report on "The Florentine Relation: A Newly Discovered Sixteenth-Century Description of the Kingdom of Kongo." The newly discovered document, which may be part of a longer manuscript yet to be recovered, provides detailed descriptions of the landscape, local practices, and everyday life of Kongo and is thus useful to scholars interested in the region and the place of Kongo in a wider world.

The contribution by Benoît Henriët, Amandine Lauro, and Renaud Juste looks at the region of the broader Central African region in a very different time in "Archives of Military Courts in Colonial Congo: New Sources for the History of Violence and Agency in Central Africa." Henriët provides a sketch of the recently rediscovered archives of the *Conseils de Guerre*, the military courts of colonial Congo (1885–1960), featuring, in particular, the activities of the *Force Publique*, Congo's colonial army. The article sheds light on the history of the long neglected records and shows how military court records can contribute to a fine-grained analysis of colonial power dynamics, both within and outside of the military. The vast range of recorded crimes and misdeeds and their judicial handling provides fascinating insights into the everyday deployment of colonial rule. The author also identifies some

promising research topics that the archives could support. The ongoing digitization of the archives will further enhance the collection's dissemination to a much broader academic community.

Looking at a very different set of materials from South Africa, Brown Maaba swims against the tide of gloom in many accounts of African archives and writes about the collection of the Johannesburg Art Gallery in South Africa in "The State of the Records of the Federation Union of Black Artists at the Johannesburg Art Gallery: An Overview." The Federation Union of Black Artists (FUBA) donated its own records to the Gallery in the 1990s, and Maaba vividly chronicles many of the highlights of the collection. As visual art was a crucial means of voicing and making people's opposition and defiance of apartheid, Brown invites a much fuller use of the FUBA collection and urges that resources be located to digitize these materials.

Contemporary scholars have mined older historical texts, such as those of British historian Ivor Wilks, for new interpretations and, in doing so, have offered many novel insights. Amir Syed, however, turns to Wilks' unpublished fieldnotes on deposit at the Melville J. Herskovits library at Northwestern University to explore their utility in the production of new knowledge. In "Mobility, Knowledge Transmission, and Authority in West Africa: Re-Reading Ivor Wilks' Fieldnotes 'Conversations about the Past,'" Syed focuses, in particular, on insights gleaned from the collection on the importance of mobility to the history of Islam in Africa. In doing so, he demonstrates the potential of this collection – which includes oral histories, ethnographic notes, and diary entries – when studied alongside other contextual materials, for the opening up of new areas of inquiry.

We continue *History in Africa's* "History from Africa" series, giving colleagues the opportunity to reflect on the trajectories, challenges, and obstacles faced in history departments on the African continent. These institutions' long engagements with historical and pedagogical methods and debates are often obscured by the overwhelming preponderance of publications and presentations emanating from North American and European institutions. But African universities have had and continue to feature excellent and diligent educational programs for thousands of students and expansive publication profiles, despite grappling with daunting dynamics. In this volume, Saheed Amusa provides the second installment on the traditions of scholarly engagement and achievement at Obafemi Owolowo University Ile-Ife in Nigeria, highlighting significant faculty, graduates, and programs. Without sugarcoating the national and institutional challenges in Nigerian higher education, Amusa contends that the Department has a bright future.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the many things that was put on pause (and that we knew would have long-term effects or maybe change forever) was archival and site research. Our thought was that we could have a longer-term feature that would allow for reflective essays about research in response to current events. We put out an initial call for research

reflections on projects affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Tamba M'bayo's work, "Researching a History of Epidemics in Sierra Leone during the Coronavirus Pandemic," engages with these questions on several levels. M'bayo reflects on his experience conducting archival research in Sierra Leone on the country's history of epidemics just as the COVID-19 pandemic began. This unique constellation of circumstances leads him to think through the connections between past and present epidemics. M'bayo's article suggests the potential of various streams of research that are just beginning to emerge as a result of COVID-19, including work on the possibilities and constraints of conducting research during the pandemic, the continued significance of past epidemics in understanding the African present, and studies of COVID-19 realities themselves, including community experiences and government responses.

We conclude this year's volume with a contribution that points toward new ways to teach, conduct research, and potentially theorize African history. In "Historians and High School Students as Partners: Community-based Learning Experiences as a Tool for Democratizing Research," written by Tony Yeboah, Trevor Getz, Talia Kertsman, and Gordon George, a team of researchers report on an innovative collaborative pedagogical project that they undertook in Ghana. Working with high school teachers, the researchers developed a curriculum for students that guided them through a community-based history project. The present article reflects on the experience of implementing this course and considers both its successes and limitations. It includes the perspectives of one of the students, Gordon George, who is a co-author, demonstrating the researchers' commitment to the democratization of knowledge production. Throughout the piece, the authors collectively demonstrate the importance of building community partnerships and fostering the creation of a new generation of African historians.

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