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van den Bersselaar, Dmitri; Doortmont, Michel; Hanson, John H.; Jansen, Jan

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Re-Mapping, Re-Spacing and Re-Connecting Africa – Editors' Introduction

Dmitri van den Bersselaar, Michel R. Doortmont,
John H. Hanson, Jan Jansen

A recurrent theme in the contributions to this volume of *History in Africa* is a concern with re-mapping places, spaces, and connections in African history. Of course, historians of Africa are only too aware of how complex even the history of the term “Africa” itself is: it is a term introduced by outsiders around the first century AD, that has referred to various sections of the continent, and that only became the term to denote the entire continent hundreds of years after its first documented use for an area covering parts of the southern Mediterranean coast between current Morocco and Libya. Similarly, the names of places and spaces mentioned in the historical sources we use were often not fixed, unspecific and at times downright wrong. This reflects the inaccuracies and confusions of older sources such as travel narratives produced by (mostly European) outsiders (and the fact that we tend to read these sources with a different aim than they were originally produced for). Added to this was the, at times, uncritical use of such sources by scholars in previous generations, whose texts however continue to influence assumptions and perceptions of historians today.

Local African (oral) sources have not been easier to work with, as many similarly use more than one name for the same place (and refer to several places with the same name), which is not problematic, except for historians who want to determine what happened at a particular moment at a specific place (or what was the place of origin of a particular individual whose biography they are reconstructing).

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It is thus no surprise that historians have spent much effort in determining particular locations, regions, and connections in Africa (mainly, but not only, for the years before 1850), the results of which they often published in *History in Africa*. The current volume of the journal shows that this task of mapping and re-mapping is not finished. Not only do newly available sources and re-readings of known sources invite historians to adjust previous localisations, changing technological possibilities also require a re-thinking of topographical terms that have been used up until now. An impetus also comes from the critical reading of historiography, which helps to uncover cases of path dependency in historical writing that could benefit from a critical examination. It thus may be helpful to consider re-connecting regional traditions of writing African history, as is explored in one set of papers included in the current volume.

We open volume 46 of *History in Africa* with a section on “re-mapping Africa.” We begin with a contribution by Henry Lovejoy and five more authors because the seemingly technical issue they address may change the way we write about precolonial African history. In “Redefining African Regions for Linking Open-Source Data” they argue that current projects, including the collection of biographical information about individuals Africans during the times of the slave trades, require definitions of regions and boundaries that have a greater degree of historical context than have been used thus far. They thus propose to replace the categorisations currently in use and that date back to 1960s work by Philip Curtin (who based his categories mainly on those of early European travelers and [slave] traders), with a new delimitation of the entire continent into broad regions and sub-regions.

This contribution is followed by Ryan Shea and Dianna Bell’s exploration of Arabic cartographic methods during the ninth and tenth century, with a focus on the deformation of Sub-Saharan Africa in world maps. They show that ‘Abbasid cartographers knew that how they drew the area did not reflect the actual shape of that part of the world, and that it rather represented a deliberate and intended way to represent a lack of knowledge of Africa south of the Maghreb. The following contribution by Daniel Ayana also considers Arab sources, showing that a new understanding emerges of northeast and east Africa when the medieval meanings of particular names is taken into consideration.

Arab sources are similarly at the heart of Hadrien Collet’s opening article in the next section on “Journeys and Sources.” “Échos d’Arabie” presents newly discovered sources that shed more light on one of the most famous events of medieval Africa: the pilgrimage of Mansa Musa in 1324–1325. The author offers a careful analysis of new materials in dialogue with the existing literature and highlights their potential use for future reinterpretations. In contrast to Mansa Musa’s famous journey stands the largely unknown visit of two Armenian ecclesiastics, Isaac and Dimothéos, to Ethiopia in 1867–1869. As the original motivation for the journey was overtaken by events, the two travelers engaged with local politics and ecclesiastical intrigue.

David Phillipson in his contribution analyses Dimothéos' account of their journey, and emphasizes the importance of considering the intentions of those responsible for the creation of written records.

In the following section, the emphasis shifts from sources to critical historiography. Myra Houser's essay "Whose Atlantic?" is concerned with the historiography of southern African liberation movements and Central American guerrilla groups during the 1970s and 1980s. Exploring the historiography of complex connections between Namibia, South Africa, and El Salvador helps to critically evaluate the references to the Cold War binary as South-South diplomacy is not fully explained by the Cold War and contained its own priorities, relationships, and historicity. Houser concludes that historians should follow their subjects in rejecting North-South or East-West binaries. The historiography of the discursive Atlantic, thus, elides easy categorisations.

A very different, and much older, historiographical matter is tackled by Tom McCaskie in "Exiled from History: Africa in Hegel's Academic Practice." While many scholars have explored the impact of Hegel's texts on European imperialism and racism, on Africa, and on African studies, McCaskie starts from an exploration of how Hegel, as a working university academic, constructed these texts. A fascinating section of the article describes how Hegel used a number of well known accounts about Dahomey and the Kongo which show complex problems relating to the sources on the basis of which the accounts were produced, as well as perspective and interest. These accounts have been critically analysed and used extensively as sources by historians of Africa, who however, reached different conclusions from Hegel. This is because Hegel's use of these texts failed basic criteria for academic scholarship, according to McCaskie. Hegel did not base his theories on these (and other) texts, but rather read, misread, excerpted, used and misused the texts in support of theories and positions that he had already formulated.

A very different question, but one that has been just as prominent in the historiography as the impact of Hegel, is addressed in the contribution by Trevor Getz, Lindsay Ehrisman and Tony Yeboah, namely: the question of how to write relevant history. Referencing an earlier contribution to this journal, the authors observe that neither the liberal historians of the 1960s, nor their Marxist successors, achieved this goal.¹ In the article they report on their experience using a pop-up museum as a method and tool for leveraging popular conceptions of local pasts for the production of meaningful histories.

The section "Bridging histories of East and Central Africa" contains five papers and an introduction. In the introduction to the section, Geert Castryck, Achim von Oppen and Katharina Zöller explain that regional distinctions such as "East" and "Central" Africa – as the very concept of Africa itself – were originally constructed from an outsiders' perspective. While regional historiographies at least avoided unwarranted generalisations about

¹ Joseph K. Adjaye, "Perspectives on Fifty Years of Ghanaian Historiography," *History in Africa* 35 (2008), 1–24.

an entire continent, they generated artificial divisions as the inhabitants of these areas never stopped crossing and entangling them. The articles in this section test the divide between East and Central Africa by transferring research perspectives from one region's historiography to the other, thus revealing histories that would otherwise remain hidden or marginal.

Stephen Rockel's contribution on Tutsi pastoralists in central Tanzania in the late nineteenth century illustrates the transregional entanglements between the dynamics of population movement in the Great Lakes area and the caravan system connecting the Indian Ocean and the African interior. In the next article Geert Castryck rescues the Muslim community of colonial Bujumbura (in Burundi) from historiographic marginality, a situation it had ended up in because the group did not fit the regional historiographical master narratives. Katharina Zöller presents the case of the Manyema, a highly mobile group spread across East and Central Africa. In East African historiography, the Manyema are discussed as part of East African towns, yet their links to Central Africa are neglected. A similar pattern, but in reverse, can be observed in Central African historiography, even though the Manyema have negotiated their mobility and identity across East and Central Africa as a single social and geographical space. Maarten Couttenier's contribution explores representations of regions of the Congo in the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium. He observes that the depictions of "the East" of the country, an area previously characterised by Swahili-Arab domination, imply that the region does not – or should not – belong to the Congo. The final article in this set of papers, by Julia Verne, complicates the aim of the section by adding yet another regional historiography, that of Indian Ocean studies, thereby emphasizing the need for a relational approach to regions in general.

The concluding section in this issue of *History in Africa* is devoted to archival reports. George Bishi reports on the use of the archive in contemporary Zimbabwe by individuals and families making claims to chieftaincy. His report is fascinating reading in its own right, and a similar centrality of the colonial archive for pragmatic claims relating to the lives of families in Africa today can be observed in many other African official archives as well. Last but not least, Larissa Schulte Nordholt's report combines observations about the UNESCO's Paris archives of the *General History of Africa* with the personal archive, housed in Ibadan, of one of the key contributors to the *General History*, J.F. Ade-Ajayi. As she pieces back together – reconstructs – the archive of the *General History*, now spread over at least three continents and many more countries, we learn about the materiality and practicality of African history in the immediate postcolonial era.

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