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# The Politics of the Production and Reception of Sources – Editors' Introduction

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

This 2016 volume of *History in Africa* offers eight articles that explore the production and use of sources for African history from precolonial times to the present. These are followed by a thematic section containing four articles that look at aspects for African history through the lens of sports. A section of archival reports concludes the volume.

Most of the contributions to this issue offer a critical analysis of written sources. At first glance, this might appear as a return to more conventional sources, following volumes in which we featured, among others, oral history, statistical analysis, archaeology, photographs, and material culture. However, many of our contributors offer new insights about known sources through a careful analysis, not only of the production of the sources themselves, but particularly of how they were used in specific contexts, and how that use has influenced historians' subsequent reading of the sources. We historians are highly skilled in source critique: the careful unpicking of what the producer of a source at the time could or could not have witnessed, what information was included or omitted (intentionally or unintentionally), what audience the writer was addressing, and what he or she may have been intending to achieve through the production of the source. We are very aware of the fact that most of our written sources contain crucial silences, and that the production of the source – whether a travel report, a petition, memoir, or piece of routine administrative paperwork – was always to some degree political. What many of the contributors to this issue address, however, goes one step further: to critically understand a historical source, we should not only be aware of the politics of its initial

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production, but also of the politics of its use and reception which resulted in particular histories of reading the sources that have continued to influence our understanding of the material, no matter how much “reading between the lines” we do.

The first three articles explore sources produced by European travellers, beginning with Jared Staller’s discussion of primary source material on Angola initially recorded by Andrew Battell and printed by Samuel Purchas from 1613 to 1625. That the publisher had revised Battell’s writing has been discussed previously in this journal.<sup>1</sup> Staller adds to our understanding by carefully comparing the revisions that Purchas made to Battell’s writing between the 1614 and 1617 editions of Battell’s *Pilgrimage*. Staller shows how the British editor’s concerns, such as producing an accessible text, updating and defining accurate data, and the tensions between Protestants and Catholics in England, led to details of Angolan history being altered.

Source material relating to the European trade with the Kingdom of Dahomey is discussed in Neal Polhemus’s contribution, which presents a newly rediscovered copy of the diary of William Snelgrave, who visited King Agaja of Dahomey in April 1727. Snelgrave’s diary was published in 1734 and has been an important source for historians, although some of the details of his account have been disputed. Additional questions stem from the subtle but significant differences between Snelgrave’s manuscript version and the published diary, as examined by Robin Law in an earlier contribution to this journal.<sup>2</sup> The written diary discussed by Polhemus, and included as an appendix to the article, is in Snelgrave’s own handwriting and was sent from the West African coast in 1727, which makes it the earliest extant version. As details in both the manuscript and published versions of the diary appear to have been informed by knowledge of political and individual disputes that had emerged after Snelgrave’s visit, this earlier account is of particular significance.

A very interesting source is discussed by Sven Outram-Leman: the account of Alexander Scott, a sailor from Liverpool, who, after being shipwrecked, spent six years as a slave in the Sahara from 1810 until 1816. His narrative was published in two parts in 1820 and 1821 as an authoritative account of the inaccessible West African interior, including a geographical dissertation by one of the foremost cartographers of the time, as well as a short note on the currents off the West African coast. Outram-Leman’s contribution focuses on

<sup>1</sup> Jan Vansina, “On Ravenstein’s Edition of Battell’s Adventures in Angola and Loango,” *History in Africa* 34 (2007), 327–347; Paul E.H. Hair, “Material on Africa (Other than the Mediterranean and Red Sea Lands) and on the Atlantic Islands, in the Publications of Samuel Purchas, 1613–1626,” *History in Africa* 13 (1986), 117–159.

<sup>2</sup> Robin Law, “The Original Manuscript Version of William Snelgrave’s ‘New Account of Some Parts of Guinea,’” *History in Africa* 17 (1990), 367–372.

the process of authentication of Scott's narrative and the context of its reception. It shows how elements of the editors' preconceived notion of the region colored the subsequent text and associated cartography.

The colonial context is crucial to the interpretations offered in the following section on "Critical Historiographies," which starts off from African written sources. Benedetta Rossi focuses on a set of copies of Arabic manuscripts that members of the elites of Agadez, Ader, and Sokoto had made available to French and British colonial administrators at the beginning of the twentieth century. The historiography of pre-nineteenth century Aïr and Ader has relied heavily on these texts. However, in her contribution Rossi argues that the local elites had handed over copies that had been altered to promote their interests. She shows when, how, why, and by whom the documents were copied and revised. She also notes that this was not unusual: tampering with chronicles for political purposes was a recurrent activity that took place across a broad geographical area, and the chronicles should thus be thought of as composite texts. The implications of the proposed reinterpretation for the historiography of the Aïr and Ader regions are explored in the article.

Harmony O'Rourke's contribution on rethinking the history of the Hausa diaspora in Cameroon turns our attention to Islamic court records. The records used are from the North-West Alkali Islamic court, established by the British colonial government to serve the region's growing Muslim community, many of whom were Hausa. O'Rourke shows how the founding of the court resulted in the institutionalization of Islamic household patriarchy as well as debates over Hausa values, especially marriage as a primary site of belonging and patriarchal control, as marital negotiations and distance interacted with colonial legal structures and community patriarchy.

Finally, Christoph Kohl's article on the limitations and ambiguities of colonialism in Guinea-Bissau critically examines some of the categories used in the historiography on that country. These categories were either created in the interaction with the colonial state, or significantly altered. They subsequently evolved, changed, and sometimes disappeared. Kohl explores the consequences of the colonial population measurements and its legal divisions into "civilized" citizens and "indigenous" subjects, analysing colonial procedures of classification. He also examines the daily-life effects of the colonizers' obsession with classifying, counting, and legislating.

Two contributions discuss sources and historiography on South Africa. Robert Ross looks at studies of African household budgets from the 1920s up to the present. Such studies are important sources for historians of consumption, social historians (including those working on gender), economic historians, and economic anthropologists. While this genre seems to be politically neutral, Ross shows that the outcomes and presentation of the reports were dependent on the political and institutional position of the researchers in question, linked to commercial institutions or as part of

the (apartheid) state. Scholars should take the political nature of these reports into account when using them as sources.

Danelle van Zyl-Hermann's contribution offers a critique of the historiography of the late apartheid period. She discusses the rich and diverse scholarship on South Africa's white workers, noting that this is focused on the first half of the twentieth century. She explains why the historiography for the period since the Second World War focuses on the plight of black workers, but also notes that the final phase of apartheid, the period of reform and resistance, had consequences for white workers as well: their privileged status in the labor arena was dismantled more than a decade before other whites were confronted with the political democratization of 1994. Van Zyl-Hermann presents the archival collections of the Mineworkers' Union and of the Commission of Inquiry into Labour Legislation as sources for including into the history of reform and resistance the dimension of white working-class organization, politics, identity and experience.

Four contributions focus on sport and society in colonial and postcolonial Africa. We tend to associate the idea of sports with "fun" and "leisure," yet a focus on sports can provide important insights into wider society and tensions, including for instance identity, gender, discipline, and power. The articles in this session aim to expand the scope of African sports history beyond the current historiography. Tom Cunningham focuses on attempts by the Church of Scotland Mission in Kenya to use sport to "civilize" and "discipline" the people of Central Kenya, paying close attention to the ways in which sports projects are discussed in colonial and other records, and noting that experiences of sport are among the most prominent and frequently recalled memories of everyday life in colonial Africa. Matthew Carotenuto uses a focus on indigenous wrestling in Kenya as a window onto historical discourse and state control of sport rooted in the colonial past, and also draws our attention to the sources available for writing the social history of indigenous sport in Africa. Michelle Sikes looks at the history of Kenyan women's sport through the sport sections of two major Kenyan dailies. Focusing on the early postcolonial period, Sikes shows how institutional barriers abroad, as well as economic and cultural factors in Kenya itself, disadvantaged female runners. Mark Deets's contribution on soccer and separatism in Senegal points to the importance of specific sites and the potential for historical research that is anchored to one specific site, in this case the stadium of Casa-Sports, a soccer club based in Ziguinchor. Deets shows how the postcolonial soccer stadium became a space for imagining and performing the nation for separatists from the Casamance region.

Two archive reports conclude this volume of *History in Africa*. Vincent Hiribarren continues the discussion about digital archives from previous issues of the journal with a presentation of a website dedicated to the colonial archives of French Equatorial Africa. He argues for small-scale initiatives and proposes that archive services should place their inventories online, so that scholars know what they can expect to find when they visit an archive.

Finally, Mauro Nobili draws our attention to manuscripts hosted at IFAN in Dakar. The mostly Arabic materials (and complete and partial translations) include information on West African history, in particular Mali and Mauretania. The report discusses the organization and the conditions of the collection, and discusses some examples of documents.

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