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Archives and Material Culture: Critiques and Reviews - Editors' Introduction

Michel R. Doortmont, John H. Hanson, Jan Jansen,
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This 42nd issue of *History in Africa* offers twenty articles in five thematic sections, ranging from critical source analysis and historiography to a review and analysis of the writing of history in Africa since 1960, and a mixed set of articles on material culture and commerce. A section with archival reports concludes this issue.

In recent years, *History in Africa* has, from the editorial perspective, always tried to bring to the fore common themes and focus points in the articles submitted and eventually published, adding direction and meaning to the individual contributions in terms of trends and common perspectives. When articles are submitted to the editors, such commonalities are not always self-evident. However, the editorial process, including the grouping together of articles, more often than not brings to light specific trends and common interests. This year, despite the wide array of themes, subject areas and geographical areas, as well as historical periods, the commonality seems to be in the subjects of archives and archival study. Almost all of the contributions – with the exception of the fourth section – deal with (written) archives in one way or another, and if not, they deal with the written (or archived) registration of oral source materials, or are otherwise about texts. And with some imagination, the fourth section, about material culture, deals with aspects of archival issues, in the form archaeological findings, and collections of art-objects and tradeware with a particular cultural background and context. In that sense this 42nd edition of *History in Africa* can be labelled the Archival Issue.

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The first section on critical source analysis focuses on historical critique in general, with an emphasis on the written word, in what can be classified as more or less formal or formalized texts. Mariana Candido addresses a relatively new field in the history of the Black Atlantic, studying African women from the lower social classes in Angola in the nineteenth century. The instrument that enables Candido to do this are the parish registers of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Luanda in Angola, which registered the baptisms, marriages, and burials of all church members, regardless of race or social status. These registers therefore offer valuable insights into the make-up of local society and more specifically to the position of women in it, offering “a more gender-inclusive history.”

Mauro Nobili and Mohamed Shahid Mathee revisit the study of the chronicle *Tārīkh al-fattāsh*, which purports to present the history of the Songhay Empire between 1100 and the seventeenth century. Their research, which makes use of hitherto unused manuscripts, emphasizes the necessity of a review and critique of earlier editions. Their work allows for a new theory on the origin and authorship of the text, and brings to light that the text as we know it is based on several manuscripts, dating from the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Nobili and Mathee’s work is valuable in its own right, as it shows the importance of detailed text critique in the field of historiography, and adds to our understanding of historiographical traditions in West Africa. On a different level, and implicitly, the article shows how important it is to safeguard historical documents in West Africa, an issue that has recently gained importance because of the outbreak of violence in Mali and elsewhere in the Western Sudan, with a distinct anti-intellectual character.

Alexander Keese’s study on the *Correia Report* deals with a very different issue in a very different time frame. The period is the Interbellum, the context that of diverging colonial views on social conditions, more specifically labor conditions, in the border area between Angola and South West Africa. The *Correia Report* is a valuable source for our understanding of social change in South West Africa after the First World War, with South Africa moving into the former German colony, and the Portuguese regime in Angola being considerably weakened due to events at home. As Keese states in his conclusion: “Agents of colonial rule might be racist and misinformed, or unmotivated or intellectually incapable of adequately describing local routines.” But at the same time their reports, when set in context properly, can tell us a lot about historical local processes. The *Correia Report*, when mirrored to South African sources is indeed helpful here.

Finally, in this section, Anne Beutter discusses a private chronicle that recorded “how juridical practice within the Protestant mission church (...) created and sharpened a Christian group identity in a predominantly non-Christian context.” The playing field is central Ghana, the period 1911–1920. The chronicle was one of the Basel Mission instruments to record its missionary activities in the field and therefore a formalized text. Beutter shows

how, in the case of the Nkoranza chronicle, the text can inform the historian about the way in which the church shaped its juridical forms.

The four articles in this section have, despite their great variety in subject matter, much in common. As already indicated, all deal with formal or formalized texts. In doing so, the authors all address their research matter at different levels of analysis, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously. Candido, Keese, and Beutter show how the colonial framework can offer opportunities to study people and historical events and processes. Formal written records offer the historian an entry into the lives of ordinary people, and more importantly, into the dynamics of their lives vis-à-vis a changing society. Nobili and Mathee's work has a general importance in the field of historical text conservation, which in view of the recent attempt to destroy the Timbuktu library, has become an urgent issue. However, altogether, the four articles emphasize the necessity to preserve original texts and textual sources that could easily be regarded as being of lesser historiographical importance.

The second section covers the theme of critical historiography, and is as diverse as the first section. Here the first two and the last two articles can be paired in terms of subject matter and time frame. Rebecca Shumway builds on her own original research on the history of the Fante in eighteenth century Ghana.¹ In the current article she addresses the continuities in nineteenth-century coastal Ghanaian history, between the era of the Atlantic slave and the onset of formal colonialism at the end of the century. Where normally the history books make a clear distinction between the two periods, ending up more or less with a historical void in the middle of the century, Shumway convincingly argues that developments from the eighteenth century were building blocks for what came after. In her opinion, the historiographical focus for Ghana has so far been too much on the position of the British on the one side, and that of the Asante kingdom on the other. In this it emphasizes too much the importance of colonial and indigenous state formation, leading to a momentous clash at the end of the century and, after this "break," to the introduction of the colonial state. Shumway counterpoises this by looking at the development of a nationalist movement among the coastal Fante, which grew out of Anglo-Fante relations in the slave trading era and developed organically in response to changing socio-economic and political relations. In conclusion this leads to the observation that Ghana was not that much different from other West African countries like Senegal and the Yoruba country in Nigeria, where continuities rather than ruptures seem to direct changing structures and relations between Europeans and Africans.

Luis Nicolau Parés' work on Roman Catholic baptisms of Africans in the town of Agoué in the present-day Republic of Benin nicely complements

¹ Rebecca Shumway, *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Rochester NY: Rochester University Press, 2011).

Shumway's research, as well as that of Candido. Parés studies how Christianity influenced social changes in one locality in West Africa in a period in the nineteenth century in which the influence of Christian missions was not yet prevalent. He also shows how Christianity could be used by individuals to strengthen their position in a rapidly changing world, by linking relations from the past to the present, and even into the future. His core subject of research is the life story the Bahian returnee Joaquim d'Almeida, who has a long personal history in relation to the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in Brazil and different parts of Africa, moving between disparate social and geographical worlds.² The source materials for this study are the Roman Catholic baptismal records of Agoué, which, like those of Angola for Candido, offer interesting insights in social relations between different groups of people in the town over a longer period of time.

Nicky Kindersley's article brings us into the twentieth century, with a study on narratives of displacement in Southern Sudan. She analyzes how "stories of war and exile" from the 1980s became a proper literary genre and acquired standardized forms, which eventually had little to do with the true-life stories of refugees. Kindersley's contribution is important for several reasons. In the first place it gives a poignant comment on the trappings of the so-called "humanitarian industry" that has sprung up in the later twentieth century, adding a historical – and historiographical – perspective to the more common socio-economic and political critiques on the phenomenon. In the second place, the article shows how (personal) oral histories easily convert into oral traditions, and subsequently into a fossilized written narrative, which has precious little to do with the people that originally told their stories.

Finally in this section, Leslie Anne Hadfield addresses much the same issue as Kindersley does, with her study of the oral sources surrounding the person and death of South African anti-Apartheid hero Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement. Here too, questions are asked about how to make use of life stories as a historical source. Hadfield moves along a different path than Kindersley does, however. Where the latter focuses on the de-historicization of the standardized and formalized personal story, and sees this as a historiographical hindrance, Hadfield chooses to incorporate emotions expressed during the recording of the stories in the analysis, allowing for an alternative and more flexible interpretative format, with definite historiographical merits. It makes for an interesting comparison between the two articles.

The third section, *Writing the History of Africa after 1960*, is self-contained, in the sense that this collection of five essays, with its own introduction, is the product of an African Studies Association Conference

² For his analysis Parés leans heavily on the work of Silke Strickrodt, *Afro-European Trade in the Atlantic World: The Western Slave Coast, c.1550–c.1885* (Suffolk/Rochester NY: James Currey, 2015).

roundtable, organized by Luise White. The focus of four of the five articles, by Florence Bernault, Moses Ochonu, John Straussberger, and White herself, is on the use of archives in the post-1960 period and the particular – and peculiar – demands of archival research in this recent historical period. Keywords include “fractured,” “disorderly,” “hodgepodge,” and “absence” when it comes to the availability and state of archival sources. The fifth essay, by Gregory Mann, veers away from the archives somewhat and deals with experience as evidence in Africanist historiography. Both individually and together the essays also form a neat accompaniment to several of the articles in the first two sections, both with regard to the analysis and critique of source materials and to African and Africanist historiographical trends and issues.

The fourth section moves away from the textual and focuses on material culture and commerce in precolonial Africa. The four articles in this section are, just like the third section, the product of an African Studies Association Conference panel. The common core theme of the articles is to expose “how regional African histories fit into global economic frameworks [extending] our understanding of African cultural history across social and geographical boundaries and more deeply in time.” Colleen Kriger discusses the relationship between the articles in her introduction to the section, to which we kindly refer the reader. Suffice it to say here that the articles by Peter Mark on the methodological stumbling blocks for our historical understanding of Luso-African ivories, by Matthew Pawlowicz on the nature of Swahili communities in southern Tanzania, reconstructed with archaeological evidence, by Andrea Seligman on the use of the lip-plug in East Africa and its relationship to the Indian Ocean trade, and by Raymond Silverman on the export of late medieval and early-modern metalware from Europe across the Sahara and its reception there, in their own right and as a corpus, offer us a host of new insights about the deeply historical global interrelationships in trade and cultural expressions between Africa and other parts of the world.

The last section in this issue, *Archival Reports*, deals with the nitty-gritty of research into African history, with three articles delving into a variety of archives. Stephanie Hassell discusses the archives of the Inquisition in the Indian town of Goa, and their importance for the history of slavery in the eastern part of the Portuguese Empire, which is the area from Southern Africa up along the coast and then east all the way towards China. The Inquisition records deal with slavery and slaves and are as such an important source for our knowledge of the early history of (African) slavery, more in particular from the second half of the sixteenth to the first quarter of the seventeenth century. The article addresses issues of African history *per se*, but also sets African history in a context of early globalization.

Bérengère Piret equally deals with a colonial archive, but of a very different nature, namely the Belgian colonial archives in Brussels, covering the period between 1908 and 1960, which are kept at the Belgian Ministry

of Foreign Affairs, rather than the National Archives. The archives have been opened up for the public only since 1997. This led to a surge in studies on the Belgian Congo as well as Burundi and Rwanda, which territories were governed by Belgium as League of Nations/United Nations mandate since 1916.

Finally, Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne discusses the art of record making and record keeping by the chanceries and archives in Ethiopia between 1700 and 1974, providing information about a long continuous tradition of indigenous record keeping, unusual for the African continent. Tegegne reviews the archival tradition in the Abyssinian state and analyzes changes in this tradition related to changes in land holding that were introduced in the eighteenth century.

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