

## Doing Precolonial African History in Postcolonial Times: A Roundtable

*História da África pré-colonial em tempos pós-coloniais: mesa-redonda*

**Hugo Ribeiro da Silva, Roquinaldo Ferreira, Toby Green and Vanicléia Silva-Santos**

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## DOING PRECOLONIAL AFRICAN HISTORY IN POSTCOLONIAL TIMES: A ROUNDTABLE

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This debate article aims to promote a historiographical discussion on the place of Africa in Atlantic and imperial history. The debate revolves around a set of questions: how to bring Africa to the centre of historical research? How close or how distant is the historiography that focuses on the African continent and the one that deals with the African diasporas? What has been the contribution of Portuguese scholarship to the study of precolonial African history? What is the meaning and usefulness of “Lusophone Africa” as a concept and as a field of study? What future for research on precolonial Africa in terms of constraints, opportunities, and priorities? The three historians invited to this roundtable do not provide definitive answers to these questions, but they open the way for a deeper reflection.

**Keywords:** African history, global south, historiography, African diasporas, Lusophony.

*Resumo (PT) no final do artigo.*

**Hugo Ribeiro da Silva** (editor): In 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy, then President of the French Republic, stated in a speech given at the main university of Dakar, Senegal, “The tragedy of Africa is that the Africans have not fully entered into history... They have never really launched themselves into the future”.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the entire speech at <<https://www.elysee.fr/nicolas-sarkozy/2007/07/26/declaration-de-m-nicolas-sarkozy-president-de-la-republique-sur-sa-conception-de-lafrrique-et-de-son-developpement-a-dakar-le-26-juillet-2007>>.

Reactions against such a speech were immediate, and since then much has been written about those words and what they represent: a paternalistic, and colonialist look at the African continent that still lingers in Europe. As stated by Kounkou (2010), “L’ontologie négative de l’Afrique, qui se rassemble dans les thèses de l’Afrique comme continent de la souffrance et du malheur, de l’éloge de la colonisation et de l’Afrique comme enfance de l’humanité, se récapitule dans la thèse de l’Afrique comme territoire de l’anhistoricité”.

In fact, Sarkozy's vision is still shared by many Europeans, who continue to look at the vast African continent as a homogeneous whole, frozen in time, where poverty reigns, but also a natural exoticism that enters our houses through documentaries on television. The general lack of knowledge about the history of Africa is profound. At most, this is limited to the transatlantic slave trade and the supply of raw materials to Europe. Interestingly, in the same year that Sarkozy gave his speech, the Nigerian-British scholar Amina Mama published an article with the rather provocative title “Is it ethical to study Africa?” (Mama 2007). Actually, this could have been a question for our debate: To what extent is it ethical to write African history from the Global North? In postcolonial times this is for sure a valid question. But even more fundamental questions could arise: does it make sense to talk about the history of an entire continent? Would we promote such a debate on Asian history? As the specialists in the field know, these questions are not new. I am – we are – aware of the pitfalls of this discussion. Historians, regardless of whether they are in Africa or outside the continent, continue to debate these and other issues (the racial issue is a key one).

However, our purpose here is not to address these “big” questions as such. This debate article aims to promote a historiographical discussion of precolonial African history and its place in the Atlantic and imperial histories. The focus is on the historiography produced in the West. More than 50 years after the decolonization processes, what is the place of precolonial Africa on research agendas? As far as the historiographical production is concerned, and although it is not the aim here to present a state of the art, in more recent decades researchers have been most interested in contemporary history, to the detriment of the so-called precolonial history (prior to the Berlin Conference). Perhaps even more problematic is the fact that the history of Africa has often been seen as just an element of either the precolonial or colonial history of the European empires. Historians often tended to ignore Africans as agents of history. Fortunately, this has been changing. Different researchers have been introducing “African voices” in

their analysis and placing Africa in world/global dynamics.<sup>2</sup> However, they are not in the majority yet.

Thus, I invited three historians, specialists in this field, to participate in a “round table”, answering a brief set of questions – Roquinaldo Ferreira, Toby Green, and Vanicléia Silva-Santos. As clarified by the short biographies presented at the end, the three have different academic paths, with careers in Brazil, the United States of America, and England. In any case, their views on the raised issues do not always coincide. At least in some of the answers, it is possible to detect nuances. Thus, each one answered five questions, having had complete freedom in how to structure and develop their responses.

As for the questions that guide the debate, although they were thought not to be too specific, I tried to ensure they were sufficiently provocative to raise debate and possible non-coincident views on specific topics. The first question asks how we can put Africa at the centre of the debate in order to overcome approaches that still look to the continent as a passive agent of (an imperial) history. Ferreira makes a number of methodological suggestions that encompass global history and takes an approach that favours local dynamics. Green stresses the need to resort to oral history and material culture to overcome the constraints of written sources, especially those produced by Europeans. Silva-Santos agrees with Ferreira on the need to integrate Africa into world systems but warns of the challenge posed by conceptual problems – a history of Africa, of Africas, cannot ignore the use of local concepts.

The second question seeks to relate two historiographies that are not always in dialogue – the one that focuses on the African continent and that of the African diaspora (in the Americas), the latter having often been criticized for an essentialist approach. The third question is based on the assumption that there is a lack of interest from Portuguese historiography in precolonial Africa. The three respondents draw attention to the need to look at this issue in the long term and from a comparative perspective, considering there is no Portuguese specificity here. However, if Vanicléia Silva-Santos presents a more pessimistic view, Roquinaldo Ferreira prefers to highlight some authors that have stood out in this field, as well as the importance of Portuguese archives for the writing of African history.

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<sup>2</sup> See, among others, Feierman (1993), Bailey (2005), Gomez (2018), Harms (2018), Candido (2022), French (2021), Falola and Salau (2022).

The fourth question is on the use of the concept of “Lusophone Africa”, questioning its value for the writing of African history. There seems to be a consensus that such a concept makes no sense, if it ever did. Contemporary historiography has drawn attention to the importance of “contact zones”, which allow going beyond the history of the European empires. On the other hand, Green underlines that territories associated with “Lusophony” are spaces where multilingualism is a cultural mark so that “Lusophony” hides more than it illuminates. Finally, the last question asks respondents to look to the future, pointing out research paths. Everyone agrees that contrary to what some young researchers might think, there are many varied sources that allow the writing of the history of precolonial Africa. New perspectives on old sources and new questions are needed, but also the inclusion of other disciplines such as archaeology, geography, and linguistics, as recent studies have shown.

As Silva-Santos points out in one of her answers, no African historians were invited to participate in this roundtable. This is perhaps the most significant paradox of this debate, and I can’t ignore it. However, I believe the following pages significantly contribute to making us reflect on how we write history (and not only African history). Finally, I hope this roundtable will encourage African scholars to submit their works to *Ler História*.



**Hugo Ribeiro da Silva:** *How can we put Africa at the centre of the debate to overcome approaches that still look to the continent as a passive agent of (an imperial) history?*

**Roquinaldo Ferreira:** The way to go is by writing global histories centred on people, seeking to understand the richness and complexity of human lives. Many scholars practice this type of history, such as Toby Green (2019), Mariana Candido (2022), Eugénia Rodrigues (2014), and others. Linda Heywood and John Thornton (2007) have also made pivotal contributions here. Thornton (1998) places Kongo as a generative site of historical forces reverberating across the Atlantic in Brazil and French Saint-Domingue. A similar approach underpins the work of several other scholars, including Lucilene Reginaldo (2015) and Silvia Lara (2016), who have also produced scholarship that places West Central Africa in broader contexts. The late Joseph Miller (1988) worked out trading networks that linked Angola to Brazil and Europe.

These studies show that Africa was an active player in historical dynamics that shaped modernity. By focusing on trans-local dynamics of Africa’s engagement with global history, we can write more complex stories that give due attention to local actors and contexts. Such history is always more

challenging to accomplish as it must rely on intense research in multiple archives. It can be a laborious and tedious work of excavation, but the outcome is usually a more complex historical narrative. Here, focusing on global microhistories is vital, always linking the local to the global and vice versa.

**Toby Green:** The key to putting Africa at the centre of the debate is to write history drawing on sources that have been produced by Africans. I often say to graduate students that if you write history drawing solely on sources that have been produced by racist machistic slave traders, the likelihood is that what will, in the end, be reproduced is the perspective of a racist, machistic slave trader. Drawing on these sources alone, you will generally conclude that what was most important in the history of precolonial Africa was the history of slavery, of European-African relations, and also of the wars and struggles of African kingdoms – since this is what these sources largely relate to. In any case, it will be the economic element that predominates.

On the other hand, if you were to draw only on oral histories, you would develop a completely different perspective as to what is important. Here you would conclude that it is histories of kingship, religious practice, household alliances and family histories, migration, clothing and ornamentation which is of most importance to the precolonial African past. And as a result, an entirely different narrative and historical discourse would emerge.

There are of course important subtleties in these issues. Not least is who is an “African”. The Congolese philosopher V. Y. Mudimbe reminds us that “Africa” itself was a concept invented in the eighteenth century, largely as a result of the history of the slave trade. Many sources which might be deemed European were in fact produced by people who were Afro-Europeans, such as the Luso-Africans of Guine-Bissau and Angola. In this sense, some of these written imperial sources may also be seen as African, or at least to reflect concerns of some people who may have seen themselves as such.

In this way, drawing on sources produced by Africans can expand to include some sources used in European languages, as well as those produced in Arabic, and those sources that we have which were also produced in Kimbundu and Kikongo. Starting with these sources, it is going to be much more feasible to place Africa at the centre of historical narratives than it will be if we draw on sources produced almost entirely for economic motives related to racial slavery, by people who saw Africa and Africans as objects to exploit.

**Vanicléia Silva-Santos:** We should admit that this question is a kind of ostentation. Who are we to “put Africa at the centre” of the debate when

the structure of this debate makes Africa a passive voice? We have gathered here scholars who are not born in Africa, and none of us teaches in Africa. When was the last group of Africans invited to answer similar questions about nations in Europe or North America? African scholars (men and women) should be at the centre of writing African history. This radical shift requires a critical approach to avoid the reproduction of knowledge constructed to tell a single story of entirely different social realities. Based on the questions we ask in our research, we must deconstruct hegemonic concepts and theories presented as “universal”. Beyond simple critique, we must suggest alternatives to Eurocentrism and imperialism in our works. Finally, we must train our students not to be mere repeaters of theories created in the United States and Europe, which are intended to be universal but are not.

**Hugo Ribeiro da Silva:** *African diaspora in the Americas has received considerable attention from historiography, mainly in Brazil and USA. However, one of the criticisms of some of the research is that it presents an essentialist approach. What is your opinion on this issue?*

**Roquinaldo Ferreira:** Yes, some of the research can be essentialist and even riddled with fetishes about Africa. However, I don't think that the relationship between African Studies and African American Studies needs to be conflictual. Here, it is important not to generalize the US model, where the relationship between the two fields has always been complicated by structural racism and scarce resources.

**Toby Green:** The early historiography of the African diaspora often did take an essentialist approach. The discussion of the erasure of Africa through the trauma of the middle passage and the construction of entirely new “African American” identities clearly tended to obscure the vital differences which existed. Moreover, this literature was written for the US academic audience, and did not tend to consider differences beyond the US. In fact, beyond this area, there have been for a long time recognitions of specificities and differences – one only needs to look at the work of Pierre Verger (1954) on Yorubá culture and the connection to Salvador da Bahia to see how long some of these questions have been debated.

Nevertheless, it's clear enough that even in North America the more essentialist approach has been out of fashion for a long time. The last 20 years have seen many historians take approaches which are far more grounded in specific connections and interconnections across the diaspora.

Indeed, Roquinaldo Ferreira (2012) has done this in paradigmatic ways for the connections between Angola and Brazil, building on the earlier work of Luis Felipe Alencastro (2000) and the late Joseph Miller (1988), and making clear that these connections of the South Atlantic are very specific. Also in Brazil, and this time especially with a focus on the *Nordeste*, there has been so much work building on the pioneering studies of Verger. Here we can think of Luis Nicolau Parés (2006), João José Reis (2008), Lisa Earl Castillo (2008) and Kristin Mann (2001), all of whom have been doing great work to show how interconnected specific cultures and regions of West Africa and of the Americas were.

Also, when we go beyond specific regions and think about the question of historiography, we find a lot of nuances. One very interesting thematic approach of recent years has been through food, especially in the rice debate linking Upper Guinea with Maranhão and the Carolinas. We can also think about the historiography of music, and of the connections linking Cuba and Senegal studied, for instance, by Richard Shain (2018). This also provides a useful complexity in the understanding of the multiple directions of diasporas and the overlapping periods of time and space in which they formed. Ethnobotany is another area in which specificities of connection are the norm and not the exception. So, all in all, essentialism when it comes to the study of the diaspora would clearly be very problematic. But the good news is that it has been overcome in many areas of the field in recent decades.

**Vaniléia Silva-Santos:** My brief answer to this question highlights the Eurocentric origins of the essentialist approach rooted in white supremacy. The scholars of the African diaspora continue to confront and challenge the hegemonic and Eurocentric paradigms. They are presenting new evidence on African history and its diaspora. The essentialist approach is primarily a White-European creation. It is necessary to understand how the “essentialist” perspective emerged in historical narratives in the West. Europeans initiated the “essentialisms” of writing histories from one perspective, looking exclusively from their perspective in Europe. Therefore, scholars from former colonies have created counter-hegemonic epistemology to have their narratives heard. These counter-hegemonic epistemologies include the traditions of studying African customs and traditions, Afrocentrism, decolonization, abolitionism, and black feminism.

When someone accuses scholars from Brazil or the USA of having an “essentialist” approach, they are arguing that African and African Diaspora scholars place their emotions over their reason. In other words, those charged with “essentialism” in the African diaspora supposedly do not use “correct



scientific methods” to write history. From my perspective, the critique of “essentialism” is a false line of research because it does not present a researchable question. These critiques do not offer clear criteria to classify non-Eurocentric works or authors as “essentialists”. Thus, this “essential approaches” question is a political dismissal of African and African diaspora scholarship for not adopting some Eurocentric perspectives.

**Hugo Ribeiro da Silva:** *As experts in African history and African diasporas, how do you interpret the lack of interest the Portuguese historiography has devoted to precolonial Africa?*

**Roquinaldo Ferreira:** The number of archives in Portugal relevant to the study of precolonial African history is impressive. No one can seriously study African history without spending extensive time in Lisbon, Porto, and Évora. These archival resources reflect Portugal's long engagement with Africa and the country's pioneering role in establishing connections with the continent. Portugal's archives have provided the foundations for the scholarship of Walter Rodney, Beatrix Heintze, Jill Dias, Joseph Miller, John Thornton, Isabel de Castro Henriques, Mariana Candido, Philip Havik, Eugénia Rodrigues, and many other important historians of Africa.

So, I would disagree (or add some nuance) with the premise of your question. I believe that Portuguese and Portugal-based scholars have indeed made significant contributions to the study of Africa. Of course, one always wants Africa to receive the centrality it deserves in the historical narrative, particularly pre-nineteenth century Africa. It is important to keep in mind that precolonial African history has also lost ground elsewhere. Today, studies focusing on colonial and postcolonial Africa dominate the field to the detriment of scholarship devoted to early times.

Portuguese engagement with Brazilian historiography might actually offer a way to mitigate the peripheral nature of African Studies in Portugal. These partnerships have become quite systematic over the past twenty years or so, with collaborative projects to study the global dimensions of the Portuguese empire. These projects offer a template to include Africa more fully in the conversation, and I believe they will bear further fruits soon. Institutionally, there are Africanists in the ICS, and the Universidade de Lisboa has a cadre of scholars of Africa. The Resistance Project, led by Portuguese scholars in partnership with universities in several continents, including Africa, is another model to produce scholarship that includes

pre-nineteenth century Africa.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the study of precolonial African history in Portugal is active, though perhaps not as active as we would like.

**Toby Green:** In the first place, it should be noted that before the 1960s Portuguese historiography was the only European historiography to devote much attention to precolonial Africa (alongside France, and the work of people like Maurice Delafosse and Raymond Mauny). It was the work of figures such as Avelino Teixeira da Mota and António Carreira who developed a historiography of the precolonial world, because of their role as Portuguese imperial administrators (just as Delafosse was also). The role of Portugal in developing this field can be emphasised through the fact that some of Mauny's work was itself published by the *Centro de Estudos da Guiné Portuguesa* in Bissau.

The significance of the Portuguese attempt to produce sources and critique of the precolonial African past can be explained through a number of reasons. In the first place, during the “Scramble for Africa” in the 1880s, a number of Portuguese scholars, such as Luciano Cordeiro, worked through the auspices of the *Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa* to publish sources from Portuguese archives on precolonial Africa. This was not because of some specific interest in precolonial African history, but rather to claim the so-called “special relationship” of Portugal and Africa, the long history of Portugal's interaction with Africa (as evidenced through these sources), and therefore Portugal's right to have its share of the imperial spoils as they were being divided up – even though Portugal was itself one of the weaker European nations.

Thus there was no specific interest in precolonial Africa, but rather in Portugal's claim to be an imperial nation of the twentieth century. This claim then became bound up deeply with the Portuguese empire in the twentieth century, as most readers of *Ler História* know, and especially during the Salazar era. The global interest in precolonial African history however began differently. This was in the 1960s, in the era of decolonisation, and the birth of African Studies as a discipline. For a number of reasons, the precolonial took centre stage in this time – the accessibility of archival sources (not true of the colonial time), and also the desire to show a long history of independent states. None of this was relevant to Portugal, which was still going through the colonial war. Thus, the origins of modern

<sup>3</sup> See *RESISTANCE: Rebellion and Resistance in the Iberian Empires, 16th-19th centuries* (PI Mafalda Soares da Cunha) at <<http://www.resistance.uevora.pt/>>.

interest in the African past diverged from the Portuguese model, and this can explain some of the distance from which post-dictatorship Portugal has since taken from this field.

Alongside this, the accent of much of this literature has been on re-centring African history in its own right, and as trying to “deimperialize it” or at least to study it outside of the framework of European imperialism. The centrality of Africa to the conceptualization of the Portuguese empire, and of this to the *Estado Novo* model, meant that the intellectual concerns of this new school of African history were quite distant to those of historians who had been trained under the dictatorship and through the many traumas of the colonial war.

**Vanicléia Silva-Santos:** The answer to this question is not simple. We must examine this topic in a historical context. The development of African Studies in European countries was deeply motivated by chauvinism and racism. For the philosopher Georg W. Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), Africa represented the “unhistorical, undeveloped spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World’s History” (Hegel 2001, 117). In the nineteenth century, colonisers were guided by Hegel's ideas that Africans do not have a history. In Portugal, the politician Oliveira Martins had similar ideas to Hegel about the intellectual incapacity of Africans to learn. Thus, he defended the colonisation of Africa based on violence and exploitation of Black people (Martins 1880, 257).

The relationships between colonialism, racism, and science in Portugal explain the lack of interest in the historiography of precolonial Africa among intellectuals in the past. The colonial state organized the structure for scientific investigation in Portugal and established institutions like *Junta das Missões Geográficas e de Investigações Coloniais* (1936-45), *Junta de Investigações Coloniais* (1945-51), and *Junta de Investigações do Ultramar* (1951-79). Through these institutions, the Portuguese government employed investigators to travel to its African colonies to establish geographical recognition of the territory and extend their research in new areas of knowledge, such as geology, botany, zoology, physical anthropology, and ethnography. The main objectives of the governmental investment in these areas were the effective occupation of the territories and the exploitation of the local workforce and their natural resources (Castelo 2012, 402). By the end of World War II, studies on the populations of Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau were based on the anthropological classification of the natives. As Claudia Castelo highlighted in her work, they did not contemplate the cultural and social dimensions of the population in their analyses, which

contributed to the crystallization of the image of the colonized peoples as part of barbaric “races” (Castelo 2012, 395).

After the independence of African nations, Portugal created the *Instituto de Investigação Científica e Tropical* (1979-2015) to succeed the colonial institutions — the *Juntas*. So, the colonial mindset was crucial in training academics for their scientific missions in Africa. Despite criticizing the discriminatory aspects of the colonial system, many researchers maintained the exceptional nature of Portuguese colonialism (Godinho *et al.* 2021; Costa and Godinho 2021, 162-168). So, the history of scientific production in Portugal until African independence was inseparable from the history of the Portuguese colonial empire. We are talking about the Portuguese *intelligentsia*, which, with exceptions, worked on scientific missions until the 1970s. Consequently, the scholarship produced in various colonial contexts and carried out under an ideology of colonial domination contributed to a cultural depreciation and dehumanization of Africans and Asians.

In the nineteenth century, anthropologists were dedicated to collecting information from the local population using anthropometric methods, gathering archaeological and ethnographic objects and photos. For instance, the Portuguese *Centro de Estudos de Antropologia*, created in 1962, established *Missões de Estudos* in Africa. However, its objective was to oversee “potential internal threats (or from neighbouring countries) to Portuguese sovereignty in Africa” (Castelo 2012, 399). So, the academics in the missions were interested in Portuguese interests. Portugal and other European colonizers focused on their own national and imperial histories. Academics were trained to write the narrative of the Portuguese expansion and their agents enrolled in the colonization process (Abrantes 2022). So, the writing of African history was restricted to ethnography and the registration of oral traditions to reconstitute fragments of the discourses of local or regional narratives, without any intention of including African history in the universal history (Margarido 2000, 52). However, the African continent was integrated into the world economy. At the same time, African voices in history were not heard in European debates.

In summary, in the past, the small number of publications in Portugal about Africa was connected to the Portuguese belief that Africans were inferior and without history. Therefore, most academics trained up until the 1970s to work in Africa concentrated their research on contemporary issues related to the colonial system. However, more recently, we should recognize that the investigations into African history before the nineteenth century have increased significantly in Portugal.

**Hugo Ribeiro da Silva:** *In your opinion, to what extent is “Lusophony” still a valid category when one addresses the history of the African territories colonized by the Portuguese?*

**Roquinaldo Ferreira:** I am not sure if “Lusophony” was ever a valid category if one thinks outside studies of traditional imperial history. For scholars of my generation, the goal was always to write social history that gives voice to multiple actors, particularly African ones. African regions under Portugal’s influence or nominal control were contested contact zones marked by violence, social hierarchies, and hybridity. Portugal was rarely, if ever, the dominant force. Focusing on the “lusophone” does not help to grasp the fluidity of these spaces, nor is it helpful to understand trans-local dynamics that animated these societies.

**Toby Green:** “Lusophone” means, literally, “Portuguese-speaking”. It seems pretty clear to me that this is at the very least a wild generalization when it comes to African nations. Multilingualism is a key characteristic of African identities, and to reduce African nations to one – European – language as a form of identification is pretty clearly a neocolonial practice as far as I can see. This is of course not something that is limited to former Portuguese colonies – I remember once speaking to a Gambian colleague about the relationship of the Gambia to Senegal when it came to language, and he pointed out that English and French were the only two languages that the countries do not share in common.

The question of *Lusofonia* and of European languages in general when it comes to Africa is thus hugely problematic. There have been many responses to this, ranging from Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s turn away from English to writing in his native Kikuyu on the one hand, to the institutionalization of colonial languages as languages of instruction and governance across Africa on the other. Whatever approach is taken, however, to define a modern African nation through its use of a colonial language is essentially to emphasise the totality of the attempt to impose a neo-colonial capture upon it. So, what is Portuguese to Portugal’s former African colonies? On the one hand, there are many reasons why the status of Portuguese as a language of governance and instruction is unlikely to change: the investment of elites in the advantages it brings, the problem of the huge range of languages found across nation-states, and the necessity of communicating effectively in these languages in order to access global markets and partners.

What needs to be recognized above all are two things: one, the neo-colonial framework of these relationships, and two, the complexity of

these questions. For instance, it should be noted that many of the PALOP countries have close relationships to other colonial languages: English is increasingly an academic language in Mozambique – owing to the influence of surrounding countries and membership of the Commonwealth – while Guiné-Bissau’s proximity to Senegal and Guinea-Conakry means that French may be spoken as much among the elite as Portuguese. Furthermore, we should be wary of assuming how much the existence of a shared colonial language means to its many speakers. I remember participating in a project with many colleagues from Angola and Mozambique in which none of the Angolans had ever visited Mozambique, and none of the Mozambicans had ever visited Angola.

In sum, these are complex questions freighted with power relations. What we can be sure of is that the phrase “Lusophone” obscures far more than it reveals.

**Vanicléia Silva-Santos:** “Lusophone” or “Lusophony” are Eurocentric categories used to produce an imperial history of territories colonised by Portugal. Both concepts are interrelated: they deny the agency of the historical subjects of the former Portuguese colonies and put the Portuguese imperial view at the centre of historical narratives for Africa, America, and Asia. Portugal started to use the idea of “the Lusophone” (translated as the “Portuguese World”) in the context of the Berlin Conference, where European royalty and diplomats divided the African continent among themselves to exploit the people and their natural resources. In this context, Portugal claimed its sovereignty over “historical discoveries” and demanded to extend its domination from the Atlantic coast of Angola to the Indian Ocean coast of Mozambique. This claim, expressed in the so-called “Rose-coloured Map” (1886), explains how Portugal constructed the idea of the “Portuguese World” in the international context to defend its colonies (Ribeiro 2018).

The dictatorial regime of the *Estado Novo* (1933-1975) developed the idea of the “Lusophone World” and invested deeply in “Portuguese Discoveries” propaganda to justify the colonial project. In the twentieth century, the government erected monuments in Portugal and in its African colonies to King Henry’s death (1460), and the “discoverers” of Cape Verde (1440), Guinea (1446), Congo (1482), and Brazil (1500), among others (Barros 2017). Crucial examples to understanding this movement were two exhibitions held in Lisbon. In 1940, the first exhibition, *Exposição do Mundo Português*, celebrated the foundation of the Portuguese kingdom in 1140, and the restoration of Portugal’s independence in 1640. The second exhibition in 1960, *Exposição Henriquina*, celebrated King Henry and his pioneering intercontinental navigation. In this exhibition, the government

commissioned artists to sculpt the first version of the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* (a monument to the discoveries), one of Portugal's most visited sites. This monument commemorates the history of the “Lusophone World”.

The Portuguese redefined the same concept to fit the post-independence world. They created the concept of “Lusophony” after African nations declared their independence from Portugal in 1975 (Margarido 2000). “Lusophony” refers to a mythical community of countries that would be culturally and linguistically connected to Portugal through the colonial experience. With Africa’s independence and the ending of the *Estado Novo* in Portugal, the concept of Lusophony relativised the colonial violence and created an intentional mixing of language and culture (Ribeiro 2018). We can apply the same critique to similar terms, such as the French *Francophone* and the British *Anglophone*. All these categories distort the study of the history of Africans, Americans, Indians, or other people colonised by Europeans. Like the *Commonwealth*, *Lusophony* and the CPLP (its organisational arm) are the legacy of the defunct Portuguese empire, representing the efforts to maintain unequal economic ties with former colonies.

**Hugo Ribeiro da Silva:** *Usually, young researchers point out the lack of written African sources as one of the main difficulties they face when starting new research. What kind of sources, or new approaches to “old” sources, should we pay more attention to? What questions are still looking for an answer? Please suggest your priorities in terms of topics, research questions or projects.*

**Roquinaldo Ferreira:** There is no lack of written African sources to study regions that came into contact with the Portuguese. The Portuguese empire depended on local allies, and locals often staffed the empire’s administration (usually skeletal). Sources abound everywhere, not only in Portugal itself but in places like Angola and Brazil. Goa repositories have a lot about connections with East Africa, not to mention Mozambique itself. So, I am not sure anyone should be compelled to think that we lack African sources to study Africa. The African voice can be heard in documents stored in multiple continents, though we need to excavate at a deeper level. Generally speaking, we need more research that gives centrality to local actors, placing them in the broader context of global history and connected history.

**Toby Green:** I looked at this question already a little. But I think the key question now for young researchers should be one of approach. Asking new questions involves these questions being articulated through a new body of sources, or a new relationship between bodies of sources. This has

been shown very often in the historiography of West Africa. It was shown in the 1960s and 1970s with the pioneering of the oral historical method. It was shown in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s as historians drew on new bodies of archival sources in the archives of Brazil and Portugal which have helped in the production of new historical questions. And asking new historical questions which centre Africa will require again the production of a new range of sources. These sources are unlikely to be found in archives. The numbers of written documents relating to the African continent from the precolonial period are few, and no amount of work will uncover more than a fairly select number. Some of these will of course be vital, but many of them will relate to elements of commerce and hence may do more to reinforce an imperialist perspective on the past than anything else.

There are two areas in which, as far as I can see, genuinely new bodies of source material may emerge to help reshape historiography and ask new questions. The first is that of language. Far too few historians of Africa have done serious work on African languages and used historical linguistics to ask searching new questions about the past – let alone relating these to other sources such as archives. Edda Fields-Black (2008) is one of the very few historians to have done this relational work, in her book “Deep Roots”, which shows how much more of this could be done. The success of historians such as David Schoebrun (2020) and Rhianno Stephens (2022) in this area shows that there is much to be done here. The second area is archaeology. Of course, archaeological work has been done in Africa, and there are excellent archaeologists such as Ibrahima Thiaw (2012) at work in African institutions, but there remain many important sites which have never been excavated. I think of Kansala in Guinea-Bissau (home of the Kaabu empire) and Kantora in The Gambia (where the Atlantic and Saharan trades met). These two cases can stand as exemplars of the enormous richness which could be produced by sustained investment in archaeological training and research.

The questions which might be produced by these areas cannot be imagined yet – because it is precisely from new bodies of sources that new questions emerge. The good news is that there still remains huge amounts to be done for young people with the passion, dedication, and luck to do it.

**Vanicléia Silva-Santos:** Even if we are talking only about written documents in European languages, the premise that written sources are lacking in recording the social history of African people is inaccurate. The libraries of Timbuktu have existed since the Medieval period. The Qur’anic schools in West Africa educated generations of scholars and leaders and taught people how to read and write Arabic. Until recently, European intellectuals chose to forget this information to reinforce the idea of an illiterate continent.



Besides this example, thousands of written documents related to precolonial African history are in other African archives and on different continents; however, we direct our students to European archives. These documents include geographical descriptions, chronicles (i.e., the so-called *Tariks*), annals, travel reports, legal and religious documents, and archival materials (family letters, private documents, and states' official papers). They are in African languages and non-African languages. After the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the rise of the European presence on the African continent increased the volume of written documents about Africa in European languages, such as narratives, records, and official correspondences.

Additionally, there are archival materials, such as private, legal, and religious documents, and official papers in the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Oceania because of the nature of the transoceanic slave trade in the early modern era. To resolve the false problem that written sources are lacking, both young and experienced scholars interested in African history, or any kind of history, must pay attention to methodologies and epistemological limitations. We should remember that the Hegelian statement that Africa was an ahistorical continent continues to impact the epistemological racism against the African capacity to produce knowledge. On the other hand, Hegel and other philosophers that came before and after him reinforced this false idea to justify the European image of superiority and rationality.

Besides the written documents, we also should consider the material culture in our research. Sources should include any creation of human thought intentionally conveyed on any material, including cave walls, buildings, parchments, bones, ivories, wood, metals, stones, beads, glasses, clothes, ceramics, and so on. Material culture is essential to understand better the relationship between society and its artefacts. Therefore, beyond the archaeological discoveries, African material culture in museum collections should be visited to answer questions that written sources cannot respond to. Finally, material culture can open new lines of investigation on objects' agency.

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#### **HISTÓRIA DA ÁFRICA PRÉ-COLONIAL EM TEMPOS PÓS-COLONIAIS: MESA-REDONDA**

O objetivo deste artigo é o de promover uma discussão de cunho historiográfico sobre o lugar de África nas histórias atlântica e imperial. O debate gira em torno de um conjunto de questões: como colocar a África num lugar mais central da investigação histórica? Como cruzar a historiografia dedicada ao continente africano com aquela que trata das diásporas africanas? Qual tem sido a contribuição da historiografia portuguesa para o estudo da África pré-colonial? Qual é o significado e a utilidade da "África lusófona" como conceito e como campo de estudos? Qual o futuro da investigação sobre a África pré-colonial em termos de dificuldades, oportunidades e prioridades? Os três historiadores convidados para esta mesa-redonda não apresentam respostas definitivas para estas questões, mas abrem caminho para uma reflexão mais aprofundada.

**Palavras-chave:** história de África, sul global, historiografia, diásporas africanas, lusofonia.