A Journal of Debates, Methods, and Source Analysis – Editors' Introduction

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Our journal has carried the subtitle "A Journal of Method" with pride for more than four decades. The singular "method" represented well the journal's mission, as the English word "method" comes from the Ancient Greek *meta* (indicating a development) + *hodos* (way). That is, of course, a sentiment widely supported by historians of Africa, as the continent and its population, as well as research into it and its historical sources, face the constant threat of marginalization.

Yet as editors our experience has been that the term "method" has its shortcomings. Epistemologically, thinking in terms of a developmental process is a sign of modernism, and it implicitly glorifies processes associated with the imposition of particular ideas and knowledge systems. And these are – and have always been! – exactly the kind of processes that contributors to *History in Africa* have attempted to uncover, to lay bare, and to challenge. Alongside this ideological critique the editors experienced that in colloquial conversation many colleagues believed the journal to be on "methods", plural, thus having a narrow scope with a strong focus on sociology. That assumption made those colleagues believe that *History in Africa* lay outside their interests as professional historian, to the detriment of the journal and its goal of engaging a wide audience.

In order to communicate the journal's agenda more accurately as well as to improve the journal's position among its audience of researchers and students of the history of Africa, we therefore decided to rephrase the journal's subtitle. From now on it will be *History in Africa – A Journal of Debates, Methods, and Source Analysis*. The new name comes with the following mission statement:

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History in Africa is an international, peer-reviewed academic journal that publishes original research and review essays on methodological and historiographical matters pertaining to African history. It has been at the forefront of critical discussion of these topics for more than four decades. It seeks submissions that suggest new methodological approaches, provide insights into source materials, and reflect critically on themes in existing literatures or emerging fields of inquiry. History in Africa is a venue for rigorous analysis of both established and emerging research practices as well as of the resulting scholarly production about the African past.

The publication of this long-planned redefinition of the journal's mission statement coincides with the passing of Jan Vansina, the man who dedicated his professional life to the professionalization and methodical deepening of the study of Africa's history. Working most of his life at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, he was one of the powers behind the journal's creation and success through his numerous contributions to the journal and, behind the scenes, through peer reviews and strategic advice.[1] For this volume of *HiA* Michele Wagner has written an informative obituary of Jan Vansina; next year's issue will contain numerous contributions that connect with Vansina's work.

This year's volume offers a range of studies that represent *HiA's* mission to be a venue for rigorous historical analysis. We offer them in three sections: Critical Historiography, New Insights into Source Materials, and Archival Reports.

The section Critical Historiography begins with Lisa Lindsay's analysis of the themes, methods, and limitations of biography, a literary genre that historians of Africa have often employed for historical analysis. Lindsay charts the rise and transformation of biography as a form of Africanist history writing, from nationalist heroes to slaves, women, and other subalterns in Africa and the diaspora. Tom McCaskie discusses a contemporary publication on plants collected in the kingdom of Asante in 1817 by Henry Tedlie. McCaskie analyzes plant-collecting as an aspect both of European global expansion, from exploration to colonialism and beyond, and of the sovereign scientific orthodoxy that became established alongside it. John Tabhiti Willis raises a methodological debate by juxtaposing his own observations and interpretations as a twenty-first-century ethnographer with those of nineteenth-century Christian missionaries in order to rethink interpretations of the practice of gender in pre-colonial Yoruba culture. Brian Yates meanwhile pleads for a debate on Ethiopia's history. He argues

[1] *History in Africa* was produced for almost forty years from the University of Wisconsin's library. We are grateful to Cambridge University Press for having made available in honor of Jan Vansina many of his publications on the journal's website – see: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/history-in-africa/in-memoriam-jan-vansina

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that Ethiopian history has been marked by provincial or cultural identities, which twentieth century notions of ethnicity have obscured; ethnicity is not a clear lens through which to examine Ethiopia's history.

Four contributions are the fruit of historians' indefatigable quest for finding New Insights in Source Materials for African history. Lidwien Kapteijns and Alessandra Vianello, drawing on the Islamic court records of Brava at the end of the nineteenth century, analyze the legal agency and economic roles of the women of Brava and shed new light on social, and especially family relations in the town. Dramatically, the sources they use were partially destroyed when the archives of Brava burnt down, which gives even more urgency to the publication of their article. Katrina Keefer sheds new light on the early nineteenth century history of Sierra Leone by analyzing accounts of the first generation of missionaries in the service of the Church Missionary Society, considering the implications of the fact that those early Anglican missionaries were German-speaking pietist Lutherans from central Europe. Klaas van Walraven presents the diaries of Barthélémy Boganda, priest and later politician in French Equatorial Africa. The diaries, which he found in the archives of the French Spiritans, shed new light on earlier stages of Boganda's life and his significance as a leader in Africa's decolonization struggles.

This year, the section of Archival Reports has a wider idea of "archives for Africa's history" than ever before. This is partially thanks to Luise White's argument that "the question shifted from being about how to read inaccurate or inconsistent archives, (to) how to find any archive at all."[2] White's argument inspired Aya Tsuruta to report on her research on Rwanda's history based on documents in an American archive. However, where White stresses the importance of looking for sources geographically outside Africa, Samuel Aniegye Ntewusu argues that one has to look for archival sources outside the archive. While his contribution may seem funny and entertaining at first sight, it touches upon major epistemological questions about the selection procedures that communities are able to finance in their ambition to preserve *documents*, and also about the impact of culture-specific cosmological ideas about *paper*. Matteo Grilli's contribution on the archives of Ghana's Bureau of African Affairs can be read complementary to Samuel Ntewusu's report, since this archive has suffered at least once from, what we might call euphemistically, a "reorganization with the banana and peanut archive." When one reads Grilli after Ntewusu, however, one fears that this reorganization is still ongoing… The section on Archival Reports ends with a contribution by Mauro Nobili and Mohamed Diagayeté who explore a category of archival sources that usually fall beyond historians' analysis: documents that are listed in repositories for

[2] Luise White, "Hodgepodge Historiography: Documents, Itineraries, and the Absence of Archives," *History in Africa* 42 (2015), 309–318, 310.

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the sake of adding name and fame to the repository. Although the authors wisely conclude that their search for manuscripts of the Tārīkh al-Fattāsh in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire may have been fruitless because these manuscripts have disappeared after listing, their travel report suggests other scenarios as well in which professional scholars play a negative role.

Reference

White, Luise, "Hodgepodge Historiography: Documents, Itineraries, and the Absence of Archives," *History in Africa* 42 (2015), 309–318.

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