Ongoing Transitions – Editors' Introduction

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

When taking over the editorship of *History in Africa*, the current editors foresaw several lines of development for the journal. The first one was to re-examine the inheritance of David Henige and build on this to keep the journal contemporary with new developments and trends in methodology and method, emerging technologies and the growing and changing availability of sources. Secondly, the editors felt that to comply with ever more stringent demands of academic quality control a full peer review system needed to be introduced, as well as action undertaken to make the journal visible in ranking systems. Thirdly, the editors decided that the journal was in need of a larger input from African scholars in Africa, to reflect developments in the continent better. Fourthly, it was decided that the paper version of the journal was in need of a more modern and professional look and format, enhancing readability, and falling into line with comparable journals, most specifically the sister journal *African Studies Review*.

The production of this third post-Henige issue has proven transition to be an ongoing process. All four points of development have been instituted, some with immediate results, others as a work in progress. Volume 37 (2010) saw the extension of the Editorial Board with several African members working in Africa, the consolidation of Henige's work with the publication of numerous articles inherited from him, and an agenda for further development. At the Annual General Meeting of the African Studies Association in San Francisco in 2010, two panels were organized to honor Henige and his work. Many of the contributions to these panels were included in volume 38 (2011), making it a Festschrift, definitively concluding the Henige era. The current issue of *History in Africa* is therefore the first regular issue under the regime of the new editorial team.

History in Africa, Volume 39 (2012), pp. 1–7

https://doi.org/10.1353/hia.2012.0009 Published online by Cambridge University Press

History in Africa now has its new size and format, which we hope is pleasing to the eye and more readable. A double-blind peer review system is in place and has already proved itself in terms of quality control and quality improvement, both for the editors and the individual authors. The latter now have the benefit of several sets of comments with which they can improve their work. This is especially helpful to assist younger and less experienced contributors to develop their cutting-edge research into a form that is suitable for the journal. The peer review system also helps established authors to refine their arguments. Some have recently questioned the usefulness of the formal peer review, which can favor mainstream research perspectives and thwart the publication of innovative and novel approaches. The editors of *History in Africa* are very much aware of these concerns and see the peer review system as part of an editorial evaluation process that leaves room for the unexpected and out-of-the-ordinary. At its best the peer review needs to be as much a critical evaluation as an encouragement for the author and the editors. This balanced approach to review is how we intend to maintain *History in Africa*'s status as a leading journal in the field of African history and beyond. It goes without saying that the editors are very grateful to the reviewers for their assistance, bringing both the field of study and the journal forward. The process to get the journal ranked and rated is under way with the appropriate registrations and by gradually bringing the publication date of the journal forward to enhance its position in the different calculation systems.

During 2011 the ASA decided it was no longer able to carry the burden of being a publisher in both organizational and financial terms. Although the editors of *History in Africa* originally felt that the journal would be best served by being part of a non-profit, independent body like the ASA, they realized that this position was no longer tenable, and worked with the ASA Board and Publication Committee as they came to a solution for this problem. This volume will be the last published by the ASA alone, as both *History and Africa* and *African Studies Review* will be joining Cambridge University Press (CUP), under the continued auspices of the ASA Publications Committee. Currently discussions with CUP are still under way about the details of the transition, but the editors are enthusiastic about the opportunities offered in terms of the further professionalization of the journal, visibility and accessibility in the West as well as Africa, digital positioning and ranking. CUP furthermore offers a support system for the editors and (prospective) authors. As said, the past year turned out – unexpectedly – to be a year of further transition, and so will be next year, when the co-operation with CUP is to be substantiated.

In the process, it is all too easy to forget the core business of the journal: producing a volume of high quality essays on the different aspects of method and methodology in African history. In terms of contributions, the editors are happy to say that the interest to publish in the journal is

https://doi.org/10.1353/hia.2012.0009 Published online by Cambridge University Press

unabated, with a good spread of subjects covering both interesting methodological issues – versed in theoretical terms and through empirical case-studies – and new developments in research. These are roughly categorized in four sections: critical source analysis, slavery debates, urban issues, and archival reports. Together the fifteen articles cover much of the continent, with two general articles, one on North Africa (Morocco), seven on West Africa (Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon), two on Central Africa (Congo/Central African Republic, Rwanda), two on East Africa (Zanzibar, Kenya), and one on Southern Africa (Malawi). The editors are pleased with this spread, but also keenly aware of the relative bias towards West Africa. This is a point of attention in the acquisition of contributions.

Critical Source Analysis

Under the heading of critical source analysis, five authors deal with some highly interesting issues in terms of new and old perspectives and topics of research. Jones and Voigt study the development of modern map making of the African continent in the wake of colonial partition. Using a German example, they set the European needs and techniques for map making in the context of knowledge acquisition for the enterprise, emphasizing the role of African spatial knowledge in this process, as well as the African response to what they call "a growing market for geographical knowledge."

Newbury's article, focusing on the case of Rwanda, is a plea for the re-evaluation of what he calls "conventional historiography," by analyzing four separate studies of Rwandan history, all with their own peculiarities and as he puts it, very much locked into their own perspective, making for "dead-end discourses."

One of the most extensively studied population groups of the African continent are the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria, and a main theme in the study of Yoruba history is (political and cultural) identity. In his article on the small Yoruba group of the Edepe-Ikale, Ogen shows that despite this long and strong tradition, much can be gained by re-evaluating the sources used for the reconstruction of Yoruba histories. He makes the point that ethnic identity formation in Africa was very much a colonial activity, canonized in administrative reports. Alternative sources, like the praise poems of the Ikale, as well as historical linguistics and original ethnographical research, can offer alternative analytical avenues for research on identity and likewise outcomes.

In her article on Islamic law in British Cameroon, O'Rourke also deals with the issue of identity formation in a colonial context. In his argument, the institution of Islamic courts in Northern Cameroon by the British in 1947 is shown to cut through well-established colonial categories regarding administration and identity. Instituted to give greater involvement to

https://doi.org/10.1353/hia.2012.0009 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Fulani and Hausa immigrant groups in the area, it backfired in the sense that it changed the official administrative status of the immigrants and cut through existing (official) "constructions of race and tribe." The article is a good example of the limited extent to which societal change can be effected by government policies.

The last article in this section is by Vansina and deals with the Dutch African merchant Alfons Vermeulen, who was also the author of two novels, loosely based on his years in Central Africa. Vansina sets the person and work of Vermeulen in the wider methodological context of the question if and how literary products by African travelers can be a source for the writing of history, especially when set of against and in combination with the better studied genre of personal memoirs.

The five articles offer much food for thought about the use of sources in general and about some specific blind spots in African historiography. Together, they make us think about the way in which a critical approach to both the character of sources and the history of their past use – or non-use – can help us develop alternative analytical frameworks. Newbury's plea to deal with separate historical discourses in a more integrative way can lead to a more balanced analytical landscape in African history. The arguments made by Vansina, Ogen, O'Rourke, and Jones and Vogt all point towards the need of a strongly critical re-appreciation of the perceived knowledge of the colonial period in African history and the role of mainstream source materials therein. The need to pursue innovative avenues in the use and analysis of available sources becomes very clear from these contributions.

Slavery Debates

Slavery and the slave trade are a recurrent topic in African history and historiography, also in this journal, and it is therefore no surprise that we can welcome three contributions on the subject here. All three mirror recent developments in the field of slavery and slave trade studies.

Goodman analyzes the last phase of domestic slavery in Morocco, covering much of the twentieth century, from the viewpoint of legal practices and legal records on the one hand, and household histories, or "household dynamics," on the other. Together they enable the construction of "an historical framework from which to interpret the lives and experiences of slaves and their children within and beyond comparable Atlantic, Islamic and African worlds," as the author puts it. The article is innovative in several ways: (1) it sets "Islamic slavery" in Morocco in a wider African and even global context; (2) it comprehensively looks at legal and social issues in slavery and the interaction between the two; (3) it approaches the end of slavery as a transition process, with all the theoretical and methodological repercussions attached to it.

https://doi.org/10.1353/hia.2012.0009 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The article by Schwarz is more technical, as it looks into the possibilities to reconstruct life histories of so-called "recaptives" in the West African slave trade of the nineteenth century, who were settled in the British colony of Sierra Leone. The author's contribution connects to two large research programs, namely the African Names Database and the African Origins Project. The article is partly a report on a newly developed project, which tries to identify the origin of early-nineteenth century liberated slaves from the records of the Vice-Admiralty Court. Substantively, the article deals with the methodological problems connected with name ascription to Africans in relation to the identification of ethnic backgrounds, and statistical issues.

The last article in this section keeps us in the nineteenth century, but brings us to the African east coast. Suzuki explores the so-called "Rigby Manumission List" of 1860-1861, in which the British consular authorities in Zanzibar dealt with – what was in their eyes – illegal slavery by British Indian subjects in Zanzibar. The article goes into the phenomenon of British Indian slave holding, as well as dealing with source critique, in terms of the usability and value of the information contained in the list.

The three articles together reflect very much the state of slavery and slave trade studies in that different parts of the continent are covered and that new sources are brought out to deal with general and specific questions in new and innovative ways.

Urban Issues

Urban history has a well-established place in African history, despite the fact that for a long time Africa was seen as a predominantly rural continent. Urban history is, however, traditionally very much connected to the formation of the colonial state and – for earlier periods – a European or Arabian presence (with the exception of North Africa that is). The three contributions in this issue of *History in Africa* depart from that tradition and thereby reflect a number of new developments in the field of African urban history.

Aderinto combines two urban issues, namely the newspaper press and the position of children in African urban society. The demesne of his study is Nigeria between 1925 and 1950. He argues that the Nigerian newspapers are a good source to research children's history in the colonial period, if one keeps in mind "the circumstances under which they were produced, "the prevailing politics," and "the interaction between (...) 'tradition' and 'modernity'." Aderinto also puts emphasis on the more positive elements of children's lives, namely education, the family ("motherhood"), and consumption, allowing for alternative perspectives on agency and the role children played in colonial social policy. With his choice of children the author links into a trend of studies on children in Africa which is not only addresses the problem of a social group largely

https://doi.org/10.1353/hia.2012.0009 Published online by Cambridge University Press

forgotten in earlier research – especially in history – but also allows for fruitful multi-disciplinary research.

Bangura's article on Temne women in colonial Freetown, Sierra Leone, is especially interesting because it makes an analysis of a social group which is normally overlooked as significant factor in Sierra Leonean social and economic history, for gender reasons, but also because of the fact that the group fell outside the purview of the colonial state and that of historians, as not being part of the Western educated "core." In general it poses questions about the historiography of the colonial state, more in particular social-economic historiography and the need for an inclusive approach.

Finally, Sackeyfio returns to a more traditional subject of urban history, namely the politics of land and urban space in colonial Ghana. Land questions in Africa have been on the historiographical agenda – and not only that agenda – for a long time, and are currently gaining momentum as an object of study in view of the globalization of issues of land use – both rural and urban – and mineral rights. Sackeyfio discusses the importance of colonial laws and regulations on land in the town of Accra around the turn of the twentieth century both for regulating access to land and for local understanding of the meaning of land and landed property. This contribution not only sets out the legal, social and economic mechanisms ruling the changing use and understanding of land in an urban colonial setting, however, it also shows us the historical importance of colonial interventions in land matters with regard to current land issues in Africa.

Archive Reports

This section contains three reports on peculiar archival collections, and one special find of two early letters by a leading African political activist and post-colonial politician and statesman.

Bala presents to us the Arabic manuscripts housed in the Arewa House in Kaduna, Nigeria, a fascinating collection of 1,600 manuscripts and a rich source for scholars of the use of Arabic in West Africa as well as historians of the region. Morrow and McCracken present two letters written in 1938, by Hastings Banda, to become the first president of Malawi, from the time he was a student in Edinburgh. The report is both a content analysis of two texts that illuminate the making of a political activist and a discussion about the life history of the documents themselves. Osborne's article describes a very nice example of an ethnographic collection of interviews with a fairly homogenous group of informants: members of the Kamba ethnic group of Eastern Kenya born between about 1895 and 1920. The material is historiographically important, because it gives a beautiful bottom-up view of the changes Kenyan society went through

https://doi.org/10.1353/hia.2012.0009 Published online by Cambridge University Press

between the period of high colonialism of the 1920s and 1930s through to the first decade of independence.

Finally, Weiss presents a unique collection of documents concerning African political and labor history in a communist context. The emphasis of the article is on the collection of records regarding the "International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers" now housed in the Comintern Archives in Moscow. This contribution gives the reader important insights into record keeping behind the Iron Curtain and the accessibility of archives of former communist organizations.

https://doi.org/10.1353/hia.2012.0009 Published online by Cambridge University Press