Special 40th Anniversary Issue

Silent Trade

Toby Green

Paulo F. de Moraes Farias, "Silent Trade: Myth and Historical Evidence," *History in Africa* 1 (1974), 9–24, http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3171758.

If looking at *History in Africa*'s influence over the field of African history since its inception in 1974, where better to start than at the beginning? A quick glance at the table of contents of the inaugural volume shows that the edition carried articles by, among others, Paulo Farias, Paul Hair, Marion Johnson, Tom Spear, Michael Twaddle, Albert van Dantzig, and Jan Vansina. Forty years on, the table of contents looks something like a *Who's Who* in Africanist history, and reminds us of the problematic aspects of replacing print editions of journals with electronic counterparts: yes, we all can scroll down the electronic table of contents, but in practice we are more likely just to click on the relevant PDF.

To begin right at the beginning, as it were, Paulo de Moraes Farias's "Silent Trade: Myth and Historical Evidence" was the very first research article in that edition's table of contents, and to my mind it remains one of the most influential. As David Henige had been (and Marion Johnson then was), Paulo Farias was based at Birmingham University, beginning work on his project of discovering, deciphering, transcribing and translating funerary inscriptions in Arabic, that would bear fruit in his major work – almost thirty years later – *Medieval Arabic Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

It has been said that a writer or historian's early work is always an exercise in procrastination, in that the extent of their research capacities is not

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yet fully evident. Given the intellectual immensity of the monograph which Farias went on to produce, this could perhaps be seen as a fair comment; yet in this case, his article is certainly one of the pithiest and most characteristic exemplars of the procrastinating genre, containing within it many of the hallmarks which distinguish the later work.

The article deals with the myth that grew up over the preceding centuries as to what was known as "silent trade." This was the practice, said to be widely practiced in the Sahel, of conducting a commercial exchange without conversation. Various sources, beginning as early as Herodotus in classical times, had claimed that it was common practice for one party to leave on the path the goods which they proposed to exchange, and then to retire, whereupon the other party would leave what they proposed to give in exchange – with the system continuing until the "transaction" was completed. In practice, the idea of silent trade stood for the backwardness and primitiveness of the African continent in the minds of outsiders, and was a significant actor in shaping pejorative cultural associations related to Africa.

"Silent Trade" examines the sources and, in characteristic gentle but irrefutable style, concludes that the whole idea was a fabrication based on second- and third-hand sources and a fundamental misunderstanding of African systems of brokerage. The erudition which enables Farias to reach this conclusion is immense; for in the article, he quotes from (among others), the Italian of Ca da Mosto, the Arabic of al-Mas'ūdī and Yaqūt, and the Portuguese of Duarte Pacheco Pereira and André Alvares d'Almada. His analysis of sources also involves an important linguistic exegesis of the meanings of the Arabic *samāsira* ("brokers," "middlemen") and *jahābidha* (those who distinguish good quality merchandise from bad quality); as well as elucidating place names from knowledge of Wangara and Dyula terms for the Akan-speaking peoples.

Complementing this extraordinary linguistic versatility was the scope of the sources drawn upon. On any page Farias is just as happy among medieval Arabic sources as among sixteenth century Portuguese and later writers. The amazing scope of the article is pithily expressed in the concluding two pages, in which the author ends by citing important German and English sources from the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, which reflect different levels of the silent trade stereotype; but in which he is also quite happy discussing Ibn Battūta's comments on the relationship between the representative of the emperor of Mali at Oualata and itinerant merchants.

By any standards, this range was itself indicative of what was to follow in the 2003 monograph. From today's vantage point, it also acts as the gentlest of reproaches to those of us who have been brought up in the ethos of what two Brazilian colleagues of mine call "*o capitalismo academico*;" the imperative to publish or perish makes it increasingly impossible for younger colleagues to take the time to develop the range of skills which the most careful

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and admirable sorts of scholarship require. This is why, as David Henige himself noted in his commentary on Farias's manuscript in this journal in 2005, Farias's monograph is of the sort which will probably never be seen again.[1]

Beyond its scope and intellectual solidity, "Silent Trade" was among a body of work at the time to attempt the demythologizing of African history. As Farias makes clear, the idea of the silent trade symbolized the entire enterprise of pejorative mythography which had characterised earlier attempts at African history. *History in Africa* was formed at a key point to try to broaden the attack on these stereotypes, and thus the article was an early sounding call in a programme of demystification, discussing themes which have subsequently proved to be of enduring significance to Africanist historiography.

The first of these themes which is worth identifying is the pervasive role of pejorative stereotypes in constructing false views of the African past. As Farias notes, available accounts of silent trade often contained within them a subtext of more developed peoples trading with less developed peoples; developing the idea of silent trade helped to place African peoples on a lower step of the chart of social evolution, and such stories are, he shows, "a misleading combination of a mythical stereotype with concrete evidence about the traditional African trade-through-broker pattern of exchange."[2] In "Silent Trade," the way in which Farias reveals this existence of the stereotype here helped to pave the way for other analyses of myths of African timelessness, lack of agency, and being "outside history," myths which remain stubbornly enduring as then-French president Nicolas Sarkozy's infamous speech of 2007 in Dakar made clear.

Secondly, one should recognise the emphasis placed in "Silent Trade" of the importance of a return to sources – something which was a key aspect, too, of the question of historical method introduced by Henige. Farias's analysis of the "knowledge" of silent trade in fact revealed a systematic pattern of hearsay, borrowing, and misunderstanding creating a primitivist myth, something which was revealed only through a close analysis of sources based on excellent linguistic and historical knowledge. As an example, we can note the almost languorous aside, in which he states: "I will omit here, for lack of space, any discussion of the medieval accounts of silent trade that can be traced to borrowings from the works of al-Mas'ūdī and Yaqūt even though they appear to refer to later times. These include passages in the works of al-Zuhri (twelfth century), al-Qazwīnī (thirteenth century), Ibn al-Wardī (fourteenth or fifteenth century), and al-Bakuwi (fifteenth century)."[3]

[1] *Medieval Arabic Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[2] Farias, "Silent Trade," 10.

[3] Farias, "Silent Trade," 12.

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This close analysis of sources was of course a part of the renewed attention to the diversity of African sources, which the work by Vansina also stressed, both in this volume of *History in Africa* and elsewhere. What this new emphasis showed was that for too long "knowledge" of Africa was based on a failure to look at evidence, or believe even that there might be evidence; the programme of source recovery initiated in this period, and continued in the 2003 monograph, was a part of the resurgence of interest in Arabic sources for African history which helped to catalyse interest among scholars from Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Senegal, and other countries in the region to track these sources down, to such important effect.

Finally, we can emphasise the importance given by Farias to the idea of brokerage as a way of decoding the myths of the silent trade. This was something that on a personal level I have found very influential; and it was an area in which scholarship produced and guided by him has continued to be of great importance.[4] His argument in "Silent Trade" represented an important statement of the role of brokerage in understanding both economic and cultural formations in sub-Saharan Africa, something of great subsequent importance to the emphasis on diasporas, mediators and cross-cultural exchanges.

As Farias stated, silent trade in fact represented a pattern of contact characterized by "the interposition of middlemen between the two principal trading parties."[5] This was an appropriate conclusion for an article that is a beautifully presented piece of brokerage between supposition and the hard truths of historical evidence, a work that has stood the test of time.

[4] Karin Barber and Paulo F. de Moraes Farias (eds.), *Self-Assertion and Brokerage: Early Cultural Nationalism in West Africa* (Birmingham: Centre of West African Studies, 1990); Toby Green (ed.), *Brokers of Change: Atlantic Commerce and Cultures in Pre-Colonial Western Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2012).

[5] Farias, "Silent Trade," 12.

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