Enduring Methods – Editors' Introduction

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

The 2020 volume of *History in Africa* is the eleventh produced by the current editorial team. It will also be the last, as we are handing over to a brand-new team, consisting of esteemed colleagues Lorelle Semley, Sandra Barnes, Bayo Holsey, and Egodi Uchendu.

In our final volume we continue the practice set in at the start of our tenure in 2010. Our mission then was first to maintain the existing profile of the journal, developed by founding editor David Henige, of publishing scholarship on textual analysis and criticism, historiographical and bibliographical essays, and archival reports. We then set out to broaden the topical framework, with an inclusive view towards "History" and "Africa," and with an open eye for discussions on new information technologies and pedagogical issues, as set out in our editors' introduction in the 2010 volume.[1] Although our ambitions may not have been fulfilled in all respects, we believe *History in Africa* has proven its continuing relevance and role in the field of African history, providing a platform for contributions on original research and reflection that other journals in the field do not always offer. The current volume starts with research on early written sources, articles which we label *enduring methods* for reasons that will become clear later in this introduction. This section is followed by one honoring and debating the work of our colleague Frederick Cooper. Then there are two sections dealing with issues of digitization that reflect our original ambition to address new technologies. And finally there is the regular and always well-received section with archival reports.

The first section features two articles with rigorous philological historical research by young researchers, in collaboration with two regular contributors to *History in Africa*. As it happens, both articles are also concerned with the precolonial history of Africa, and the Portuguese role in it, in Southern and in

History in Africa, Volume 47 (2020), pp. 1–3

© African Studies Association, 2020
doi:10.1017/hia.2020.13

[1] Michel R. Doortmont, John H. Hanson, Jan Jansen and Dmitri. van den Bersselaar, "The Next Step for a Journal of Method," *History in Africa* 37 (2010), 1–5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2020.13 Published online by Cambridge University Press

West Africa. Both contributions also show how we can extract African perspectives from European texts.

The article by Gai Roufe and the late Joseph C. Miller describes and analyses how the make-up of political institutions in the Zambesi Valley between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries can be understood by studying Portuguese ethnographic documents that echo voices of local actors. The production of this article deserves extra attention, since it beautifully illustrates the scholarship and commitment of Joe Miller. Joe Miller was a member of the journal's Advisory Editorial Board from its inception in 1974, and every year he provided the editors with excellent reviews, critical comments, and editorial advice. He thereby supported the work of upcoming researchers, as in the article he co-authored with Gai Roufe in the current volume. During the editorial process, we received the sad news that Joe had passed away. This final co-authored piece is a fitting salute to Joe Miller's engagement with the journal and with Africa's history. We, the editors, are proud to have known him as our mentor, colleague, and friend and thank him for his life-long commitment to the historians of Africa.

The second article in this section is by another young researcher, Pedro Pinto, co-authored by Robin Law, also since 1974 active as a member of the Advisory Editorial Board. Robin Law has made his scholarship on the Portuguese presence in West Africa, and especially on the Kingdom of Allada, available to strengthen the work of a colleague at the start of his academic career. The archival work pushes back the date of the first known state contacts between Allada and Portugal from 1553 to 1541, while informing us about African initiatives to enhance relations with a European nation.

Under the heading "Frederick Cooper and the Historiography of Africa," five authors honor the work of Cooper on the eve of his retirement from teaching. The contributions are in themselves relatively short for a publication in *History in Africa*, but we feel that together they make a highly valuable contribution to historiography that also shows the breadth and impact of Frederick Cooper's work. Moreover, the collection illustrates well how *History in Africa* is embedded in the scholarly community of historians of Africa: the contributions to this section are a selection of papers presented at panels at the 2018 ASA Annual Meeting.

The two sections on digitization – "Archives and the Digital Turn" and "Digital History" – with their own introductions and a total of nine articles, can be considered groundbreaking in several respects, both generally speaking and for *History in Africa*. For one, both sections contain a series of articles offering profound analyses of the current states of affairs in the field of digitizing archives, as well as the field of digital methodologies for the research (and teaching) of Africa's history. Secondly, both sections deal with the shift in historical work from analysis to preservation. As some authors remark, the strong current interest in digitization may easily draw away attention from text analysis in both historical research and history education. This in turn may lead to a loss of skills in the latter field. Just digitizing a source

https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2020.13 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is not the end; it still must be followed by rigorous analysis. We, the editors, share the concern of the authors that all the energy now put into digitization should not be to the detriment of analysis. Hence we label linguistic and philological analysis – so beautifully illustrated in the first two articles of this volume – "enduring methods."

This critical note on the dangers of undue attention for digitization is methodological. It must be emphasized that there is a difference between digitization and digitalization in this respect. Digitalization refers to the changing modes of communication worldwide and is a process that actually enhances the communication of historical analysis and debate. In the past decades we have witnessed how *History in Africa* was transformed from a journal only accessible as hard copy in academic libraries, to a resource to which millions of scholars and students have permanent (and partially open) online access. This made it possible for us to adopt FirstView, through which we have been making outstanding historical scholarship available immediately, without having to wait for the printed volume of the journal to appear. Due to the logistical problems that Cambridge University Press are facing in printing hard copies of its journals because of the COVID-19 crisis, this year's volume is the first that is published fully digitally, initially, while hard copies of the journal will be printed and distributed at a later date. It is a sign of the changes in research and publishing that this solution to a global logistical challenge could be decided on just as we publish this volume of *History in Africa* with special sections on digitization.

Joe Miller's passing might lead to the conclusion that the skills and methods "old school" historians of Africa have been employing for decades are losing relevance, becoming "endangered methods." The hard copy of the journal, its original medium, is now available in a digital version. But as much as historians love change, many also value the past. They embrace new methodologies and explore new epistemologies, but they also appreciate that that most significant work ***endures*** because it convinces others through its argumentation from the available evidence. The historian's practice is a multi-faceted and living practice. So much so that it often ends up learning *and* giving lessons in the art of saying farewell.

After more than a decade the current editorial team makes place for a new one. For the four of us it has been a privilege and honor to serve the journal that we consider a unique and important platform for all historians, not only those who work on Africa. *History in Africa* has always been rigorously exploring epistemologies for researching and representing the past. We look forward to the ways our successors will shape the journal and serve its objectives.

Reference

Doortmont, Michel R., John H. Hanson, Jan Jansen and Dmitri van den Bersselaar, "The Next Step for a Journal of Method," *History in Africa* 37 (2010), 1–5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2020.13 Published online by Cambridge University Press