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INTRODUCTION

Editors' Introduction: Revisiting Received Wisdom

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This volume of *History in Africa* is a transitional one, as the previous editorial team under Lorelle Semley has handed over the reins to a new team consisting of editors Paul Bjerk and Andrew Wegmann and associate editors Alex Lichtenstein, Nicole Eggers, and Chapane Mutiua. Dr. Semley left us with several excellent articles already in production and a healthy pipeline of incoming pieces which in part make up this year's volume, the 53rd in the journal's rich archive. We are thrilled and honored to lead this unique and expansive journal, and we are grateful to the long line of editors who have maintained it as a place of probing methodological debate for over half a century.

As a historian of Tanzania paired with a historian of interracial America and the Black Atlantic, our aim is to expand the scope of this journal more deliberately into Africa's diasporic realms across the Americas, the Caribbean, and the wide sphere of the Indian Ocean, yet still maintain its traditional focus on studies based on the African continent. While *History in Africa* has always published diasporic histories, an emerging scholarly discourse, rooted in interdisciplinary and transcontinental methods and perspectives, has provided new tools highlighting the importance of Africa and Africans in more global historiographies.[1] Our annual panel at the 2025 meeting of the African Studies Association (ASA) meeting explored diaspora as method.[2] The histories of Africa's diasporas

[1] For examples of earlier diasporic work published in *History in Africa*, see Thomas Q. Reefe, "Traditions of Genesis and the Luba Diaspora," *History in Africa* 4 (1977): 183–206; P. E. H. Hair, "Black African Slaves at Valencia, 1482–1516: An Onomastic Inquiry," *History in Africa* 7 (1980): 119–139; and William E. Allen, "Liberia and the Atlantic World in the Nineteenth Century: Convergence and Effects," *History in Africa* 37 (2020): 7–49.

[2] For broader examples of this historiographical trend, see Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Michael A. Gomez, *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); Lamin Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad: American Blacks and the Making of Modern West Africa* (Harvard University Press, 2001); James H. Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Caree A. Banton, *More Auspicious Shores: Barbadian Migration, Blackness, and the Making of an African Republic, 1865–1912* (Cambridge University Press, 2019); Kimberly Wortmann, *Society of the Righteous: Ibadhi*

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and the histories of the continent itself are not mutually exclusive, and the histories and legacies of imperialism and colonialism, so formative in Africa's political and social realities, did not stop at oceanic shores. Diaspora in this context, as Toyin Falola once put it, is "the agency of Africa as a continent within a powerful wider world," an extensive, global network of African pasts becoming regional origins.[3] Our vision for *History in Africa* follows this line of thinking, bringing together African history from within and without, exile and return, rooted and uprooted.

Yet we remain dedicated to the core principle of the journal, articulated by David Henige in 1974, of the "need for constant examination by each historian of his [or her] own particular work and its relationship to his [or her] chosen craft."[4] Long the Africanist librarian at the University of Wisconsin, Henige created a remarkable reputation and legacy for the journal out of his windowless little office, piled high with books and manuscripts. In a more contemporary era, submission, publication, and organization have all developed into more fluid and immediate forms. While at times we may lament the digitization of scholarship, archives, and other repositories of data and sources, we were handed a journal that we believe combines and exemplifies the values inherent in the past and the present, having already transitioned from the analog to the digital age. Indeed, it was through the great effort of Dr. Semley and her colleagues, together with the staff at Cambridge University Press, that the paper-based processes of the twentieth century were replaced by the digital processes of the twenty-first.[5]

As the new editors, we have been adapting and learning the ropes as the last stages of this digital transformation are put in place, but we hope to retain the human touch and the sense of lively discussion that has long characterized this journal. A review of our back catalog reveals not only important research articles and literature reviews, but often the provocative inquiries and exploratory research by young and seasoned scholars alike. Jan Vansina's 2004 piece on "The Many Uses of Forgeries" is a case in point: "Nothing is wasted ... a forged travel account can be deconstructed until all its parts down to the very last sentence or proper name can be used as evidence for one or another kind of

Muslim Identity and Transnationalism in Tanzania (Indiana University Press, 2024); and Chelsea Berry, *Poisoned Relations: Healing, Power, and Contested Knowledge in the Atlantic World* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024).

[3] Toyin Falola, *The African Diaspora: Slavery, Modernity, and Globalization* (University of Rochester Press, 2013), x, 1–3.

[4] David Henige, "On Method: An Apologia and a Plea," *History in Africa* 1 (1974): 1.

[5] Lorelle Semley and her associate editors provide meaningful reflection on this process as well as the decision to undertake it in their introduction to last year's volume. See Lorelle Semley, Teresa Barnes, Bayo Holsey, and Egodi Uchendu, "Editors' Introduction: New Histories from the Margins of the Archive," *History in Africa* 52 (2025): 1–5. They likewise cite a special section on digitization that appeared in the 2020 edition of the journal. For particularly relevant parts of that special section, see Jennifer Hart, "Introduction: Digital History in African Studies," *History in Africa* 47 (2020): 269–274 and Fabienne Chamelot, Vincent Hiribarren, and Marie Rodet, "Archives, the Digital Turn, and Governance in Africa," *History in Africa* 47 (2020): 101–118.

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history."[6] It is a response, in some sense, to Henige's prickly point about "the sources used by historians of Africa":

> Not that they are bad (though they may be) but that they have not been shown to be good ... Every source, every piece of evidence has been influenced by its environment ... both selective at birth and mutable in varying degrees throughout its life.[7]

We frame this volume of *History in Africa* around Carolyn Hamilton and John Wright's opening article, "Rethinking the Political Order in the KwaZulu-Natal Region in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries." They reflect upon the evidence and its implications for political history of KwaZulu-Natal in the early nineteenth century. John Wright, with his erstwhile colleague Colin de Berri Webb, laboriously produced six volumes of transcripts based on the notes of the colonial researcher, James Stuart.[8] Carolyn Hamilton, in her earlier work, explored the motivations of Stuart himself, insightfully mapping "its environment ... at birth" and its powerfully "mutable" themes in South Africa's fraught history.[9] Stuart, in his own right, interviewed scores of people (mostly men) who had grown up in the Nguni-speaking societies of the nineteenth century in what is now KwaZulu-Natal. His effort produced one of the most extensive records of African voices describing life and politics in a sovereign precolonial society.

Hamilton and Wright point out that it is precisely a term like "sovereign" that plays host to retrospective presumptions distortive of historical meaning and collective understanding. "Sovereignty was constantly being renegotiated." Anachronistic concepts interpolate even when unbidden, appearing as corollaries to a term like "refugee," itself an artifact of what became the globally normative system of sovereign states. Hamilton and Wright point out that the use of such a term is just a recent variation of long-standing attempts to explain and frame the fluid mobility of polities and identities in the region. In sources like the James Stuart Archive, we have rich troves of voices of people who grew up amidst the turmoil of the nineteenth century. But today, Hamilton and Wright conclude, those voices appear decontextualized in twentieth-century typescript, and the historian's task is to recontextualize them in a demonstrably appropriate manner. And therein lies the rub.

We take direction, then, from Hamilton and Wright's wide-ranging reflection to consider how this year's articles and detailed archival reports force us to critically revisit received wisdom. The volume takes form in three sections:

[6] Jan Vansina, "The Many Uses of Forgeries: The Case of Douville's 'Voyage au Congo'," *History in Africa* 31 (2004): 369.

[7] Henige, "On Method," 2.

[8] C. de B. Webb and J. B. Wright, eds., *The James Stuart Archive of Recorded Oral Evidence Relating to the History of the Zulu and Neighbouring Peoples*, 6 vols. (University of Natal Press and University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 1976–2014).

[9] Carolyn Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention* (Harvard University Press, 1998).

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- Intellectuals and Their Publics
- The Built Environment as Archive
- The Sahara and the Horn in Imperial Archives

Intellectuals and Their Publics

In three essays on public intellectuals and two on the agency of audiences, we find corroboration of Hamilton and Wright's thesis that political fluidity and mobility are irreducible. We witness the ways that communities are constituted and politics framed through public participation in discourses articulated by trusted intellectuals.

In "The Sphinx's Solution," Tomi Onabanjo projects mythology, prophecy, and public intellectualism into geographic dimensions. Placing famed Liberian and Sierra Leonean thinker Edward Wilmot Blyden and his most well-known text, *Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race* (1887), in a transcontinental context, Onabanjo analyzes the style and meaning of Blyden's vision for Africa's future rebirth.[10] Here we find Blyden the Victorian and Blyden the Orientalist asking himself and those who would listen, as Onabanjo puts it, "What is the destiny of the 'Negro Race' on the continent and in the diaspora?" The answer, it would seem, is simple: "Africa's regeneration." In breaking down Blyden's understanding of "regeneration" and how an entire continent might experience such resolve, Onabanjo picks out his use of the Riddle of the Sphinx as a way of challenging the Eurocentric notions inherent in any call for Africa, or anywhere else, to *re*generate itself in a lost image. Describing Blyden as an "Afro-Victorian," Onabanjo importantly contextualizes the Caribbean-born West African thinker within the Victorian Atlantic, an intellectual exchange that both forced and allowed people like Blyden to answer for the "difference-as-degeneration" that informed the Victorian image archives of the European and Western selves in contrast to those of Africa and parts of Asia. Indeed, instead of rejecting the very notion of this degenerative assumption, Onabanjo's Blyden, as well as his Afro-Victorian writing, necessarily stands between rejection and acceptance, an "ambivalent Orientalist" bridging two worlds equally exotic to and informative of Africa's future and rebirth.

In regard to writing and readership, Nile Green makes the astute point that a set of sociological presumptions derived from the idea of a print culture as "a common focus of attention" are undone by "the sheer variety of languages used in Zanzibar." Instead, and in keeping with our goals for this journal, Green reframes these presumptions by casting them in a "convergence of discrete diasporic publics," each of which has a history. Citing Shelly Chan, he notes that the concept of diaspora is equally temporal as spatial. This means diaspora is also functionally technological in that a communal sense of "home" is maintained through time via means of movement and communication. Religious tracts and translation were also the foundation of print publics in the famously fluid ethnic

[10] Blyden's canonical text was originally published as Edward W. Blyden, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (W. B. Whittingham & Co., 1887).

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and religious context of the Swahili Coast. We see how doctrinal debate and interreligious competition were at least as influential as ritual practices in maintaining diasporic identities. Although Green delimits his analysis to literate publics, we wonder whether his analysis might provide entry into a better understanding about how diasporas are maintained via nonliterate belief systems and ritual practices. And here Green's point that literacy bound these diasporic publics to the exclusion of nonliterate peasants and proletarians is of great salience given the animosities that produced the violent Zanzibari Revolution on the heels of its independence.[11]

Matthew Unangst explores museums as sites perhaps better cast as shrine-like ritual spaces than text-like productions. While they ostensibly represent and serve a national public, the public they address is increasingly ambiguous as they serve the purposes of tourist and external donors. Unangst, however, points out that a target audience of "American tourists" was baked into the formative colonial vision of museums in the region. The continuity here, of realizing a tourist industry as a generator of always-needed foreign reserve currencies, is only highlighted in the current president's active marketing of the country. In this context, whatever nationalist narrative is embedded in Tanzania's museums fades into obsolescence as "none of the museums exhibits much of anything about Tanzania since 1970." The outward orientation of these museums shades them as something of a distraction that shifts outsider gaze from today's heated politics happening just outside the museum gates. Here a Swahili-speaking public is bound ever more tightly as a constituency reading irrepressible newspapers and debating the nation's hard-headed politics in online fora, much to the consternation of a habitually censorial government.

Walter E. A. van Beek and Ibrahima Poudiougou bring into the written record a figure known almost exclusively in nocturnal funeral recitations of oral tradition: the blind poet and prophet Abiré Goro. Abiré may have lived as long ago as the fourteenth century or as recently as the late nineteenth. The authors conservatively place him in this latter time frame. The songs about him meditate on war and the environment, a life well lived, and death: "the great surprise or a new wife; as the fulfilment of a prenatal contract; as an elephant fallen into a well." At the heart of his prophecy, at least as recorded in oral tradition, was the warning that "The Fulbe will fall." Current Dogon resistance groups see a prophecy fulfilled, having emerged as a political force in the twenty-first century.[12] "Informants love to cite these latter predictions, since they so clearly define Abiré as a real prophet, one who foresaw things far into the future and whose predictions were realized in spectacular and unexpected ways." Past prophecy is inextricable from present recitation. They form a rhetorical whole. The Fulbe of prophecy are now perceived as the "robber groups" plaguing a nation in conflict, and Dogon people today are on the move across ethnic, linguistic, and national boundaries. In the funeral performances, despite the

[11] Jonathan Glassman, *War of Words, War of Stones: Racial Thought and Violence in Colonial Zanzibar* (Indiana University Press, 2011).

[12] Tanguy Quidelleur, "Courtiser l'État et traquer les djihadistes," *Critique internationale* 94 (2022): 53–57.

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inspiration taken by armed rebels, "his style is more that of a poet than that of an apocalyptic prophet … Revenge is not on the agenda; compassion is." Sovereignty is indeed "being renegotiated," not just in terms of territoriality or political dominance, but in terms of the very purpose of politics itself.

Patrick Otim and Martin David Aliker's illuminating article on the life and work of Acholi intellectual Reuben Anywar fits into the twentieth-century trend of regional African intellectuals reckoning with the rapidly changing and fluid possibilities for identity in colonial Africa. The Makerere-educated Anywar was not strictly "homespun historian" to use Derek Peterson and Giacomo Macola's rich phrase.[13] But his Acholi-language history, *Acoli ki Ker Megi* (Acholi and Their Chiefdoms) was in public conversation with a very much "homespun" popular history by the minimally educated Lacito Okech, *Tekwaro ki Ker Lobo Acholi*, and the more widely circulated *Lok pa Acoli Macon* (Precolonial History of the Acholi) by the Verona Father, Vincenzo Pellegrini.[14] What is worth noticing is the way religious identity infused homespun histories and ethnic identity, both because of the active participation of missionaries like Father Pellegrini in these local intellectual projects and because so many mission- (and mosque-) educated historians, poets, and novelists were also scriptural translators like Anywar. Although Otim and Aliker do not argue this point, we see another indication of Joseph Mbele's point that preservation and promulgation of local languages by Christian missions is an inseparable aspect of postcolonial intellectual ambitions to decolonize African expression by using indigenous languages.[15] Identity, like communication itself, is an inexorably fluid thing.

Like writing, colonial administrative technologies brought new pressures to bear on communities and identities. The census established quasi-scientific authority over demographic projections, even when its data collection was suspect. Part social history and part textual and quantitative analysis, Bukola Oyeniyi's "Missionary Intelligence and Colonial Censuses" offers a deep dive into the context and meaning of the 1895 *Church Missionary Intelligencer* (CMI) tabulations of populations in Yorubaland, in southwest colonial Nigeria. Oyeniyi notes the widespread use of these figures by scholars of war, religion, politics, and urbanization over the course of more than a century as "ready-made" snapshots of reality in a highly urbanized network of towns and villages. But, as Oyeniyi observes, "the authority of the CMI has rested less on demonstration than on repetition." In fact, when one puts together both the numbers and the historical realities under which they were produced, we begin to see the CMI numbers as anything but authoritative. Rather than presenting examples of static resting life in the colonial "interior," the1895 tabulations create a story of movement and violence, a region in flux, people pushed by war and shifting

[13] Derek R. Peterson and Giacomo Macola, eds., *Recasting the Past: History Writing and Political Work in Modern Africa* (Ohio University Press, 2009).

[14] Patrick W. Otim, "Local Intellectuals: Lacito Okech and the Production of Knowledge in Colonial Acholiland," *History in Africa* 45 (2018): 275–305.

[15] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (James Currey, 1986); Joseph Mbele, "Language in African Literature: An Aside to Ngũgĩ," *Research in African Literatures* 23 (1992): 145–151.

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visions of authority in a place defined – and counted – within colonial borders yet hardly contained by them or, indeed, observed by those who drew them. As Oyeniyi concludes, it is that the decontextualization of and overreliance on evidence like the 1895 figures prompts certain historical imaginings that deny, and thus silence, more cautious, and ultimately more realistic and illustrative, conclusions. The centrality of these seemingly banal administrative processes in Nigeria's postcolonial history can hardly be overstated. Questions about population numbers created a constitutional crisis when the allocation of parliamentary seats in Nigeria's first national elections were rejected by many in the southern regions because of politicized doubts about census numbers.[16]

The Built Environment as Archive

We continue with three unique insights into how the human-built environment serves as archive beyond the formal insights of archeology.

Tomos Evans's survey of mostly unpublished papers deposited by the archeologist J. H. Goodwin at the University of Cape Town exemplifies the purpose of the "archival report," a unique contribution of *History in Africa.* The British occupation destroyed the historic city in 1897, so Goodwin's pioneering work in the 1950s, and several more surveys over the next decade are now irreplaceable contributions, since urban development has made further archeological research about this legendary imperial capital much more difficult.

Ishmael Annang brings to light a site in need of archeological investigation, but more importantly he highlights the living nature of such a site when it is still animated in oral tradition, and the tradition's presumption of spiritual agency at work. In his article about a collection of stones enchanted in a medicine eating ritual to anchor an immigration policy enacted in a 1733 Accord, Annang proposes a counter-process to David Henige's "feedback" problem in oral tradition.[17] Annang allows for the possibility of spiritual entities acting in history, albeit via their human interlocutors, and sees a moment of "reverse feedback" where an event and an accord authorized in oral and ritual tradition found its way into the written record, presumably sometime in the British period. The only unambiguous archival record of the 1733 Accord, at least so far, is a brief mention of the oral tradition and ritual appearing in a 1959 report on the adjudication of land disputes in Akuapem state. The key to understanding such "reverse feedback," Annang insists, is to resist the pull of treating living traditions as "orature" objectified as a form of writing. Here he builds upon Karin Barber's theory of "entextualization," which is closely akin to the cautionary advice provided by Hamilton and Wright on the use of the James Stuart Archive.[18]

[16] The implications of this politics of population are evident. See, for example, Jibrin Ibrahim, "Political Transition, Ethnoregionalism, and the 'Power Shift' Debate in Nigeria," *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 27, no. 1 (1999): 12–16.

[17] David P. Henige, "The Problem of Feedback in Oral Tradition: Four Examples from the Fante Coastlands," *Journal of African History* 14, no. 2 (1973): 223–235.

[18] Karin Barber, "Text and Performance in Africa," *Oral Tradition* 20, no. 2 (2005): 264–277.

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By contrast to these kinds of stratified localities that are the subject of archeological digs, Phillip Gooding leverages Geographic Information System (GIS) data to gain insights into the human-built agricultural and mercantile environment of East Africa. By mapping the observations of European travelers, Gooding can more accurately locate these observations and square them with other administrative records, thereby enabling these sources to mark change over time where more than one observation is available. By carefully mapping the uptake of certain crops in certain locales, and taking into account their characteristics, Gooding is able to suggest an increase in high-yield imported grains that fed the caravan trade and the growth of trading towns in what is now central Tanzania. These profitable grains were also more vulnerable to drought and may explain social instability in the early colonial era and the received wisdom for agricultural administration of the territory in the twentieth century.

The Sahara and the Horn in Imperial Archives

In our last section, the ability to "see" fluidity of identity, circumstance, and locale is just as important in the northern reaches of the continent as the southern. The Sahara and the Horn have long been liminal gateways to trade routes and other regions of the world, separated from continental trends by distinct historical legacies, landscapes, and languages. As elsewhere, critical use of imperial archives provides us with key points of reference and an armature for insights derived from more locally based knowledge sources.

Kerem Duymus has surveyed the Arabic and Turkish language sources across the Northern Sahara and offers some key correctives to our understanding of economic and social change in what is now Western Libya. By collecting these widely scattered materials, Duymus is able to account for regional trends better than previous Anglophone and Francophone accounts based on the often transitory observations of European travelers. The decline of the gold trade out of Timbuktu launched a search for new trade goods and routes throughout the Sahara and bound major inland cities more tightly into Ottoman administration. Trade, however, remained in the hands of specialized groups delimited by ethnic identifiers, and each city had its own history of government and regulation. Fezzan had long paid taxes in a regional Sultanate that provided armed security for its traders, while the more independent traders of Ghadames had long paid tributes for safe passage on their routes. As a result, Ghadames was more resistant to Ottoman rule.

At the far western edge of the Sahara, János Besenyő and Adam Mayer uncover and explore an example of colonial failure in today's Western Sahara. Holding the Austro-Hungarian Empire's 1898–99 effort to get a foothold in the expanding European colonial map of Africa as a counterexample to the "triumphalist Atlantic 'success stories' of the second industrial revolution," the authors highlight the unrealistic visions of two opposing forces in Austro-Hungary's nascent imperial project: the government and the merchants who stood to benefit from the enterprise. Where in other, more "successful" European countries these interests often aligned and did great damage to the people on the ground while

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lining their own pockets, in Austro-Hungary a complex political relationship between Austrians and Hungarians combined with a timid entrepreneurial class to give each side impossible expectations from the other. At the center of this narrative, and indeed the reason for its existence, is the authors' extraordinary use of previously unexamined Hungarian archival holdings that, in their collective detail, "achieve radical rehumanization" of the scheme's potential victims as well as a renewed clarity of the disunity and lack of uniform political and economic identity within Austro-Hungary that led to the scheme's ultimate collapse.

In the Horn of Africa, Italian records are invaluable, and can be read critically for subaltern voices, as Iman Mohamed does with such fluency in her Archival Report on the Territorial Military Tribunal records kept at the *Archivio centrale dello Stato* (Central State Archive) in Rome. Mohamed provides a detailed background on the history of the Tribunal records for *Somalia Italiana.* Her fluent review, informed by current work on military history in colonial Africa, provides researchers with a clear sense of tribunal records, where each case includes standardized demographic information as well as summary, testimony, and findings. Their rich possibilities extend well beyond military history since the cases often dealt with nonmartial manual labor, offering insights from "social relations within the military to the broader structural dynamics of colonial rule."

The final entry in the 53rd iteration of *History in Africa* is Gabriele Bastiani's reexamination of the Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935–40, a conflict that Bastiani admits "is one of the most thoroughly researched topics in Italian historiography." But like Besenyő and Mayer above, Bastiani uses new archival discoveries from Italy's Central State Archive and Diplomatic Historical Archive to explore not the war itself, or even its profound legacy, but rather the confidential negotiations that took place between the two empires over the course of the war. Using material from these two archives allowed the author to gather perspectives and voices that otherwise would have been either broken or neglected altogether. It also allowed him to tell multiple sides of the story, ripping the negotiations, and the larger conflict they informed, out of singular Italian or Ethiopian historiographies and sewing them back into the broader contexts of European political tensions of the late 1930s and the realities of World War II in East Africa. Beyond a new narrative of a well-known event, this article stands as a methodological reflection, a model for reinterpreting transcontinental discourse, however fraught, and how sources communicate with each other in different ways depending on where they are housed and how they are read.

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