Editors' Introduction

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

In February 2017, Jan Vansina, leading scholar of African history and historiography died at the age of eighty-seven. His ideas and publications were and are a formative influence on many African historians and his importance for our methodological thinking will remain significant. Vansina was a regular contributor to *History in Africa* over the life-time of the journal, which we commemorated in last year's issue. In this volume, we have a section entitled "Jan Vansina Remembered," consisting of five articles, introduced by David Schoenbrun. These are the product of a set of three roundtables organized at the African Studies Association conference of 2017 in Chicago. The section is especially interesting, because it addresses the methodological issue of our understanding of "early African history" outside of the often still dominant context of colonialism. The articles deal with the issues of the dynamic versus the unchanging African continent (Chirikure), Vansina's methodological eclecticism as exemplified in his studies of the Kuba people (Kriger), the role of archaeology in Vansina's work (Robertshaw), and the opposition between small-scale social interactions versus large-scale institutions in Vansina's narrative style (de Luna). Together they form a welcome critique of Africa's "early history" and the lessons we can still learn from Vansina's work on the topic.

The 2018 issue of *History in Africa* includes numerous submissions on Uganda and its environs, with articles across the different sections dealing with this region. It is a welcome change from the emphasis on West Africa that we have seen so often in the past. Apart from the section commemorating Vansina, there are sections dealing with "Critical Historiography," "Institutional Life in Uganda," "Towards Multispecies History," and "Archival Reports."

In line with general practice, this edition of *History in Africa* starts with the section of critical historiography. Five authors deal with a diverse array

History in Africa, Volume 45 (2018), pp. 1–4

© African Studies Association, 2018
doi:10.1017/hia.2018.21

https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2018.21 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of topics. Rönnbäck presents a challenge to earlier work by Green in our sister publication *The Journal of African History* on the study of inflation in West Africa. Green was given the opportunity to respond to the critique, which has resulted in a second article making clear that both historians have distinctly different perspectives on the topic, whereby Green fruitfully adds a global context to the debate, as well as sharpening the methodological vantage points. The editors are thrilled to include this debate on precolonial African economic history in the journal, and we encourage such polemics on scholarly topics.

Prosperetti studies the comparisons made by social scientists between Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire through the lens of the wager that the countries' political leaders Kwame Nkrumah and Félix Houphouët-Boigny made in 1957. The article offers an intriguing view on knowledge production and premises on the process of modernization in comparative social science. Although the case for Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire is quite unique, the article's conclusions allow for a wider application of the analytical framework introduced here.

A well-known phenomenon in West Africa are the funeral posters, affixed by family members in public places to announce the death of a loved one. Adotey shows that these posters are much more than that, pointing towards the way in which relations of the deceased are named on the posters – or not, as the case may be. Close scrutiny of two posters from the Ewe area, straddling the border of Ghana and Togo, leads the author to conclude that they are a useful source for historical research into issues like kinship and chiefly relations, with an eye to the complexities of local politics. Although based on evidence relating to one specific local context, and not a study on which we can base broader conclusions on social dialogue and social relations in general, the study invites further research into the possibilities of this source.

Studies on the overseas service of African soldiers during World War II are not rare, but the topic Coates addresses in his article on Ijebu soldiers from southwestern Nigeria serving in South Asia and the Middle East in 1943–1945 is quite novel. How and to what measure did these Nigerian soldiers maintain customary obligations during this period? It sheds a new and interesting light on the profession of soldiering in relation to local social and cultural structures, opening a methodological door for the study of other isolated professional groups.

The section "Institutional Life in Uganda" counts another four articles, with an introduction by Bruce-Lockhart and Earle. The articles stem for the theme of the 2017 African Studies Association conference, "Institutions: Creativity and Resilience in Africa" and examines the contestations underlying views on institutions in colonial and postcolonial Uganda. The introduction sets an agenda, the other four articles deal with disparate case-studies ranging from diplomatic gifts and colonial politics (Bennett), ethnonymic traditions (Browne), the archives on Idi Amin's prison officers (Bruce-Lockhart), and local knowledge production (Otim).

https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2018.21 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Different from the last section, which has an explicit empirical undertone, the articles in "Towards Multispecies History" are rather more theoretical and abstract. As the introducers (Schoenbrun and Johnson) argue, multispecies ethnicity, in which social anthropologists study people in relationship to "other-than-human beings," is in need of a better understanding by historians (of ethnography) and they call for a more sophisticated historical methodology. This is an interesting vantage point, especially when one considers it from the point of view of the discipline of history, rather than that of social anthropology. In their introduction Schoenbrun and Johnson summarize the literature on the subject – which is voluminous – and present an agenda of sorts.

Hoesing analyzes how, in Uganda, ideas about well-being and ethnicity are shaped "through specific musical references to flora and fauna" and makes a case for an inclusive approach in the study of music, ritual, the human, the symbolic, and the ecological, set in a historical context. Earle explores the triangular relationship between the colonial authorities, a spirit prophet, and the natural world in late colonial Uganda, with regard to the politics of independence and challenges to colonial power. Schoenbrun addresses the issue of the formation of an ethnic identity in times of crisis on several islands in Lake Victoria around the figure of Mukasa and non-human connections. Johnson, finally, explores the relationship between politics, gender, the family, and local Ugandan cosmologies on fish and the "hatching" of children. It is an intriguing, though complex, treatise on the way in which the lives of fish can influence thinking about politics, and how colonial political discourse and philosophy misinterpreted this completely.

This series of articles calls for some considerations from the point of view of the historiographer and theoretical historian. The necessity to include politics in a multispecies approach, as emphasized by the authors, brings one quickly to the only (historically) useable source to do so: oral tradition. Here, all species play their part and variations in the traditions allow for contesting world views. The claim that a multispecies perspective can also be a political claim is then valid. However, African history is undeniably more than oral tradition, whether one likes it or not, and this methodological limitation leaves room for further debate – something the editors applaud, as the changed subtitle of *History in Africa* indicates. Moreover, one can extend the discussion to the inclusion of methodologies from political science into the analysis, for an even better understanding of power relations in which the non-human element is a natural phenomenon.

The final section traditionally deals with archival reports, of which two are presented. The first, by Jacobs, presents the archives of the Fellowship Foundation, an American Evangelical organization. This collection of papers from the 1960s to 1987 is of particular interest to historians of international relations, as the Fellowship often acted as, what Jacobs calls, "a clandestine 'track two' diplomatic organization" across Africa. The second article, by Schouten, also focuses on a missionary organization, the Swedish

https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2018.21 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Mission Association in French Congo, which, according to the author, could be seen as a counterweight to official French records. The archives run from 1876 to 2013 but are most important for the period from the 1920s to the 1960s. Together, the two collections offer an interesting insight into what private papers can do for a historian's analytical viewpoint, the first on how a private organization can support and strengthen official policy, the second on how a private organization criticizes that same official policy. The debate on sources and historical perspective is offered by the sources themselves as it were.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2018.21 Published online by Cambridge University Press