


Editors' Introduction: African History's Interdisciplinary Roots, Ruts, and Routes

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For historians of Africa, there is nothing new about interdisciplinarity. Indeed, Paul Zeleza reminds us that debates about interdisciplinarity are more than a few decades old and they are not limited to the study of Africa. The issue of academic organization into disciplines or departments versus other configurations dates back to the nineteenth-century origins of the Eurocentric university system that has, in turn, shaped the contemporary study of African history. Yet Zeleza also rightly observes that the process of interdisciplinarity has always been “an act of translation and transculturation.”¹ He thereby evokes a central practice in African history writing. We do not simply uncover or narrate histories but we engage, interpret, reimagine, and fundamentally transform histories in the process of conveying them in written, oral, visual, or digital forms.

The interdisciplinary debates in the field of African history have often concerned methodological and interpretive questions between historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, and linguists, for example. Yet, as Jan Vansina remarked in an article in *History in Africa* in 2009, there has been less theorization around interdisciplinary methods in African history.² In fact, we proposed a

¹ Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, “The Disciplinary, Interdisciplinary, and Global Dimensions of African Studies,” in *The International Journal of African Renaissance Studies* 1–2 (2006), 197–198.

² Jan Vansina, “Is a Journal of Method Still Necessary?,” in *History in Africa* 36 (2009), 424–427.

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call for a special section on “new interdisciplinary approaches to African history” in the hopes of inspiring the very theoretical and methodological analysis that Vansina envisioned. We soon realized some of the same lingering possibilities and limits in much of the interdisciplinary scholarship work still concerns rethinking different archival data, linguistic sources, or archaeological materials. Ultimately, interdisciplinarity in African history and African Studies often takes the form of multidisciplinary programs or collaborations. Rarely are individual scholars able to engage in fully interdisciplinary work or to move beyond individual disciplines to a transdisciplinary space.³ But these persistent challenges may point precisely to possibilities for new directions.

First, we suggest other origins for interdisciplinary approaches to African history in the earlier interdisciplinary and pan-Africanist tradition pioneered by a towering figure like W. E. B. DuBois, who is known for his foundational role in American sociology but also for his prolific work across history, literature, and journalism. Diverse sources were also deployed by early African writers who were often missionaries, politicians, and/or activists such as Rev. Samuel Johnson of Nigeria or Edward Wilmot Blyden of Sierra Leone; this volume features an article on Sol Plaatje’s use of film in his research and writing in South Africa. African diaspora politics and activism also continued to shape approaches to African history in the crucial decades of the 1960s and 1970s.⁴ Black scholars, in particular, recognized the complex ongoing relationship between Africa and its diaspora. Together with new generations of African historians who deployed song, oral narratives, and praise poems that engaged in the early decolonial approaches, this scholarship centered on African and African diaspora knowledge production.⁵

Debates continue about the boundaries of historical practice in relation to certain methods in anthropology, linguistics, and archaeology, especially for earlier periods before 1800. However, there are also possibilities to think beyond those dynamics.⁶ In an article theorizing interdisciplinarity from the perspective of literary studies, Ato Quayson suggests that interdisciplinarity is a process of “locat[ing] interstitial realities” that remain in tension because of

³ Zeleza, “The Disciplinary, Interdisciplinary,” 199.

⁴ William G. Martin, “The Rise of African Studies (USA) and the Transnational Study of Africa,” in *African Studies Review* 54–1 (2011), 77.

⁵ For a short retrospective, see Joseph E. Harris, “African Diaspora: Some International Dimensions,” in *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 24–2 (1996), 6–8. As an example of African scholarship from the 1970s that proposed these new methods, see Bolanle Awe, “Praise Poems as Historical Data: The Example of Yoruba Oríkì,” in *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 44–4 (1974), 331–349.

⁶ Kathryn M. de Luna, Jeffrey B. Fleisher, and Susan Keech McIntosh, “Thinking Across the African Past: Interdisciplinary and Early History,” in *African Archaeological Review* 29 (2012), 75–94. Catherine Cymone Fourshey, Rhonda M. Gonzales, and Christine Saidi, *Bantu Africa: 3500 BCE to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

what each discipline must bring to the interdisciplinary relationship.⁷ Perhaps the point of interdisciplinary work may be to embrace those disciplinary tensions rather than try to suppress them in order to try new approaches to the pivotal transformations of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries.

In fact, our call for papers on interdisciplinarity for the current volume resulted in a diverse array of articles. Because of the fruitful intersections between the articles focused on interdisciplinarity and our general-submission articles, we have interspersed them in the first three sections of this issue. In a section on theorizing new interdisciplinary approaches, we begin with articles that we found pushed the notions of interdisciplinary possibilities into the newest theoretical terrain, in two very different ways.

In "Mau Mau as Method," Christian Alvarado writes about the Kenyan insurrectionary anti-colonial movement of Mau Mau, not as an historical event, memory or myth, but as a discursive signifier moving through larger "systems of information." Alvarado argues that Mau Mau can be considered as an historical method because it implies the imposition of epistemological structure on a durable phenomenon. In this case, the durability of tropes of "wildness" and instinctive savagery that were first applied to the Land and Freedom Army and other Kenyan anti-colonialists by British colonizers and the world media hardened into stereotypical explanations of permanently insensible indigenous intransigence. The movement from Mau Mau as event to Mau Mau as discursive tool is most implicitly akin, perhaps, to scholarship in the multivalent world of queer studies, in which instabilities and continuities rest uneasily hand in hand.

In "Cinema and the Idea of Fieldwork in Sol Plaatje's Journeys," the authors Fernanda Pinto de Almeida and Aiden Erasmus focus on Sol Plaatje (1876–1932), the indefatigable South African socio-political pioneer who had a good head for the power of the media. In the 1920s, Plaatje lugged films from the Tuskegee Institute in the US around the rural areas of South Africa in an attempt to broaden his audiences' views of their own political possibilities. Importantly however, Plaatje also considered cinema as a part of his own fieldwork practice as an author and politician. Thus his emphasis on class mobility, personal travel, transnational imagery, and the engagement of rural audiences presents a model of interdisciplinarity in cinema studies, which the authors argue, can assist in broadening contemporary conceptions of the role and impact of cinema in African history.

Our second section on "Reinterpreting and Reviewing Evidence" addresses some of the classic debates in African history around the use of interviews, ecological data, archaeological resources, and oral narratives and suggests ways that these materials can be reimagined and repurposed to make

⁷ Ato Quayson, "Means and Meanings: Methodological Issues in Africanist Interdisciplinary Research," in *History in Africa* 25 (1998), 318.

different arguments that can center the intellectual work of African authors and knowledge producers. The central argument of James Parker's article on "Ecologies of Development: Ecophilosophies and Indigenous Action on the Tana River, Kenya" is the reorientation of African environmental history to incorporate localized ecophilosophies, racial ecologies, and environmental justice. The author posits that doing so will allow scholars to rigorously challenge the sociocultural and ecological implications of colonial and post-colonial environmental development in Africa and elsewhere. Using the Tana River in Kenya, East Africa, as a point of reference, and employing conventional methodology, the author challenges conservative notions of space by outlining how the river connects peoples and interests in different geographic spaces so that the interest of one group has a direct effect on the other group. The author also situates the Tana at the center of the lives of Pokomo and Orma communities close to the river. From these, readers get a sense of how local communities produced knowledge about the river, revealing the views and perspectives of local communities about their environmental resources.

Daren Ray's article, "Recycling Interdisciplinary Evidence: Abandoned Hypotheses and African Historiologies in the Settlement History of Littoral East Africa," proposes an intriguing process of "recycling." Once upon a time, historians, archaeologists, historical linguists, and anthropologists sparred in debate over the location, in fact the very existence, of a place called "Shungwaya" somewhere along the coast of East Africa. As historical methods rise and fall in fashion, this particular debate has been superseded by other foci. However, Ray contends that there are gems still to be found in the reinterpretation of oral history interviews about Shungwaya when African historiologies (communal stories of the past) are treated as sovereign perspectives rather than as mere evidence to buttress one side or the other of the older Shungwaya debates.

Our third set of articles focuses on the contents and analyses of archives. McNulty and Hamilton harken back to the special section in our 2021 volume on digital humanities, complementing Musandu's submission on digitally born archival records. The pieces by Mbah and El Guabli responded to our call on interdisciplinary approaches with deep dives into different types of archival sources that challenge understandings of specific historical contexts, while Anaïs Angelo's article, discussed below, asks us to reconsider the intersection of history and politics in presidential archives.

In "Refiguring the Archive for Eras before Writing: Digital Interventions, Affordances and Research Futures," Grant McNulty and Carolyn Hamilton urge historians to take advantage of digital tools to reinvigorate pre-colonial historiography. There are many places on the African continent, such as KwaZulu Natal in present-day South Africa, where historians generally consider there to be virtually no pre-colonial "sources." Yet the authors argue that digital interventions and affordances have the capacity (although not without

their own problematics) to bring neglected, overlooked, sequestered and lost materials of the pre-colonial “non-archive” closer to light.

By contrast, while many have considered the digitization of archives a cause for celebration, in “The Elephant in the Room: The Implications of ICT Proliferation in Kenya for Archiving and Historical Research,” Phoebe Musandu sounds a cautionary note and points to potential hazards. Examining digitally born government records in Kenya, she demonstrates that the lack of government support and training for those charged with managing these archives puts them at risk of being lost altogether. Musandu’s analysis makes clear that if these issues are not addressed in the present, they will negatively impact historical research in the future.

Looking at a different set of contemporary African archives, in “Presidential Powers in Postcolonial Africa Deserve Attention,” Anaïs Angelo asks why so many post-colonial African countries are led by a “president.” Why has that particular conception of leadership been so influential in the processes of African political decolonization? Angelo argues for the renewed study of presidential power to break the automatic link of African post-colonialism with virtual metropolitan determinism and with the cynical stereotyping of leadership styles.

Looking at a similar time frame in a North American context, Brahim El Guabli interrogates problems related to preserving official (state) and non-official documentary heritage as well as the role of historical memory in Morocco during the “Years of Lead,” the historical period that spanned five decades between Morocco’s independence in 1956 and the end of the reign of King Hassan II in 1999. The period was characterized by widespread state violence in all sectors of life in the kingdom, including the production of knowledge and the writing of the country’s post-colonial history. To redress the wrongs of this era, the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (2004–2005) recommended the establishment of historical truth and the (re)writing of the country’s post-colonial history. To address the problem of a lack of access to official documentation for the period under consideration, the author suggests recourse to “other-archives,” defined as “all forms of sources that provide access to uncomfortable histories that lie outside the purview of classical official archives.” Sources in this genre will include interviews, biographies, and literature, thereby promoting a fusion of interdisciplinary approaches in addressing the harm done to the national history of Morocco during the “Years of Lead.”

Ndubueze Mbah’s “‘Wives Wishing to Join Their Husbands’: Colonial Forgery, Gender Legibility, and Labor Migration in West Africa” also uses a range of archival sources creatively to highlight new histories of women from southeastern Nigeria. Mbah shows how women used the status of “wife” to make demands on the colonial government and facilitate travel to Fernando Po and Gabon between the 1930s and 1950s. In the words of the author, these women, though illiterate, “contingently exploit[ed] wifehood as an instrumental forgery.” Interestingly, these women mobilized colonial documentation to

initiate autonomous means of social reproduction at a time when both European colonial officials and African men strove to limit women's economic autonomy and ability to determine their marital lives and sexuality. Using photographic evidence from the archives, the author demonstrates women's agency in subverting colonial bureaucracy and navigating a masculine labor migration system and reflects on how photographs can be more fully utilized in reconstructing African history.

Our articles on "History Spanning the Sahara" show a different perspective on the movement of people and ideas that problematize the common divide between North Africa and Africa south of the Sahara. Samuel D. Anderson, in "From Algiers to Timbuktu: Multi-Local Research in Colonial History Across the Saharan Divide," revisits the challenges of compartmentalizing sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa into distinct regions of study. For a more holistic picture of the region around the Sahara, and for the benefit of unifying the historiography of North and West Africa, the author proposes the practice of researching in multiple African archives. He demonstrates this process by tracing the careers of two Algerians teachers in Mauritania and Mali and connecting them to his own research journeys. He proposes this methodology to help scholars confront geographical frameworks that structure scholarly inquiry while potentially transcending the limits of colonial boundaries.

Similarly, Mauro Nobili challenges the divide between North Africa and the rest of the continent that is promulgated by the Area Studies framework. He notes that this artificial separation makes it difficult for scholars to trace the rich history of connections between the two regions. Examining the holdings in two Moroccan manuscript libraries for materials related to West African history, Nobili demonstrates the kinds of insights that can be gleaned about these connections by taking a more integrated approach to African history.

As we try to think differently about sources that connect historiographies of the continent in new ways, we are happy to be able to include articles that remind us of the work that African history departments on the continent do to develop and revitalize our field. *History in Africa's* new initiative on "History from Africa" reminds us that as all historians of the African continent and the African diaspora grapple with the ethical problematics of research, writing, collaboration and publishing, it is easy to forget that, first and foremost, African history emanates from academics and students in African educational institutions. This new section highlights their voices and perspectives. Since at least the 1950s, African universities have supported (sometimes generously, other times more meagerly) history departments that have graduated thousands of students, produced thousands of books and journal articles, sponsored hundreds of conferences and workshops, hosted and housed important historical debates, and thereby played crucial roles in the rise and fall of national, regional, and transnational historiographies.

In this volume, four insiders—two Nigerians, a South African, and a Zimbabwean—reflect critically on dynamics of their own departments and historiographical traditions. In “Historical Scholarship and Training at Ife: Growth, Personalities, Achievements and Challenges, 1962–2022,” Saheed Amusa and Abimbola Adesoji reflect on the growth and development of the Department of History at the Obafemi Awolowo University, formerly University of Ife, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, beginning at its inception in 1962. Offering a rich biographical sketch of the academic members running from the pioneers to current faculty, this piece demonstrates the Department’s depth and reach over time. Ushewhedu Kufakurinani chronicles the achievements but also the institutional demotion of the sub-field of Economic History at the University of Zimbabwe as a small but stubbornly anti-hegemonic historical method that was thrown a supposed lifeboat of “history as heritage” laden with distinctly political overtones. For South Africa, Neil Roos’ perspectives on attempted transformations of historical praxis at a university that was once a bastion of apartheid-era racial orthodoxy is a hopeful yet cautionary tale of the aspirations of “post-liberation” history education. *History In Africa* will issue regular calls for submissions that will highlight and showcase the achievements, traditions, and challenges of history and allied departments in African universities. We welcome expressions of interest for “History From Africa” segments in upcoming volumes.

Finally, we are pleased to include contributions to our long-standing feature on archival notes. In this volume, we hear from authors discussing the conditions of the state archival records in two of the last African countries to achieve formal independence: Zimbabwe (1980) and Namibia (1990). As weeds literally reclaim statues of Cecil Rhodes in the backyard of the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ), George Bishi reviews relationships between archivists and researchers in NAZ’s inner sanctum through independent Zimbabwe’s eras of economic and social upheaval. Meanwhile, according to Tycho Hoog, the state archives of Namibia are close to completing the cataloging of records relating to the struggles for independence, and thus will soon be able to support the production of new perspectives on Namibian history other than its German and South African colonial pasts.

With articles spanning the continent from north to south, this volume of *History in Africa* has much more of a focus on contemporary history into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. While there has been a focus in some of the classic interdisciplinary approaches on the earlier eras of African history, it is important to envision interdisciplinary approaches across time-lines and, more importantly, as part of potential methodologies that can shape African history’s place as a field and site of theoretical innovation. African and African American scholars were some of the first to decenter Europe in their telling of the African past. Scholars of Africa can also be recognized for being at the forefront of theorizing and transcending restrictive historical methodologies for the future.

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