

INTRODUCTION

Editors' Introduction

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At fifty, *History in Africa* remains unique in the academic publishing landscape. Historical debates, innovative analysis, and attention to methods are central to the challenge of writing and researching any history. We know that the stakes are different for the continent because African history is often overlooked and misrepresented. Various forms of information, knowledge, and learning have been facing attack in different ways and on a global scale. *HiA* continues to be a home for in-depth explorations, reflections, and discussions of epistemological questions about what happened in the African past.

As we prepare to transition *HiA* soon to its next editorial team, we have begun to reflect on our own work since 2021. We are the journal's first all-woman, transatlantic African American and African team – based in the US East, Midwest and South, and West Africa. In the last five years, *HiA* has continued to produce one major volume per year and the transition to fully online publishing with Cambridge University Press has been completed. The journal is now indexed in SCOPUS and Web of Science (WOS), facilitating visibility and citations. The “History from Africa” section highlights the developments and activities of academic departments of history in African universities. Since 2022, we have participated in group publishing panels at the African Studies Association to discuss the logistics of publishing, including the maze of manuscript preparation, submission, revision, and acceptance. We have also sponsored panels related to themes in *HiA* including brainstorming new projects, reflecting on artifacts in African history, and different forms of historical writing. At the same time, there were also challenges to update and improve our processes. We had ideas and projects that we were unable to pursue.

This year's journal highlights some of our initiatives in using calls for papers for special sections; expanding the pool of authors; and encouraging submissions from scholars based on the African continent. If we see African historiography as a well-loved forest, its health depends on the growth of all its trees, especially those vigorously growing in African landscapes that have been disregarded or overlooked by and in US- and Eurocentric historiographical traditions. We join many others in working to redress those stubborn dynamics. The final article of

this volume notes a trend with new generations of historians from Africa completing schooling in the Global North, including the United States. This dynamic is one of many factors that are leading historians of Africa to ask different questions and share ideas in new forms. Looking forward, as our methods, theories, and sources for African history shift, *HiA* should reflect that movement and change, if not transformation.

Our research section begins with an article on the connections between Africa and the African diaspora. This area of scholarship was one that we sought to develop in order to highlight African contexts in shaping that relationship. In their article “Saliu Salvador Ramos das Neves, a Nineteenth-Century Yoruba Muslim in the Black Atlantic,” Lisa Earl Castillo and Kristin Mann engage the popular study of *Aguda* or returned Brazilians to West Africa in new ways. They carefully trace the movements of Ramos das Neves and his family and associates back and forth across the Atlantic to reveal a multilayered relationship built around religion, family, and commerce. Highlighting the importance of Islam as part of *Aguda* identity underscores the complexity of the African context as part of this living transatlantic network.

In their article, “Law and History in Angola: The Collection of Court Cases in the Benguela District Court (1850–1945),” Candido, Dias Paes, and de Matos Ngala explore the vast potential and limits of preserved court records from the Benguela District Court in Angola, for the period 1850 to 1945. Their research reveals some of the methodological issues integral in the use of court records as a historical source. In general, detailed trial transcripts, wills, deeds, and contracts reveal important aspects of Africans’ lives but notably those who lived near colonial centers. In addition to intimate details of people’s experiences, the work of African lawyers, clerks, and translators also emerge from the documents. While African engagement with the colonial regime may appear passive, the authors argue that the archival records reveal their interest, participation, and knowledge of the colonial legal landscape.

Cheikh Sene’s study “Vivre en paix et en bonne intelligence avec les princes locaux” in *Senegambia in the Age of Slave Economy: Diplomatic Treaties, Trade, Conflicts, and Peace in Interaction (1679–1815)*,” based on archival sources and trade records of the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, sheds new light on the complexity of the history of diplomatic relations between the French and local leaders in the Senegambia region. At the start of the European-African relationship as the transatlantic slave trade expanded in the region, European nations accepted their African counterparts on an equal footing and recognized the sovereignty and independence of African societies and states. Over time, however, European merchants devised alternative forms of power through palavers and treaties to enable them to exploit their African partners’ territories. Violence of the slave trade, fraud, and rivalry often upended agreements causing the proliferation of treaties after 1785. Jealousy, brutality, and subterfuge became the norm in the Atlantic trade and the banning of the slave trade in 1815 and the inauguration of the legitimate trade brought no significant changes in diplomatic relations.

Environmental history is a long-standing field in African history. One aspect of the new approaches in the field includes scholars who are able to re-examine

older studies with the benefits of new tools, perspectives, and creative collaborations. This volume features two such articles. The first, “A Tapestry of Human-Induced and Climate Driven Environmental Change in Western Uganda: The Ndali Crater Lakes Region,” is authored by Peter Schmidt, Jonathan Walz, Jackline Besigye, and Julius Lejju. It makes a multilayered reappraisal of the historical, linguistic, and archaeological evidence of environmental change in western Uganda for hundreds of years on both sides of the BCE/CE divide. The authors urge environmental scholars to abandon the habit of “imagining” human actions when they run out of historical data; and they lay a similar injunction on historians who craft opportunistic narratives of environmental causation at the limits of their linguistic and historical data. Instead, a more simultaneously interdisciplinary approach, enriched by archaeology, reveals intricate interplays of nature and culture in the Ndali Crater Lakes Region over the course of hundreds of years.

The second article “Archival Aerial Photographs of Africa: Present Potential and Imagining a Machine-Learning Future,” begins with a different premise: the forest or the trees? Emmanuel Kreike explores this question as he argues that archival aerial photography is shortly to have a massive rebirth through the use of machine learning. Twentieth-century aerial photography has sent thousands upon thousands of images of virtually every nation on earth into archival storage – and they are, Kreike argues, now a treasure trove for tracking environmental change over time with the use of new digital tools. Manual/visual assessment and conventional pixel analysis cannot, for example, track the fates of the approximately 800,000 individual trees that were growing in Ovamboland in the 1940s. But Kreike argues that we are on the threshold of writing algorithms that will allow historians not only to track trees, but discern the prevalence and placements of water holes, households, fields, and fallows at a sub-1-meter scale. The potential of this new analytical methodology holds enormous promise for blended environmental and social histories, especially for places like central Namibia, which have not been particularly well served by environmental historiography, but where there is an urgent need to understand climatic change over time.

History in Africa has a long-standing feature on archives and sources, and this year’s volume includes three articles that highlight the wealth of materials in different institutions in Ghana while also detailing a range of challenges that interested researchers may face. In his contribution to the volume, Frank Afari examines the National Reconciliation Commission’s (NRC) archival holdings. The NRC, which was created in 2002 to establish a historical record of human rights abuses by public institutions and holders of public office between 1957 and 1993, produced an abundance of documentary and audiovisual material that is now held in a range of libraries and repositories in Ghana. Afari traces the difficulties he and other researchers have faced due to various restrictions to access, noting that these restrictions are driven in part by concerns among those who testified before the NRC that they might face reprisal. Despite these issues with access, Afari demonstrates that there is a wealth of material available and details precisely how researchers can locate and access it. In this way, he provides a critical guide for researchers interested in this important archive.

Manuel Manu-Osafo and his coauthors George Bob-Milliar and Ben Jones, discuss how urban history can be examined from various perspectives using the archives held by the Public Records and Archive Administration Department, Kumase, and the Manhiya Palace to expand the historiography of urban Asante. In addition to information on accessing the records, they suggest a range of topics, including the landscape and geography of public parks, public health, and urban planning. They conclude with a discussion of their experience with familiar “tin-trunk archives,” which are private collections, often held by elders, local leaders, or activists. Their stories of negotiations – not always successful – suggest the many ways to approach the study of daily urban life inside official archives and beyond them.

Samuel Ntewusu joins several colleagues in reporting on the range of resources that came to light through a collaborative project on the Railway Archive in Sekondi-Takoradi in Ghana. He and his coauthors Stefano Bellucci, Samuel Andreas Adamasie, and Frederick Abraham began a pilot for a digitization project in 2018 based on the findings in the archive. Their report discusses the importance of the materials for an international labor history, noting the wealth of information available concerning employment on the railways of people from Ghana, other West African nations, and Europe. Accessing the materials is challenging, however, due to stringent protocols for access and the destruction of files. Sadly, while his research team was engaged in their digitization project, the roof of a building containing documents caved in, leading to significant loss of materials. Nonetheless important sources remain, including yearly staff diaries.

Finally, we include a contribution to our “History from Africa” series. In his article, “History and the Development of Historical Scholarship in Africa,” Jeremiah Arowosegbe takes an unsparing look at the state of academic history departments on the African continent. With a long view of capital-H History from its earliest instantiations in Western philosophical traditions and academic institutions, Arowosegbe traces its slow rooting in African colonial settings and assesses the extent to which decolonization is tugging at those roots. Particularly critical of stagnant pools of knowledge production in Nigeria and South Africa, he bemoans the passing of the early eras of promise following the achievement of independence across the continent. Still, he holds out hope for new generations of African historians, ironically many of whom are being trained wholly in, or in partnership with, Western institutions.