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Editors' Introduction

The articles in this issue cover and trouble several chronological, methodological, and historiographical terrains and boundaries. The five research articles are regionally and chronologically diverse, but they raise convergent questions around sources, interpretive distance, and the historian's positionality in unpacking stories, ideas, knowledge, and practices bequeathed by African historical actors.

The question of how a particular past connects to a previous history or extends it is posed to various degrees by the articles. Relatedly, the articles, in their own ways, highlight the ways in which historical narratives are formed and transformed in both oral and written sources on one hand and in historiographical consensus on the other.

David Gordon's article radically reevaluates the well-known love story between Chibinda Ilunga and Lueji, a staple Central African genesis legend. The article transcends the traditional way the story has been treated by historians: pitting its symbolic connotations against historical evidence or straining to reconcile the two. Gordon instead addresses the question of why the legend acquired a vigorous new life in the mid-nineteenth century, clearly transitioning from a simple, formulaic African origin story to an elaborate narrative carrying important sociopolitical and economic stakes.

In answering the question of the legend's nineteenth-century reinvigoration, the article reveals the political utility of oral traditions and the dynamism and elasticity of such traditions in correspondence to changing conditions, social relations, and political priorities.

Gordon shows that, when Portuguese explorer and diplomat, Henrique Dias de Carvalho, encountered the story, he and his African informants gave it a new political valence. At a time of booming caravan trade in Kasai and eastern Angola, actors from different factions of proximate invested polities added new dimensions to the legend as ways of articulating their 'interests and narratives' in the context of intensifying zero-sum competition for 'political titles and trading profits'.

Gordon's article suggests that the love story's resurgence in the nineteenth century points to the multiple lives and functions of oral tradition. In this case, the story and its multiple elaborations came to underpin what Gordon calls a 'pax Lunda guaranteed by the Portuguese', demonstrating that, for African historians, the benefits of exploring the historical contexts and utilitarian dimensions of oral traditions outweigh the often dead-end effort to reconcile such traditions to historical facticity.

Zachary Wright's article, covering the mid-fifteenth century to the mid-seventeenth, writes the little-recognized Islamic exegetical and political initiatives of clerical communities in the Middle Niger into the much better-known history of clerical religious revolutions of nineteenth century West Africa. Wright upends the traditional chronology and disjuncture of West African Islamic history, reaching back to an earlier period to show how clerics scattered across the Middle Niger, outside of Timbuktu and other well-known West African urban centers of learning, sought to intervene in the political realm to make governance more humane and socially just. The clerics also prioritized the protection of women, Wright argues, prefiguring the revolutionary discourses of later centuries.

Wright demonstrates that a new, more attentive reading of familiar Arabic sources from the region in the two centuries covered reveals a religious environment in which scholars staked claims to community autonomy while exerting pressure on political establishments to 'temper unjust political power'. The nineteenth-century jihads, Wright shows, were, at least in the Middle Niger, extensions of the 'earlier spiritual jihad' more than they were either spasmodic religiopolitical events or radical departures from the past.

Hermann von Hesse, working with a different set of sources in the mid-nineteenth century and in a different part of West Africa, questions yet another influential historiographical consensus. Using the stories and archives of African merchants on the Gold Coast, von Hesse constructs a fascinating profile of a class of Africans, who, in the transitional period of the mid to late nineteenth century, consciously adopted a robust sartorial ensemble. This profile, von Hesse contends, was a carefully curated social artifact that projected the 'cultural dynamism' and economic success of a group of Africans. These Africans actively participated in the circuits of commodity and ideational exchanges that connected Africa to Europe and Asia, and deployed the material culture of these exchanges in forging a new fashion, along with its semiotics.

For von Hesse, these merchants were not merely 'creolized' Africans or mimics of European dress styles as they are often portrayed in the historiographical literature. Instead, he argues that Ga and Fante mercantile classes transformed imported European textiles and fashion ideas into new instruments of embodied self-representation. The merchants birthed new social meanings, von Hesse notes, through their dress styles and their creative use of imported fabrics. The resulting aesthetic economy compellingly articulated and propagated a sense of power, 'family integrity', and the commercial and ancestral ramifications of worn textiles.

Another article in this issue focuses on a later period of Gold Coast colonial history and on an environmental disaster that became a touchstone for contestations between and among European colonial administrators and Africans. **Waseem-Ahmed Bin-Kasim** demonstrates that while the 1939 earthquake in Accra seemed to have opened the door to long sought-after urban rebuilding and rehousing plans, as with most colonial projects, the failure to consider the plight of victims of the earthquake and the spatial anxieties of the larger Accra African population, some of which predated the disaster, fueled 'urban discontent' and exacerbated existing colonial tensions.

Bin-Kasim argues that the nexus of the failure of colonial rebuilding plans and the rising, contentious politics of the colonial urban built space resulted in local political activism that mapped onto nascent anticolonial nationalist agitations. The author introduces environmental disaster and its aftermath and management into a familiar African colonial historiographical narrative around the causal relationship between African grievances and anticolonial nationalism. He shows that in Accra, African grievances had origins in both a natural disaster and its mishandling by the colonial authorities in the form of an insensitive rebuilding and rehousing program.

The last research article in this issue analyzes a uniquely tense moment in late colonial Kenya, marked by European settler efforts to maintain their public privileges against the tide of decolonization and sociopolitical change. **Meghan Ference** takes us into the world of a group of European women who called themselves 'The Housewives' and wrote letters to Nairobi's mayor and the Kenya Bus Service (KBS) to protest proposed changes to bus operations in the volatile political period of the 1950s. Ference delves analytically into the missives of the women, showing the social undercurrents and contexts of their reactionary activism.

The European bus riders wrote the letters to reject a proposal to abolish the first-class compartment of the transit bus and make all seating the same price. The letters sought to keep buses racially segregated by differential bus fares and differential seating. The letters, Ference argues, reveal two intersecting points: that the letter writers had particular anxieties about African bus riders, and especially African Muslim women as competing and threatening presences on Nairobi public transportation, and that African bus riders were a potent force in the quotidian political squabbles of the Nairobi urban milieu.

African bus riders, Ference demonstrates, were crucial in shaping the intersection of automobility and urbanity in a late colonial period in which European actors sought to delay or derail egalitarian change, and the colonial government's declared State of Emergency and its counterinsurgency against the Land and Freedom Army (Mau Mau) were ending, even as colonial tensions escalated.

Ference's analysis situates the European women's letters as compelling evidence of the ways in which urban infrastructures, spaces, and services became 'battlegrounds during the final years of

British colonial rule in Kenya'. She follows the example of some recent works to write mass transit buses into the historiography of African colonial and postcolonial urban life.

In this issue's History Matters, a group of historians who study the Islamic and intellectual history of western and northern Africa have gathered their thoughts and appreciation on the legacy of William Allen Brown (1934–2007). Brown's intellectual legacy, the authors contend, remains underappreciated because he did not conform to the traditional expectations and metrics of scholarly valuation: number of publications, doctoral students supervised, and undergraduates taught.

Brown, they write, was an immensely important scholar-activist who influenced and was influenced by the entwined radical politics of decolonization and civil rights that coalesced in the 1960s and 1970s. Having been educated as an undergraduate in an HBCU and having interacted ephemerally with Malcolm X, he developed a radical personal politics that was interlaced with his family's Baptist roots, his Marxist ideological leanings, and his epistemological quests in the histories of Egypt and Muslim West Africa. The resulting scholarly identity was as eclectic as it was profound, the authors write.

Although Brown published sparsely, the writers demonstrate that he intervened in several important scholarly debates of his time, ranging from the place of Egypt in African history to the sourcing for West African Islamic history and African history more broadly. His academic appointments at Ahmadu Bello University, Yale University, Harvard University, and his tenured position at the University of Wisconsin-Madison foregrounded an intellectual itinerary that hugged and engaged both sides of the Atlantic even as he remained grounded in a primary interest in West African Islamic history and political culture.

The authors, former students, mentees, and scholars who have been influenced or inspired by Brown's work, pay tribute to a scholar who shunned conventional, structured understandings of supervision and mentorship, and instead focused his intellectual energy on teaching, Arabic manuscript collection and interpretation, and informal, arguably more impactful modes of mentorship.

The authors reserve special mention for Brown's magnum opus, his unpublished doctoral dissertation, 'The Caliphate of Hamdullahi' (Wisconsin, 1969). The work is a key reference and point of scholarly departure for historians, archaeologists, geographers, anthropologists, and other scholars of Islam and precolonial politics in the inland Niger delta region of West Africa. That this work commands the attention of a multidisciplinary array of scholars attests to its enduringly high quality.

How is it possible that an unpublished dissertation written more than fifty years ago retains such scholarly sway over the field? **Ousman Kobo** and **Sean Hanretta** provide instructive cues in their elegantly written and enlightening introduction: the work is rigorous, chock-full of textual and oral testimonial evidence, and is a pioneer work highlighting the intellectual and theological heft of a previously and still neglected theocratic state, which is often subsumed under larger polities that resulted from bigger Islamic reform movements.

The other point of uniqueness and influence in the dissertation is, according to Kobo and Hanretta, Brown's approach of departing from the existing treatment of West African Islamic reformist states' discourse as monolithic extensions of the founders' ideologies. Brown, Kobo and Hanretta, contend, instead paid keen attention to debates, tensions, theological plurality, and shifting consensus in the Ḥamdullāhi state.

The *Diina* (Caliphate) of Māsina, headquartered at Ḥamdullāhi, was founded in 1818 by Seeku Amadu Lobbo, as a Fulani caliphal state and was conquered by the forces of al-Ḥājj 'Umar Taal in 1862, during the latter's successful effort to establish a larger, multiethnic Islamic caliphate. Kobo and Hanretta show that Brown not only took the Caliphate of Ḥamdullāhi seriously as a center of important and theologically consequential debates about state-building but that he also grounded his analysis of Lobbo's and his advisers' motives and aspirations in oral sources. He was a pioneer of integrating Arabic texts and oral sources to understand the undercurrents of West African Islamic history.

The authors remark on Brown's pioneering work in the oral history of the inland Niger delta as well as on his important interventions in the oral history methodological debates in African history

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in the late 1960s and 1970s, most notably his critique of the use of structuralist and functionalist methods — and what he regarded as 'racist and Orientalist' assumptions — to interpret the oral traditions and Arabic manuscripts of the Mande world.

Taken together, essays by Kobo, Hanretta, **Madina Thiam**, **Mauro Nobili** and **Said Bousbina**, **Bernard Salvaing**, and **David Henry Anthony, III** celebrate the intellectual legacies of Brown as a scholar, teacher, mentor, and manuscript collector/translator whose collection of original Arabic texts now sits proudly and is accessible to scholars as the Yale University Malian Arabic Manuscript Microfilming Project.

Through the discussion of Brown's multivalent scholarly identity and the breadth of his influence and engagements, the authors challenge the conventional understanding of scholarly influence and importance that is constrained by institutionally defined modes of engagement, knowledge production and dissemination, and measurable metrics of mentorship.

This issue's eight reviews cover broad chronologies, geographies, and methodologies. We begin in early colonial Southern Africa, with **Jochen Arndt**'s study of missionaries, language, and the construction of Zulu and Xhosa ethnic identities. JAH board member **Raevin Jimenez** is our reviewer. **Heather Sharkey** pursues similar questions in East Africa with her review of **Morgan Robinson**'s study of the standardization and dissemination of Swahili.

Our next reviews pivot from closely observed studies of localized interactions and developments to more macro accounts of connection and conflict over the last many centuries. We are happy to feature **Liang Xu**'s review of the eminent Chinese Africanist **Anshan Li**'s magisterial three-volume history of Chinese-African interactions — a massive subject, of ever-increasing scholarly and political importance. **Jacob Wiebel**'s review of the latest volume of *Acta Aethiopica's* Ethiopia-focused archival collection focuses on the intrigue, collaboration, and contests that defined Ethiopian-European relations during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Rounding out this subsection of reviews, **Sarah Walters** considers how the Portuguese government thought about and addressed what it considered the 'population problem' in colonized Angola. As our reviewer reveals, **Samuël Coghe**'s study sheds new light on colonial policies during the first half of the twentieth century, as well as on the transnational histories of demography and medicine.

Our next two reviews bring us back to South Africa and focus on related aspects of that country's still-unfinished (and never coming?) revolution. **Arianna Lissoni** reviews **Paul Landau**'s richly detailed, dizzyingly cast, and ambitiously revisionist history of the first phase of the armed struggle against apartheid. One of Landau's goals is more firmly to define the South African Communist Party's role in the country's resistance politics; **Tom Lodge**'s monumental study of a century of the SACP shares this ambition. **Alan Kirkaldy** — himself a leading historian of the South African left — is our reviewer. Finally, **Ola Uduku** examines a different sort of revolution — an architectural one, fashioned via the collaborative efforts of Israeli and African architects, engineers, and governments during the era of decolonization and immediate postindependence. **Ayala Levin**'s study considers a cast of characters and collaborators rendered unlikely in hindsight; her careful archival and other research restores the lack of predictability that defines history and reminds us that the past is both vast and strange.

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