

## **Panel D19: Disciplinary Trends in African History**

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### **Convenors:**

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### **Contributors:**

#### **Discussant:**

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#### **Panellists:**

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**Abstract of the panel:**

This panel aims to bring together old and new perspectives on the history of African historiography, i.e. on the history of how Africans and others, from within and outside of African societies, have dealt with and thought about the African past. The panel invites papers on a wide range of topics, including, the legacy of the slave trade and how it has been studied, pan-African visions of history, how the 'Mfecane' became conceptualized as a period in Southern-African history and how the power of the paradigmatic logic of the Hamitic hypothesis was employed to introduce a racialist logic in African history. Historical analysis of the key methodological debates, for instance, the use of oral history and oral traditions as source materials, is of interest, too – especially in relation to debates on the decolonization of history. Lastly, the panel also wishes to engage with the actors and networks of this intellectual history and the history of decolonization of historiography that ensued. For instance: what has been the role of international institutions such as UNESCO and its General History of Africa project in establishing a historiography of Africa?

**Papers:**

Larissa Schulte Nordholt – Confronting the Hamitic hypothesis in UNESCO's General History Africa  
This paper analyses how and why the so-called Hamitic hypothesis lingered as a powerful narrative within African historiography throughout the twentieth century. This happened even though it was proven factually incorrect by the 1960s. The paper takes UNESCO's General History of Africa (1964-1999) as a case-study to show that debates about the hypothesis were centred around questions of race and emancipation. The phrase 'Hamitic hypothesis', generally speaking, came to refer to the explanatory narrative that civilizational progress in Africa had stemmed from outside the continent, brought there by migrating whites from the north. It was therefore antithetical to the emancipatory goal of proving Africa had a history espoused by the UNESCO History specifically and African historiography in the mid-twentieth century generally. Within the GHA it was Cheikh Anta Diop who utilised the racialist logic inherited from 19th century European science to argue that the Hamitic Egyptians had been black. This reversal could make the hypothesis useful for the purpose of historiographical emancipation, by emphasizing blackness rather than denying it. This made the hypothesis ambiguous and therefore difficult to get rid of.

Kalpana Hiralal – Re-thinking women's histories in nationalist struggles

This paper seeks to capture the lost gendered voices and histories of women in South Africa's road

to democracy. Official accounts of nationalist history are often explained in the context of men, religion, community or events. Archival and newspaper sources are at times, bias and skewed in documenting women's histories. Hence, their analysis is often simplistic, one dimensional and fails to incorporate the marginalized voices of women. This paper captures the oral histories of three women who played a pivotal role in the liberation struggle in South Africa: Bertha Mkhize, Phyllis Naidoo and Goonam. The narratives captured in this article are rich, layered in multiples experiences and highlights how women's status and experiences are socially constructed and culturally determined. They show how individual memories converge to highlight the complexities of gendered experiences. It is women describing their own experiences and contributing - not someone else describing their experiences - to women's history from below. A feminist perspective not only challenges the meta-narratives of the liberation histories but also illuminates the heterogeneous experiences of women in the struggle. It decolonizes gendered experiences within an Africanist perspective and offers an alternative and new ways of documenting the gendered aspects of the liberation struggle in Africa.

Marie Huber – Developing heritage – developing countries: UNESCO and the making of national heritage institutions in African countries from 1950 on.

In the context of decolonisation and the new international order forming in the 1960s African political leaders had to reformulate the national identities they claimed to represent and African intellectuals acted as representatives of sovereign, independent nation-states and actualised the discourse of a particular African identity and intellectuality. Various projects emerged to rewrite African history as Africa's own history, and the re-appropriation and emancipation of national heritage-making formed a relevant issue in the process of decolonisation—having a national heritage meant having a national identity and belonging to the community of sovereign nation-states. UNESCO served most prominently as a framework to promote the importance of history and heritage as a strategy for empowerment and fostering the nascent national identities of the new member states in the era of decolonisation, in other words: providing development-aid for nation-building. Aside from the historiographical project of *The General History of Africa*, there is more to be told about the construction of national histories, and as a part of it, identifying cultural and natural heritage to augment national identity. Based on records from the UNESCO archive and the Ethiopian Antiquities Administration I will explain UNESCO's cultural and natural heritage politics in African countries during the 60s and 70s, and show the involvement of international experts, of creating heritage-institutions and heritage-bureaucracy in African states, modeled on Western concepts of "heritage" and "conservation" as universal principles.

UNESCO's role in promoting the identity discourses that underwrote the construction of national

narratives in African countries, in this paper, will be analysed in light of its role as an institution that built-up and facilitated knowledge production, and the institutional and conceptual legacies of this knowledge production.

Casper Andersen – ‘Making the archival watch dog bark’: the UNESCO archive of African oral tradition’

In 1985, in the UNESCO *The Courier*, the Kenyan historian Ali Mazrui emphasized the importance of oral traditions for the study of African history. As long as written archives were considered the exclusive basis for historical research, the African continent would remain marginalized and largely silent about its past. Mazrui likened the situation to the Sherlock Holmes story in which the identity of the intruder is revealed negatively by the watch dog that did not bark (thus revealing that the culprit was the person the dog knew beforehand). The dog's silence was the devastating piece of evidence. Similarly, in African history - because written sources had been regarded as the only archive for history, the (apparent) silence of the continent had been taken as devastating evidence that Africa had no history and no internally driven development. At crucial moments the African archival dog had not barked - but only because until recently Africa's oral traditions had not been properly archived. It was, Mazrui concluded, the ongoing task of UNESCO to establish and vindicate this archive and, thus, make the dog bark.

This paper discusses UNESCO's gigantic program for building a continent-wide archive of African oral traditions, which became institutionalized in 1968 with the Centre for Research and Documentation of Oral Traditions in Niamey in Niger. Concerned with preserving oral traditions of the past the program was, nonetheless, obsessed with making a truly modern archive. UNESCO developed scientific typologies to cover all African oral traditions. The program employed the newest recording technologies and used fixed scripts that would allow for the making of a standardized archive. Mass media and new communication technologies were enrolled to ensure a wide distribution of the archived oral traditions as a number of national broadcasting corporations aired in radio and televised to the large urbanized African audiences plays and performances based on the UNESCO archive of oral traditions.

I argue that the archive project displayed a tension between on the one hand a commitment to promote and vindicate African ways of knowing about the past and on the other a high modernist drive to build a scientific archive that would resonate in international scientific circles. The UNESCO program to make the African archival watch dog bark, therefore, offers a fresh perspective on longstanding tensions between Afrocentric agendas and universalist aspirations in African history.

Nsima Udo – The 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural self-reinvention: Mbopo ritual and the Calabar Festival in southern Nigeria

There is an extensive literature on how Europeans re-invented Africa in tribal or ethnic frameworks with an emphasis on cultural performance and spectacles. This literature foregrounds the ways in which Africa was 'invented' or fabricated in the European imagination along traditional tribal lines in ways that suppressed any signs of modernity and exaggerated traditionalism. These inventions were public spectacles whether in the form of museum displays, Africans paraded on stage, or assumed esoteric ritualism. These profoundly shaped a Eurocentric discourse of 'othering' in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They contributed to the conceptual categories through which Africa was controlled, dominated and historicized during the imperial and colonial periods.

Yet Africans always represented themselves in different ways using different registers. This paper will examine how important rituals and identities associated with indigenous forms of culture in Nigeria have been re-invented or re-imagined from within as public spectacles designed for television audiences and public viewing. It does so by exploring the complex issues of cultural representations associated with two highly popular cultural performances for Nigerian television (with continental and global audiences) from the 2010s: the first is a re-enactment of the mbopo ('fattening room') rituals associated with Ibibio/Efik girls' prenuptial initiation ceremonies (televised in 2013 with young women from all over Africa as cultural subjects) and the second is the Calabar Festival and Carnival held annually in December in which the different cultural groups across Nigeria perform their traditional dances in traditional dress for a vast and growing continental and global audience. (They are now advertised as the fourth largest festival in the world.) Based on participant observation and interviews at the Calabar Festival of 2019 and close visual analysis of the 'Fattening Room' television series of 2013 this paper examines the complex issues associated with the staging of African cultural identities in the 21st century within a substantial literature on this subject. How do we assess the degree of 'authenticity' of such rituals? To what extent do they capture and convey to modern public audiences, cultural rituals, traditions and concepts of the past and the present? What is the interplay between culture as entertainment and culture as lived experience in these visualised events? How does the visual language and media of television constrain or enable different levels of cultural presentation and performance? And how do these layers of analysis help us in revisiting the cultural history of Africa?

Paola Vargas Arana – Biographies of Africans in America during the slave trade and their contribution to the retrieval of the African history: The case of New Granada 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The American documentation produced during the era of the slave trade has invaluable information

that can contribute, not only for the Diaspora history, but also for the retrieval of the history of Africa. Based on American primary documentation, the reconstruction of biographies from the Africans who forcibly crossed the Atlantic show the range of responses that Africans led to face the challenges imposed by slavery. As a result of my Ph.D. dissertation in history at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, I found that the African knowledge was critical for the survival of the Africans in New Granada territory (today Colombia), during the 16th and 17th centuries. In particular, they used their African knowledge as a tool to introduce agricultural, medical, dietary, architectural, and military techniques, which allowed many of them to escape successfully from oppression and reconstruct communitarian life, free from the slaveholders. For instance, I found that West Africans from the Upper Guinea region introduced the rice cultivation and the construction of houses over wood structures based on their African knowledge, and fitting it to the humid swamps of the Caribbean. The paper I propose for the Disciplinary Trends in Africa panel seeks to show how the historical awareness of the cultural memories that Africans used, reconfigure, renew or recreate in America, has aroused the need to establish more accurate connections between the African and the Diaspora history. The study of particular life histories, which I am currently working on as a Research Assistant in the Digital Humanities project Freedom Narratives <https://freedomnarratives.org/>, can boost that precision, as it aims to link the cultural origin of each African, to the life they performed in America. My work shows that Africans arrived to America with profound scientific, spiritual and technical knowledge, that not only allowed them to overcome the slavery, but that greatly contributed to the construction of the Americas.

Bakail Moncef – Decolonizing African history: spotlight on the history of Africa in the ancient and medieval times

Through this paper, we seek to demonstrate the importance of the ancient and medieval history of Africa which has been marginalized. This Paper also tries to cast lights on what has been the role of Algerian and international institutions such as the African studies laboratory; Algiers University in establishing a historiography of Africa?

Africa attracted Greek and Arab merchants to the major African capitals, and enabled us to know the social characteristics of the Bantu farmers, the blacksmiths and potters.

It is worth noting that the history of Africa is the fruit of this balance between the short time of actors and the longtime of cultural depths.

The study of the history of Africa as an independent field of study is a recent development. Thus, until the end of the colonial period, Western historians believed that sub-Saharan Africa had no "civilization". The end of colonialism witnessed a growing number of African thinkers who strongly reject this approach and relying on written sources only is an insufficient scale for writing the history

of Africa, but rather than relying on other sciences such as Anthropology and Ethnology has corrected many concepts.

On this basis, many ancient people wrote about Africa, even if their writings were not systematic or objective in many cases. They were followed by the Arabs, who left an invaluable production of African societies.

The next stage in the history of Africa was dominated by the writings of merchants as well as Christian missionaries and other European adventurers, whose writings on Africa are still the main sources of many historians who specialized in the history of ancient and medieval Africa.

It can be said that with the end of colonialism, many African and European historians have emerged and rejected the idea that Africa has no ancient history and they even rejected the idea of the privilege of written sources from the one hand and insisted on including interdisciplinary sources and methods ranging from archeology to oral history.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that over the centuries, many African Kingdoms existed before the partition of Africa by the colonialists; and on this basis, we will try to analyze in depth the emergence and the fall of these kingdoms by introducing some new terminology and concepts in order to write African history with objectivity.

Enocent Msindo – Writing history beyond Trevor-Roper: the experience of African history, with special reference to Zimbabwe

In this paper, I will connect some issues and developments that at first appear isolated in space and time, yet they help us to understand the journey so far traversed in the writing of Zimbabwean history and where we are potentially going. These are (in no particular order), Hugh Trevor-Roper's argument about there being no African history and what it triggered - the rise of nationalist historiography in the 1960s and subsequent developments; the role of SOAS, London as an institution and its historical relationship with African studies; the Southern Rhodesian Native Affairs Departmental Annual (NADA) as a settler controlled journal that ignited much interest in studying Southern Rhodesian Africans during the colonial era, and lastly, the Rhodesian Reprint Library as a key library to recover white Rhodesian memory and to ignite the Rhodesian white nationalist imagination at a time settler colonialism was in a serious political crisis. Hopefully examining these will highlight salient features and perspectives on the development of African history, with special reference to Zimbabwe. A key strand in all this is the way in which history has been used as a legitimising tool for grander political projects.

**The discussion:**

Adom Getachew, our discussant, started her comment by noting that the wish to decolonize history, or African studies in general, has a history of its own. That questions of mental decolonisation are not just a contemporary issue should be obvious. In order to have meaningful discussion on the decolonisation of knowledge, therefore, we should connect the issue to the end of empire and its continuing legacies. The first generation of African historians, their archive and history making and their efforts towards a decolonized history of Africa show that engagement with question of mental decolonization were at that time connected to the end of empire. All of the papers are connected to this question of contemporary decolonisation as it is in conversation to the political history of decolonisation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They also noted, however, that this early framework of decolonization was embedded in a nationalist framework – as Adom Getachew put it. Kalpana Hiralal pressed that this meant a silence in regards to the role of women. In Marie Huber’s paper, moreover, it became clear how heritage is produced in such a way that European history – and Christian heritage – are privileged. To study the history of the oppressed is to develop new methodologies it therefore seems, as was noted by Kalpana Hiralal and also many of the other contributors. The latter, it was noted, was also a part of the first generation of African history in the postcolonial period. African historians, in their interdisciplinarity and their overt rejection of Eurocentrism started to engage in what is essentially a decolonizing project even if it was geared towards nationalism, as Casper Andersen and Bakail Moncef have shown in their papers. Casper Andersen however showed how the conceptual framework of archiving is inherently antithetical to orature.

The papers in this panel are also connected to the problem of eurocentrism, moreover and deal with it in different ways, showing both its conceptual entanglement with African history as such – in the case of Enocent Msindo’s and Larissa Schulte Nordholt’ papers – as well its overt presence in the continuing need to disprove European theories on African history itself. As Adom Getachew noted, it seemed like sometimes the critique of Eurocentrism demanded a deployment of the tools of eurocentrism. Enocent Msindo clearly critiqued this in his paper on Trevor-Roper explaining that his negative appraisal of African history in 1963 had managed to set the agenda for African studies for decades to come and arguably still does – for instance in the Hegelian focus on the state. Larissa Schulte Nordholt also showed this in her description of Cheikh Anta Diop’s role within the General History of Africa – Diop deployed the methods of race science to argue for an African origin of the ancient Egyptians. In order for us to engage further with this history of African history, moreover, we might need to shift our emphasis from a critique of eurocentrism, or a “verificationist” approach, and allow for more ambiguity in our study of African pasts and especially pasts that are entangled

between several continents, as Paola Vargas Arana has shown in her paper on African history and the history of slavery. Highlighting the continuities between Africa and America should therefore not be forgotten in our efforts to decolonize African history. In our discussion of memory and heritage it was moreover noted that African history is deeply connected to the question of reappropriation of African cultural practices by contemporary African publics, as Nsima Udo noted. How do 'we' reclaim heritage, memory and past without always referring to Europe?

We also noted that the lost legacies of the history of decolonisation is partly the result of changing global inequities in the funding of knowledge production. After 1975 universities faced severe budget cuts as part of the debt crisis and neoliberal politics in Africa. Moreover, this almost coincided with growing funding for African studies in the 1960s on the American continent as a result of Cold-War policies. The next generation of African historians, therefore, was not able to continue the work and status of the arch-fathers (and very few -mothers) in the same way. The history of African historiography, therefore, is worth revising in order to establish a deeper insight on current debates on decolonisation and knowledge production in and on Africa.