

Landscapes, Sources and Intellectual Projects of the West African Past

Essays in Honour of Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias

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Introduction. Thick Contextualisation: Interpreting West African Landscapes, Sources, and Projects

Benedetta Rossi and Toby Green

African history offers empirical, methodological, and theoretical insights that can be useful to historiographic debates on other parts of the world.¹ This volume puts forward a methodological agenda that can contribute to overcoming presentism and parochialism within African history itself; and can offer new ideas to historiographical theory and methods beyond Africa. The volume addresses two main concerns: first, it aims to outline what we see as elements of a paradigmatic shift within West African historiography; and second, it aims to consider how far this paradigmatic shift can contribute to methodological debates beyond Africanist research, and thereby place African history in closer dialogue with non-Africanist historians.

The critical exegesis of sources is a domain in which Africanist scholarship has been making, and can continue to make, major contributions. The objective dearth of written sources in African languages that lacked a written form, and ecological and political conditions that limited the preservation of written sources, meant that historians of Africa resorted to a variety of methodological approaches, ranging from archaeological digs through to oral historical interviews, via the exegesis of Arabic texts produced in the Sahel and texts produced in a variety of European languages. At least since the 1970s, Africanist historians have been analysing critically evidence as diverse as landmarks on African landscapes, faded texts, and the ephemeral utterances of oral performers; and historians of Africa remain exceptionally self-critical when it comes to their use of sources, in a way which may well be useful to scholars working on other world regions.

1 New Approaches in the Historiography of West Africa: Legacies of Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias

One of the core themes to emerge in this historiographical reframing of West African histories is the relationship between political conjunctures and

1 Gareth Austin, "Reciprocal Comparison and African History: Tackling Conceptual Eurocentrism in the Study of Africa's Economic Past," *African Studies Review* 50, no. 3 (2007): 1–28.

the production of sources. Where previous generations of historians may have mined sources produced in Africa for 'hard evidence,' new frameworks of historiography recognise the significance of the political circumstances surrounding a source's production. This approach takes the decolonizing of the history of Africa a step further: here is recognition of the complex intellectual pasts and historical engagements of members of West African intelligentsias, those 'source-producers' who have shaped current historiographical overviews of the West African past.

A leading figure in the development of this new framework is the Brazilian historian Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias. Moraes Farias was trained initially in medical science at the Universidade Federal da Bahia, in Salvador, north-eastern Brazil: this is the heart of African influences in contemporary Brazil, and these formative years shaped in Moraes Farias an abiding passion for both unravelling and engaging with West African cultures and histories. After leaving Brazil to escape the military dictatorship in 1964, and studying in Ghana and teaching at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria, Moraes Farias was to spend most of his career teaching at the Centre of West African Studies, Birmingham University. Here his colleagues over the years included Karin Barber, JD Fage, David Henige, AG Hopkins, Marion Johnson, TC McCaskie – and indeed the two editors of this book.

Moraes Farias's landmark work, *Medieval Arabic Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali* (2003) created a benchmark for the reassessment of the past from the viewpoint of intellectual histories and debates constructed from within West Africa.² A conference in Birmingham in November 2015 to reflect on the intellectual legacies of Moraes Farias offered a major opportunity to collect the views of many researchers – both young and old – on the ways in which Moraes Farias's work and these new directions shape current approaches to West African histories. *Medieval Arabic Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali* epitomises the potential of Africanist historiography to influence significantly entire historiographic fields, such as the established tradition of Islamic epigraphic research, which restricted epigraphic data to a subsidiary role in relation to Arabic written sources; moreover at the conference many of Moraes Farias's extended articles were also discussed (as becomes clear in this volume), expanding on the widespread influence his intellectual trajectory has had.³

Moraes Farias saw epigraphic inscriptions as historical sources in their own right. He analysed their written content, and when they did not corroborate the information provided by the Timbuktu chronicles he tried

2 Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias, *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions From the Republic of Mali* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

3 *Ibid.*, lv.

to account historically for the discrepancies between chronicles and inscriptions. Doing so necessitated contextualising each type of source in the circumstances of its production and analysing them as texts that provided insights into the worldviews and strategies of their authors. This exegetic task called for a reconstruction of the discursive and material fields in which these authors operated, and in which they occupied particular positions. The *Ta'riḥ al-Sūdān* therefore appeared not as a disembodied source of raw information, but as a partisan text developed by its author al-Sa'dī, who unfolded his political agenda by popularising a peculiar reading of Timbuktu's history. Al-Sa'dī was developing a new historical genre that followed specific literary conventions that had to be considered in order to acknowledge the discursive historicity *and* textuality of this work.⁴ By contrast, epigraphic texts partook in different genres and provided different types of information – information about the reckoning of time, or the everyday salience of ancestry outside better known elite genealogical logics.⁵ Therefore the famous Timbuktu chronicles had to be triangulated with oral traditions (conveyed by the chronicles themselves and by other sources), as well as with the epigraphic inscriptions.⁶

This 'thick contextualisation' places African texts in multiple overlapping contexts, all relevant to their interpretation: the broader historical and discursive context of the times; the literary genres, registers, and conventions followed by the authors of texts; the political and intellectual strategies of the authors in relation to particular 'fields of struggle' in which authors occupy unequal positions; and the material landscapes in which people travel and reside. The inscriptions' physical characteristics – their spatial positioning and tangible visibility on the land – shaped the experience of both literate and illiterate people.⁷ Their materiality provides historical information on ways of living and thinking about life and the afterlife that Moraes Farias examines in contributions that explore the 'meanings attached to landscapes'.⁸ These

4 Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias, "Intellectual Innovation and Reinvention of the Sahel: The Seventeenth-Century Timbuktu Chronicles," in Shamil Jeppie and Suleymane Bachir Diagne, eds., *The Meanings of Timbuktu* (Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council, 2008), 95–107.

5 Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias, "The Oldest Extant Writing of West Africa," *Journal des Africanistes* 60, no. 2 (1990): 65–113.

6 Moraes Farias, *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions*, lxxxv–cxii.

7 Ibid., part II. See also idem., "Local Landscapes and Constructions of World Space: Medieval Inscriptions, Cognitive Dissonance, and the Course of the Niger," *Afriques: Débats, méthodes et terrains d'histoire. Dossier* 02 (2010): 1–21.

8 Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias, "Text as Landscape: Cultural Reappropriations of Medieval Inscriptions in the Seventeenth and Late Twentieth Centuries (Essuk, Mali)," in O. Hulec and M. Mendel, eds., *Threifold Wisdom: Islam, the Arab World, and Africa. Papers in Honour of Ivan Hrbek* (Prague: Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, 1993), 53–71.

studies illustrate vividly, as in the passage cited below, how this method can reveal the connections between topography and people's imaginary worlds:

In the fifth century AH/ eleventh century AD, expatriate Muslims in West Africa, and West African converts to Islam, were engaged in a joint effort of the imagination. Their task was the reciprocal domestication of otherness. It involved mapping West Africa onto the world at large while bringing international references to bear on West African localities. For this purpose, topographical images and chronological frames were used in special ways which far transcended the pragmatic descriptions of routes and markets, and the practical time-keeping, directly required by trans-Saharan and Sahelian traders.⁹

Medieval Arabic Inscriptions subjects to the same critical scrutiny the texts and intellectual projects of chroniclers; oral performers; those who buried their relatives in the dry earth of medieval Mali; and European scholars (from Heinrich Barth to Jean Sauvaget) who at different moments analysed this material.¹⁰ It is the culmination of a life-long engagement with the exegesis of African sources that has been enormously wide-ranging and nuanced. Hence, for example, his concern with the projects of authors led Moraes Farias to interrogate their positionality not simply in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, or social status. He also emphasised how everyday positionalities were modified by the adoption of particular registers of communication in which the author (or speaker) and his/her audience are given pre-defined roles, and retain varying degrees of interpretative freedom. In a comparative study of constructions of kingship in the Manden and Borgu, Moraes Farias interrogates how praise practices instantiate particular rules of behaviour between the praiser and the

9 Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias, "Tadmakkat and the Image of Mecca: Epigraphic Records of the Work of the Imagination in 11th-Century West Africa," in Timothy Insoll, ed., *Case Studies in Archaeology and World Religion*, (Oxford: Archaeopress, 1999), 105–115.

10 The work of Heinrich Barth, such a prominent source for historians of the Central Sahel, is almost always cited as a reservoir of information on the nineteenth century without critical analysis of Barth's intellectual and political position. We owe to Moraes Farias and other authors with whom he collaborated insightful analyses of Barth's interpretative biases. See Mamadou Diawara, Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias and Georg Spittler, eds., *Heinrich Barth et l'Afrique* (Cologne: Rudiger Köppe, 2006); Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias and Mamadou Diawara, "Introduction: Les thématiques de l'ouvrage," in Diawara, Moraes Farias, and Spittler, *Heinrich Barth*, 21–34; and Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias, "Barth, le fondateur d'une lecture réductrice des chroniques de Tombouctou," in Diawara, Moraes Farias, and Spittler, *Heinrich Barth*, 215–223.

praise: '[i]f praise is celebration, nevertheless it is also an exercise in intrusion into the depths of one's being. It is hence a source of mixed feelings.'¹¹

Moraes Farias' work on literary genre, performance, and discourse has been developed mostly in collaboration with Karin Barber, the renowned scholar of Yoruba orality and performance culture. Their two co-edited volumes develop themes that are present in their respective individual research and here generate an incredibly powerful methodological agenda.¹² *Discourse and its Disguises* is a manifesto for a theory of source interpretation that sees sources as the fruit of their authors' intellectual projects, but also as texts that ought to be subjected to methods derived from literary criticism. The volume applies these ideas to oral texts in particular: 'what seemed to be required was an approach that acknowledged simultaneously the historicity and the textuality of oral texts.'¹³ The jointly written introduction outlines the elements for a paradigmatic shift in the exegesis of sources. It discusses historical circumstances of production; processes of 'erasure and layering' of texts over time; a 'sociology

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- 11 Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias, "Praise Splits the Subject of Speech: Constructions of Kingship in the Manden and Borgu," in *Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature*, eds. Graham Furniss and Liz Gunner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 225–243. Related arguments are developed in articles that focus on the work of individual traditionists/intellectuals – see Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias, "The Oral Traditionist as Critic and Intellectual Producer: An Example from Contemporary Mali," in *African Historiography*, ed. Toyin Falola (Harlow: Longman, 1993), 14–38; and idem, "'Cultural Officer' at Home and Abroad: Oloye Adebayo Ogunrinu Ogunidijo, 1939–2005," *Africa* 80, no. 1 (2010): 151–158, or on specific groups of traditionists (see idem, "History and Consolation: Royal Yoruba Bards Comment on Their Craft," *History in Africa* 19 (1992): 263–297).
- 12 In addition to themes that have been touched upon already, Moraes Farias had developed a critical approach to African sources in a 1974 article which analysed the textual and literary conventions mobilized in sources that described 'silent trade,' and which used this textual analysis to separate historical evidence from myth – see Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias, "Silent Trade: Myth and Historical Evidence," *History in Africa* 1 (1974): 9–24. In a similar fashion, he had analysed the appearance of the categories Zanj, Qaqu, and Kawkaw in medieval Arabic sources to explain what these categories meant at the discursive and ideological level – see idem., "Models of the World and Categorial Models: The 'Enslavable Barbarian' as a Mobile Classificatory Label," *Slavery and Abolition* 1–2 (1980): 115–131. Finally, following the publication of the two co-edited volumes with Barber, in 2003 his review article on Afrocentrism develops a textual genealogy of different ideas of Afrocentrism that places the books reviewed in longer discursive and intellectual legacies – idem., "Afrocentrism: Between Cross-cultural Grand Narrative and Cultural Relativism," *Journal of African History* 44, no.2 (2003): 327–340.
- 13 Karin Barber and Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias, eds., *Discourse and its Disguises: The Interpretation of African Oral Texts* (Birmingham: Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, 1989), 1.

of textual production'; the specificities of orality and its relations with various modes of literary expression.

Self Assertion and Brokerage, Barber and Moraes Farias' second co-edited volume, rejects easy polarisations opposing foreign-indigenous, or African-colonial sources and agency. They show that a model based on compartmentalised positions does not do justice to the capacity of individuals to synthesise different cultural elements and develop original ideological models that borrow from plural political and cultural influences *and idioms*. The thematic focus of this volume is on African nationalism. In this field particularly, their methodological position paves the way for more sophisticated and compelling analytical possibilities. It also encourages researchers to avoid projecting on their sources identities and agendas that are meaningful to them in their intellectual and political milieus. By contrast, this approach requires a genuine engagement with the 'mixed ingredients'¹⁴ that the authors of our sources chose to combine in their texts, using otherness as a resource for infinite creative possibilities. By showing that African history is not 'African' in a culturally essentialist sense, but is the result of constant original interactions of African subjects with the world, this methodology has relevance well beyond 'African history': 'the indigenous perspective no less than the foreign one had both an agenda and an intellectual strategy, and each attempted to assert itself by incorporating part of the other.'¹⁵

Moraes Farias and Barber's analytical position has far-reaching ethical implications. Surely sources are the products of their authors' strategies. These strategies, however, are not always consciously chosen but are partly discursively shaped by the broader cultural rationales accessible to people at any one time. Broader discourses and individual, strategic, texts combine a plurality of influences: from models of human progress to expressive conventions. Thus, African history is a history of the world, and a history of the world is African history; the unique individual experiences of the authors of what we call 'our sources' are the prism through which we can interpret the significance of historical texts.

All the contributors to this volume, in one way or another, take the agency and concerns of West African historians as the producers of these texts with great seriousness. This is because a core wider concern that also animates historians, anthropologists, and political scientists of West Africa – whether inside or outside the continent – is the relationship between West African histories

14 Karin Barber and Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias, eds., *Self-Assertion and Brokerage: Early Cultural Nationalism in West Africa* (Birmingham: Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, 1990).

15 Ibid.

and the global understanding of those histories. Questions of state failure and/or success, economic underdevelopment and/or 'rising Africa,' religious freedom and/or the rise of 'militant Islam,' take their place within a broader continuum of Africa's long-standing place in globalisation. By grasping the agencies and political strategies of West African historians from the past to the present, the ways in which these themes have been and are still presented is placed in a much richer context. With Moraes Farias, we should refrain from essentialising such agencies and strategies, and instead see them as evolving positions that shape, and are shaped, by both African and global influences:

Modern cultural nationalisms are often geared to the construction of 'historical' genealogies of states, each essentially built around, and to the glory of, one particular ethnic group, family of linguistic communities, 'kingdom,' or 'empire'. However, contrary to these claims, cultures have not developed in splendid purity and isolation from one another. As they traded goods (and people!), they also exchanged tales, rituals, and other means of self-construction and self-description. Central cultural features were built out of borrowings from other cultures modified to suit new purposes. Thus Songhay oral stories about Askya Muhammad I were constructed out of re-elaborations of the Tuareg tales about Arigullan.¹⁶

2 Landscapes, Sources, and Intellectual Projects: Contributions to the Volume

Traces of past material life and cultural interpretations are scattered across the land. Archaeologists recover this evidence and analyse it alongside written and oral archives.¹⁷ Their work is fundamental to historical research everywhere, but perhaps particularly in Africa where early written sources are generally

16 Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias, "Bentiya (Kukiya): A Songhay-Mande Meeting Point, and a 'Missing Link' in the Archaeology of the West African Diasporas of Traders, Warriors, Praise-Singers, and Clerics," *Afriques: Débats, méthodes et terrains d'histoire. Dossier* 04 (2013): 1–59, 30. See also idem, "For a Non-Culturalist History of Béninois Borgu," in Elizabeth Boesen, Christine Hardung and Richard Kuba, eds., *Regards sur le Borgou: Pouvoir et Altérité dans une Région Ouest-Africaine* (Paris and Montréal: L'Harmattan, 1998), 39–69; and idem., "Yoruba Origins Revisited by Muslims: An Interview with the *Arókin* of Òyó and a Reading of the *'Asl Qabā'il Yūrubā of Al-ḥāḡḡ* 'Ādam al-Ilūrī," in Moraes Farias and Barber, eds., *Self-Assertion and Brokerage*, 109–47.

17 For a concise discussion of the use of both written and oral sources in archaeological research on Africa, see Graham Connah, "Historical Archaeology in Africa: An Appropriate Concept?," *African Archaeological Review* 24 (2007), 35–40, 37–39.

both scarce and partial, in the sense that they reflect the views of a narrow literate section of the population.

In this volume, the emphasis on the contextualisation of sources uses the notion of 'context' *sensu lato*: political context is sometimes revealed by the particular script (Arabic, Hebrew, Tifinagh) chosen for an inscription on a tombstone, or by the tombstone's spatial orientation; the use of writing for specific types of documents in specific places, too, can shed light on political and cultural circumstances that in turn may provide insights for interpreting a document's contents. People's interaction with particular physical landscapes provides clues for the interpretation of sources of different kinds. But landscapes are not merely physical: they are always also imagined and morally coloured. People attribute meaning and morality to landscapes. The second section of this volume suggests that cultural and moral topographies must be taken into account when interpreting sources that provide information on the regional/ethnic origins and migrations of particular groups and individuals. The geographic details offered by the authors of our sources sometimes tell us more about the moral landscapes that were in their mind at the time of writing than about actual localities. Similar considerations are made by contributors to this volume's third section on written sources, as Stewart, Hall, and Jeppie discuss the status of Timbuktu as a site perceived as a major intellectual centre. Context, therefore, implies the materiality and morality of landscape as well as political conjuncture and social positioning.

The need to integrate archaeological studies in the historiography of Africa calls for the development of interdisciplinary research agendas. This can be challenging because analytical concepts do not always travel easily across disciplinary fields. For example, Haour and Rossi highlighted some of the problems that arise when archaeologists are asked to contribute to the study of epistemological categories such as ethnicity and race: projecting categories such as 'Hausa,' 'Tuareg,' or 'Songhay' in the archaeological past can result in anachronism and essentialisation.¹⁸ Archaeological data provide insights into 'ways of living' without necessarily telling us how these 'ways of living' were labelled. Yet, ways of living imply choices informed by immaterial values such as specific beliefs in the afterlife revealed by the characteristics of burials and tombstones; or structures of hierarchy exposed by material signs of power and status: jewellery, royal insignia, thrones, shackles, etc. Recent contributions to the archaeology of Africa look at material culture as evidence of immaterial

¹⁸ Anne Haour and Benedetta Rossi, eds., *Being and Becoming Hausa: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 3.

ideologies, as attested by Timothy Insoll's approach to religious beliefs in his *The Archaeology of Islam*.¹⁹

Archaeological contributions to this volume exemplify the productive potential of the integration of archaeological research and historical data. They subscribe to this volume's view that the answers authors give reflect the questions they ask, and these questions come from specific political and social contexts.²⁰ Thus, the political and cultural contextualisation of sources is not only meaningful in relation to sources for early history: contemporary research is also influenced by political climate, tenacious scientific myths, and disciplinary conventions. Sonja and Carlos Magnavita's chapter advocates innovative methodologies with the potential to correct faulty generalizations that acquired the force of scientific axioms, empirically unsubstantiated, which, following Yoffee,²¹ they refer to as 'factoids'.

In a classic article on 'silent trade' Moraes Farias criticized tendencies by professional historians of Africa to treat mythical or legendary information as valid historical data, concluding that 'under careful scrutiny, the frozen portrait that has been termed silent trade seems to melt away, revealing behind it a much richer and more varied reality of commercial practices'.²² Taking inspiration from this and other works by Farias, the Magnavitas discuss ancient trade in gold and slaves across the Sahara, and advocate combining methods from the natural sciences, as pursued in the fields of archaeometry and bioarchaeology, with traditional archaeological research. François-Xavier Fauvelle's chapter argues that archaeological data tends to be seen as subsidiary (rather than complementary) evidence and used to 'fill the gaps' in interpretations that presuppose the primacy of historical sources. Fauvelle proposes the evocative image of the chalk-line on crime scenes: he examines the cases of Niani in medieval Māli and Siġilmāsa in medieval Morocco to show that archaeological interpretations are only seen as correct if they corroborate pre-existing historical reconstructions based primarily on the readings of chronicles. The ideological marginalization of archaeological research means that evidence that could potentially correct erroneous interpretations is discarded *a priori*. In their chapter, meanwhile, MacDonald, Gestricht, Camara and Keita exemplify a methodology based on the integration of different types of

19 Timothy Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.

20 See Robin Derricourt, *Inventing Africa: History, Archaeology and Ideas* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), ix.

21 Norman Yoffee, *Myths of the Archaic State: Evolution of the Earliest Cities, States, and Civilizations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 7.

22 Moraes Farias, "Silent Trade," 19.

evidence – historical sources, oral testimonies, and single-site archaeological excavations – to advance research on Malian history.

After discussing archaeological engagements with material landscapes, Part Two of the volume investigates the *moral* landscapes produced and reproduced in oral and written sources. Insa Nolte's chapter on Yoruba Muslim compounds in Oyo analyses the cultural and religious strategies unfolded to demarcate Muslim spaces from non-Muslim ones while preserving inter-religious dialogue within Yoruba political structures. Robin Law examines stories about Fante origins recorded from the eighteenth century onwards and based on 'oral tradition' derived partly from written sources through feedback mechanisms. Law suggests that such accounts of Fante origins tell us more about the times when they were produced than about the earlier dynamics they claim to illustrate: 'stories of migration may be understood as metaphors expressing perceptions of various sorts of political and cultural influences, rather than as literal claims of actual biological kinship'. These political and cultural influences change in time, and so do preferences for one or the other 'origin' as expressed in myth and historical writings. Benjamin Acloque's chapter shows that the origin and migration histories of the Wlād Dleyim involve the formulation and reformulation of political statements about place and identity: they attribute genealogies and provenance in a way that positions groups and individuals within the normative mental maps of authors temporally and culturally removed from the events they describe. Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh's chapter exemplifies the difficulties that arise when attempting an exegesis of the work of authors whose identity is itself part-mythical. Ould Cheikh examines the aš'arite views of the Almoravid scholar al-Murādī al-Ḥaḍramī. He shows that Aš'arism was central to the political development and expansion of the Almoravid movement and that this is the context in which al-Murādī's Aš'arite teachings come to influence some of the movement's political leaders in Azūgi (present-day Mauritania). Yet, as in Law and Acloque's chapters, Ould Cheikh's analysis proceeds to a large extent by deconstructing and discarding information that is not directly relevant to the interpretation of al-Murādī's aš'arite works. The knowledge we have of this figure is a complex combination of contemporary biographic details and popular legends developed at different moments between the author's death and our analysis. Like a hybrid mythological creature, al-Murādī's persona reaches us as a combination of factual and fictional elements about his 'origin' and identity that must be disentangled in the process of interpreting his writings.

The third part of the volume contains contributions that engage specifically with written sources. A discussion of written sources for the study of African history begs the question of the relationship between written sources and the

practice of writing. Where and when was writing accessible, and to whom? What are the earliest forms of writing in Africa, and what have been the written word's changing functions? Understanding the meanings and functions of writing itself is a preliminary step for the interpretation of sources: were the latter written in alien characters mastered only by passing travellers, or were they integral to local technologies for 'inscribing the now and the hereafter'? Ghislaine Lydon opens this section with a chapter that integrates Africa, and northwest Africa in particular, in the latest debates on early writing globally. Lydon discusses the latest hypotheses on the development of the Lybico-Berber script, early forms of which survived in the form of *tifinagh*, the Tuareg alphabet. The four following chapters examine sources related to Mali from medieval to present times. Mauro Nobili's chapter shifts the focus from the origins of writing to the origins of a particular historiographic genre. Building on Moraes Farias' work on the *Ta'riḥ al-Sūdān*, Nobili suggests that the *ta'riḥ* genre was re-suscitated recurrently whenever authors found it politically expedient to provide versions of the past that would meet their contemporary needs.

Moving on from Nobili's focus on the *ta'riḥ* genre, Charles Stewart's chapter examines the literary production of Timbuktu's scholars in the subject areas that appear to be most broadly represented in the local manuscript culture: Arabic grammar and jurisprudence derived from classic legal sources. Stewart suggests that the fame of Timbuktu as a prominent centre of Islamic learning should be recalibrated. He argues that between the 17th and 20th century Timbuktu scholarship was less rich and original than hitherto surmised, and that the main locus of the scholarship identified with Timbuktu actually lay in Saharan nomadic schools (*maḥāẓir*); such a finding indeed tallies with earlier research by Webb and others who showed how members of the Timbuktu scholarly '*ulamā*' class migrated westwards following the fall of Songhay to Morocco in 1591.²³ Stewart's revisionist analysis of the role of Timbuktu in Arabic intellectual production is based on his comprehensive study of extant Arabic sources from the manuscript libraries of the western Sahara, which led to the recent publication of the monumental ALA V.²⁴ Hall's chapter concurs with Stewart's, and complements Stewart's deconstruction of the role of Timbuktu by analyzing the processes – both historical and discursive – that led to the creation of the 'myth of Timbuktu as a hub of manuscript production,' within this context of the westward migration of the '*ulamā*' after 1591. Taken

23 James L.A. Webb Jr., *Desert Frontier: Ecological and Economic Change along the Western Sahel, 1600–1850* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 30.

24 Charles C. Stewart, compiler and editor, *Arabic Literature of Africa Volume V: Mauritania and the Western Sahara* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

together, both Hall and Stewart's chapters therefore place Moraes Farias's work on Timbuktu in a new light, revealing the spread of scholars, ideas, and genres beyond the Niger Bend.

Hall urges us to contextualize the projects of authors not only in the political arenas of the times, but also in relation to hierarchies in the field of knowledge production. Such hierarchies are not, or not only, a reflection of 'factual' inequalities in expertise and/or intellectual abilities (however measured and defined). They are also shaped discursively, as particular places and networks acquire the status of major centres of knowledge. Local intellectuals unfold strategies aimed at enhancing and maintaining such status by publicizing their 'intellectual profile' amongst potential audiences; in highlighting these trends within the scholarship on Timbuktu, Hall also shows the ways in which heritage forms part of a neopatrimonial paradigm which, as political scientists have shown, has entrenched inequalities and pre-existing hierarchies in post-colonial Africa. The chapter by Shamil Jeppie focuses on Sahelian book collectors, and shows that just as sources should not be seen simply as repositories of facts to be mined for data, so collections too are not neutral 'containers' of books and manuscripts: they reveal the rationales in the mind of collectors, which developed in specific historical circumstances. Focusing on the manuscript-book collection of Ahmad Bul'arrāf in Timbuktu, Jeppie's chapter investigates the intellectual networks and strategies that contributed to the constitution of a field in which particular works were selected, classified according to the collectionist/scholar's criteria, and circulated or made available for a particular readership.

A fourth core strand in the re-evaluation of the source base for West African history has been the changing place of oral literatures in the field. After the pioneering work of Jan Vansina in this field, several scholars sought to develop complete histories of areas of West Africa solely through the use of oral literatures, two pioneering examples being Joseph C. Miller's work on the Mbundu kingdoms and the Imbangala, and Donald Wright's early work on Niumi in the Gambia river basin.²⁵ Nevertheless, this work was subsequently called into question, not least by Vansina and Wright themselves.²⁶ As a consequence, the

25 See e.g., Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Oxford: James Currey, 1985); Joseph C. Miller, *Kings and Kinsmen: Early Mbundu States in Angola* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976); Donald Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa: A History of Globalization in Niumi, The Gambia* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2004, 2nd edition).

26 Jan Vansina, "It Never Happened: Kinguri's Exodus and its Consequences," *History in Africa* 25 (1998): 387–403; Donald Wright, "Requiem for the Use of Oral Tradition to Reconstruct the Precolonial History of Lower Gambia," *History in Africa* 18 (1991): 399–408.

ways in which oral literatures should be integrated into historical analysis of the West African past has become a particularly important one.

In this area, indeed, Moraes Farias has played a key role, through his discussion of the place of griot histories in the exegesis of the West African past. Here, he has argued that – like the authors of the *ta'rihs* and funerary inscriptions from the Sahel also studied in such depth by him – orature should be seen as a historical genre, with oral histories constructed as intellectual projects by their practitioners, in the same way as the *ta'rihs* were. Through analysing the work of the Manding griot Waa Kamisòkò, Farias has shown clearly the importance of contemporary conflicts within Manding society in Kamisòkò's reconstruction of the deep Manding past.²⁷ Thus what is placed at the core of the analysis is the relationship between oral historical discourse and the importance of a present historical consciousness in reframing the importance of the past.²⁸

These questions are at the heart of the section on orature which is covered in this volume. The section begins with chapters by Mamadou Diawara, Jan Jansen, and Karin Barber, in which these anthropologists and historians reveal the nature of the oral practitioner's art and mediation and their place within generations and social frameworks. For Diawara, oral sources and the practice of orature can intervene in written discourse; moreover, oral discourses may reveal fundamental elements of discourses which emerge from 'written' historical patterns. For Jansen, the focus is on the way in which knowledge is transmitted and from where new generations of griots derive their authority to 'give account of the past'; this exemplary analysis offers a clear understanding of the role of orature in mediating the political present. Barber, meanwhile, looks at the Yoruba historian N.D. Oyerinde, and his integration of Yoruba oral discourse into a Western historical tradition, showing how the resulting syncretic product epitomises the historical moment of its construction, in the high colonial era. The following chapter in this section, by Green, then expands on these insights, arguing that the oral texts held by the National Centre for Arts and Culture in The Gambia offer vital new ways of approaching themes of the West African past, to complement those now emerging from newly discussed textual sources. The final chapter in this section, by McCaskie exemplifies this

27 Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias, "Au-delà de l'Opposition Coloniale Entre l'Authenticité Africaine et l'Identité Musulmane: L'Oeuvre de Waa Kamisòkò, Barde Moderne et Critique du Mali," in Christophe de Beauvais and Mariella Villasante Cervello, eds., *Colonisations et Héritages au Sahara et au Sahel* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007), Vol. 2, 271–308.

28 Moraes Farias, "Praise Splits the Subject of Speech," and idem, "The Gesere of Borgu: A Neglected Type of Manding Diaspora," in Ralph Austen, ed., *In Search of Sunjata: The Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature and Performance* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 141–170.

potential by looking at the place of Asante dreams in narratives of key episodes in Asante history, arguing that understanding the place of dreams in Asante identity is vital for understanding the Asante historical past.

The section as a whole therefore offers an important new primer as to the place which oral histories can have in the reassessment of the West African historical past, and also as a key bridge between Africanist historiography and broader trends in the discursive patterns of world historical discussion. The vital role played by orature as both a discourse on the past and a mediator of the present is highlighted. Historians seeking ‘certainty’ about the past may prefer to keep to the tried and tested textual sources produced by outsiders; but those seeking to understand History as a discourse interweaving present concerns with past realities will find much to profit from considering these chapters, and the insights they offer as to the creation of ‘historical knowledge’ in – and of – West Africa. There will be many new thoughts arising from these chapters as to the ways in which present and future historians should integrate oral perspectives into their source bases.

The final section of the volume considers a question which is in some ways latent in all the different constituent parts of the book: the nature of historical sources as political projects of their authors. The chapters in the part all look at this through different types of sources, and the part as a whole reinforces the central praxis of historians in Africa, where historical writing is always a work in progress. This is an important paradigm for reflecting about the African past: where Marxist-influenced historical practice of the 1970s and 1980s was interested in material conditions and their social consequences – ‘production and reproduction’ – the increasing interest in historians as actors in their own right, reflecting particular historical moments and their concern, reflects the different shape of ‘history’ as a discipline.

The five chapters of the final part of the volume therefore examine head on the way in which political actors constructed visions of the past which were in keeping with their own concerns. The intensely political character of the historical discourse and profession – be it regarding Africa, or any other part of the world for that matter – is made clear. Camille Lefebvre’s account of the meeting of the geographer Carsten Niebuhr with an ambassador from Tripoli, ‘Abd Al-Rahmān Āġā, shows clearly how diplomatic exchanges provided cross-cultural knowledge which fed into Niebuhr’s subsequent intensely political work, *Das Innere von Afrika*. Lefebvre’s chapter is followed by Paul E. Lovejoy’s important reconsideration of the Kano Chronicle: he shows through a detailed new exegesis of important primary texts how the Chronicle was the work of the Dan Rimi Barka of Kano, produced in the late 19th century as a consequence of internal political struggles among Kano elites. Continuing with the

Sokoto theme, Murray Last's revelatory interpretation of the victories of the *jihād* suggests that there was a clear political purpose in the claim by political leaders such as Muhammad Bello of destruction of the enemy; by contrast, Last shows how ransoming prisoners alive was the aim of many soldiers, and that the numbers of deaths caused by the conflicts of the early 19th century have been exaggerated. The final two chapters of the part are significant, for they show the continuity into the colonial era of this politicisation of historical narratives from the 18th and 19th centuries. Ann McDougall's chapter considers the career of Louis Hunkanrin, a political prisoner deported from Dahomey to Mauritania by the French in 1923. McDougall shows how a key text by Hunkanrin on slavery, published in 1930, was written by him in order to achieve goals related to the birth of nationalism in French West Africa; by using French law in his demands, Hunkanrin showed how law could and would be used to challenge colonialism. By contrast, Daniela Moreau's intriguing chapter looks at the photographic corpus of the French photographer Edmond Fortier, who lived in Dakar in the early 20th century; by showing how Fortier's work reflected tropes clearly associated with colonial goals, and yet also can provide very valuable historical information, Moreau reiterates the core questions of the volume as a whole – how to balance the recovery and revivification of the African past with an awareness of the ideological frameworks underpinning the sources that are left to us.

Moreau's significant Brazil-based research concludes the volume by reminding readers that Moraes Farias's contributions to the historical profession started in Brazil. In recent years Brazil saw a huge expansion of research in African history, with a special emphasis on Brazil's long historical links to West and West-Central Africa. After the election of Lula's government in 2002, a law was passed making the teaching of African history obligatory in Brazilian schools. Many of the leading scholars in this field today are Brazilian; they continue the legacy of Moraes Farias's intellectual trajectory and influence, in spite of the recent autocratic *golpe* led there against popular democratic forces.

3 West African History: Present Conditions, Future Directions

As the discussion of the various contributions to this volume makes clear, all the participants at the November 2015 conference in Birmingham came with new perspectives and source bases which offer a real chance to assess the state of the field for historians of West Africa. This allows for both an assessment of the sources which are used to write the history of West Africa, and of the new perspectives which are being brought to those sources. Larger questions

concerning the politics of knowledge production, and the purposes of 'history' as a discipline are foreshadowed clearly by focussing on the question of historical method in a West African domain.

Several core issues emerged as a result of the conference regarding the challenges and difficulties of engagement with the deep West African past. The first relates to the conditions surrounding the global production of knowledge. Put bluntly, global knowledge about West African history still tends to be produced in the Global North, usually by Western academics, but also increasingly by African academics now based in the Western academy. Where early generations of postcolonial historians had easy access to Western institutions, coming and going from their home African institutions for extended periods of research and scholarly interchange, the rise of discriminatory visa programmes to gain access to 'fortress America/Europe' makes such exchanges increasingly hard to arrange.²⁹ Indeed, Moraes Farias's career at the University of Birmingham is testament to these changes; where he began in 1969 at a time when the majority of researchers coming through the then Centre of West African Studies were from African institutions, by the time of the 2015 conference the situation was very much reversed.

While conditions regarding scholarly exchange with African institutions have become more difficult, history as a discipline has become ever more 'political'. From nationalist appropriations of the historical past in India, Israel, Serbia, and beyond, to the place of history in reframing contemporary political struggles, and the potential for ethnicized conflict on the African continent itself, 'history' has developed an increasing problematic relationship with political frameworks. It continues to be deployed for political ends – both in Africa and beyond. In the UK, this was concretised during the EU debate leading up to the controversial Brexit referendum on June 23 2016, when British historians mobilised both in favour of and against leaving the European Union for 'historical' reasons.³⁰

One of the consequences of this global process of the problematisation of History in Africa itself has been the retreat from the systematic academic study and teaching of precolonial history. It is for this reason, also, that many of the contributors to this volume are not African themselves – something that it is hoped will in time change for the field of precolonial history. Where, for

29 For instance, scholars such as Professor Boubacar Barry (Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar) were regular visitors to SOAS through the 1970s. Moraes Farias speaks with a certain wistfulness of his early years at CWAS, when such visits were very much the norm.

30 See the relevant websites – www.historiansforbritain.org and www.historiansforbritain-neurope.org.

example, universities such as Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar and Ibadan in Nigeria began their existence in the 1950s and 1960s as famous centres for the study of precolonial Africa, the study of 20th century and postcolonial history now predominates in the History departments of these and other newer institutions on the continent. And yet the study of precolonial African history offers vital elements for the interpretation of more recent dynamics.

It is for precisely these reasons that the framework developed by Moraes Farias, and others, is of such importance; and this elucidates the core focus of this volume. These approaches not only enhance the sophistication of our analyses of the West African past, but they also urge historians to be self-consciously aware that historical research, today as in the past, does not exist in a political vacuum and is not politically neutral. This approach pushes us to think of all texts as 'primary sources,' including our own work. Recognising the political structures and concerns which have animated the production of historical 'sources' (Chronicles, Oral Histories, Printed Histories in the 20th century) places West African historical production as a full part of the global historical discipline, thus taking a further step in the de-exceptionalisation of African histories and peoples.

The volume as a whole engages fully with these concerns, and is also emblematic of several core themes which have emerged in recent years in the historiography. First of these is the increasing interest in thinking beyond artificial boundaries of 'pre-colonial' and 'colonial' era. Several recent works have looked in this direction. Bruce Hall's work on conceptualising 'race' in Islamic West Africa ranges from the 17th century to the end of the colonial era in Mali.³¹ In a similar vein, Alexander Keese's new book on ethnicity and historical conflict looks at the importance of pre-colonial political structures in shaping post-colonial political tensions.³² Two new books, respectively by Camille Lefebvre on the southern Niger-Sokoto region and by Vincent Hiribarren on Borno, take this approach further through the conceptualisation of space and territorial boundaries in Niger and northern Nigeria, arguing for continuities between the 19th-century and colonial and post-colonial delimitations.³³ Meanwhile both the editors of this volume have engaged in this approach; Rossi, in her

31 Bruce S. Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

32 Alexander Keese, *Ethnicity and the Colonial State: Finding and Representing Group Identifications in a Coastal West African and Global Perspective, 1850–1960* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

33 Camille Lefebvre, *Frontières de Sable, Frontières de Papier. Histoire de Territoires et de Frontières, du Jihad de Sokoto à la Colonisation Française du Niger, XIXe–XXe siècles* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2015); Vincent Hiribarren, *A History of Borno: Trans-Saharan Empire to Failing West African State* (London: Hurst and Co., 2016).

work on the Ader region of Niger, from the late 18th century to the present day dependence on aid, and Green in his edited work on Guinea-Bissau linking precolonial 'ethnic' designators to contemporary political tensions.³⁴ Thus, this volume's encompassing of historical periods ranging from the first millennium AD to the 21st century is in keeping with this important new trend, and also with the work of Moraes Farias, whose approach to brokerage and analysis of griot 'histories' looks at the present contexts of deeper 'histories'.

This volume's focus on the individual producers of texts is also very important. Here the focus on individual authors, scholars, and practitioners of orature restores individual agency, something which stands in contrast to earlier foci on macro-processes. This concern is in keeping with recent new trends in the study of the African diaspora, where what is known as 'the biographical turn' has seen a large volume of publications concentrated on the 18th and 19th centuries, which seek to focus on individuals both to restore the humanity of enslaved persons, and to open new windows onto these broader processes.³⁵ Paul Lovejoy, alone and in collaboration with Robin Law, applied this approach in their analyses of the strategies – at once political and literary – of African slaves and abolitionists.³⁶ In their third co-edited volume on African sources on slavery and the slave trade Alice Bellagamba, Sandra Greene, and Martin Klein make available a collection of essays that examine the individual voices and projects of African slaves and slave-owners.³⁷ The emphasis on 'microhistories,' championed by Roquinaldo Ferreira among others, has seen works such as Jean Hébrard and Rebecca Scott's *Freedom Papers*, focussing on one family from revolutionary Haiti to France during the Second World War, and James Sweet's biography of Domingos Álvares, trailing a Mahi healer from Dahomey to Brazil and then Portugal.³⁸

34 Benedetta Rossi, *From Slavery to Aid: Politics, Labour and Ecology in the Nigérien Sahel, 1800–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Patrick Chabal and Toby Green, eds., *Guinea-Bissau: Micro-State to "Narco-State"* (London: Hurst and Co., 2016).

35 Lisa A. Lindsay and John Wood Sweet, eds., *Biography and the Black Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

36 Paul E. Lovejoy, "'Freedom Narratives' of Transatlantic Slavery," *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 32, no. 1 (2011): 91–107; Paul E. Lovejoy and Robin Law, eds., *The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua: His Passage from Slavery to Freedom in Africa and America* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2007).

37 Alice Bellagamba, Sandra Greene, and Martin Klein, eds., *African Slaves, African Masters: Politics, Memories, Social Life* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2016).

38 Roquinaldo Ferreira, *Cross-Cultural Exchange in the Atlantic World: Angola and Brazil in the Era of the Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Jean M. Hébrard and Rebecca J. Scott, *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); James Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

Thus finally the volume also attempts to act as a bridge between West African historiography and the growing literature on the diaspora. As with that literature, a core concern here is in individualizing historical figures from the African past; shedding light on the contexts in which their strategies as authors and agents took shape; and reminding us that historical writing was, and continues to be, embedded in political processes and inequalities today.

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