

Sources, Heritage, and Experimental History in Premodern Africa New Tools, Old Debates

A Roundtable Discussion sponsored by the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa (ISITA) and the Critical African Heritages Workshop at Northwestern University

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ABSTRACTS

Correcting a Colonial Myth: The Tomb of Askia Muhammad from a Distance

Mark Dike DeLancey, art history, DePaul University

The so-called “Tomb” of Askia Muhammad, a stepped pyramidal mud-brick structure on the Niger River in Mali, is claimed to be the final resting place of the Songhai ruler who came to power in 1493. Scholars have speculated that it reflects ancient Malian practices of constructing tumuli over the burials of rulers, a representation of pre-Islamic Songhai cosmology, or Askia Muhammad’s awed replication of the Great Pyramids of Egypt seen while visiting Cairo during his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1497-1498. Yet there is no evidence of a burial, and its identification as a tomb is disputed by the local population. Rather than the Great Pyramids, I propose that this building is modeled after the Minaret of the Mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo as a reference to Askia Muhammad’s reception of the title of Commander of the Faithful in the Sudan from one of the last of the Abbasid Caliphs. Resituating the “Tomb” as a political statement enables the overturning of several common colonial myths of the Western Sudan as a surrogate for Ancient Egypt, of the decrepitude of ancient monuments there saved by colonial concern, and of the awed African blindly imitating more sophisticated exemplars abroad.

Experimenting with Precolonial Texts: From Digital Humanities to Public History

Rémi Dewière, history, Northumbria University

The scarcity of sources and material evidence regarding the written cultures of pre-modern sub-Saharan Africa is a challenge for both reconstructing the past of these societies and engaging with non-academic audiences. In this short presentation, I will show three short case studies in which digital humanities can be used as a first step to build projects of public history, in collaboration with museums and non-academic institutions: the reproduction of a Mamluk letter to the sultans of Mali (15th c.); the sijils of the Kanemi dynasty (19th c.); and the creation of a Bornu script font (17th-21st c.).

The Case of the Second Appendix of *Chronique du chercheur*: An Experiment on a Historical Document from West Africa

Ali H. Diakite, Cataloger of West African Manuscripts, Hill Museum and Manuscript Library

For more than a century now, scholars of West Africa have worked diligently to understand the work of Houdas and Delafosse entitled *Chronique du chercheur*, better known as *Tarikh al-Fattash*, published in 1913. Since this time, many have tried to unpick certain textual inconsistencies in the document. It is in this context that Zachary Wright, Mauro Nobili, and Ali Diakite started a new approach in looking for certain details not only in the manuscripts but in Delafosse’s translation, which we treat as a primary source. We understood that our remaining concerns could be traced to a section towards the end of the book entitled Second Appendix. In this brief presentation I will try to quickly explain what is this second appendix that we have called the “virtual text,” and our efforts to translate this French text back into Arabic and re-insert it into the original Arabic text, resolving many of the problems with the document.

West African Manuscripts Crowdsourcing Project: The Case of Djenné Manuscripts

Djibril Dramé, Researcher and Chevening Fellow, the British Library

This presentation focuses on the Islamic manuscripts digitised by the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme from Djenné, an ancient city located in the North of Mali. The manuscripts were collected through three projects, EAP488, EAP690, and EAP879, and constitute approximately 10,000 manuscripts. They cover various subjects mentioned in Hall and Stewart (2011), but more importantly, more than half of the manuscripts are esoteric manuscripts (Sarin 2015), and most of them are fragments. I have used generated python codes by ChatGPT to convert all the images from JP2 to JPG, and to extract only the first two images of each image folder because the cataloguer's notes can be either the first or the second image. My interest is to identify the titles of the manuscripts and transcribe them through crowdsourcing that will be ultimately imported into the EAP website. I have built the ground truths of three classes (cover board, cataloguer's notes, and manuscript page) to generate the model from Teachable Machine and run it on Spyder to extract exactly the three mentioned classes from the images' folder and put them in subfolders. Since some cataloguer's notes are either clockwise, or anticlockwise or upside down, I generate a model from Teachable Machine to run it on Spyder to rotate them correctly. Before launching crowdsourcing, I will use Transkribus to transcribe the cataloguer's notes. In this presentation, I will also show the trends of dominant themes, and Ajami typology used by the Djenné scribes as described by Dmitry Bondarev (2021), and potential indicate the dominant languages written in the manuscripts from the city of 313 saints.

References

Bondarev, Dmitry. 2021. 'A typology of West African Ajami manuscripts: languages, layout and research perspectives'. In Jörg B. Quenzer (ed.), *Exploring Written Artefacts: Objects, Methods, and Concepts* (Studies in Manuscript Cultures), Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 707-728. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110753301-035>.

Hall, Bruce S. and Stewart, Charles C. 2011. 'The Historic "Core curriculum" and the Book Market in Islamic West Africa'. In Graziano Krätli and Ghiislaine Lydon (ed.), *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade*, PP. 109-175. Leiden-Boston: Brill.

Sarin, Sophie. 2015. 'In the Shadow of Timbuktu: the manuscripts of Djenné'. In Maja Kominko (ed.), *From Dust to Digital, Ten Years of the Endangered Archives Programme*, PP. 173-187. OpenBOOKpublisher.

The Chemistry of History: Glass Beads, Mobility, and Regional Integration in West Africa, ca. AD 1000-1380

Akin Ogundiran, history, Northwestern University

The recent advances in instrumental analysis have opened new avenues to study ancient technology and regional interactions in West Africa. One of those avenues is the study of glass beads. The complementarity of instrumental analysis and archaeological investigations has now confirmed the first and only mineral and chemical evidence for indigenous African glass production that began no later than the eleventh century in Ile-Ife (an ancient city in present-day Nigeria). In this brief introduction, I will discuss how the innovations in glass technology facilitated an integrated West African regional economic system, increased the tempo of movement and cross-cultural interactions, and united the Islamic and Ōriṣà Worlds between the eleventh and late fourteenth centuries. The audience will be invited to consider the implications of all of these for imagining new narratives of the African past and future.