

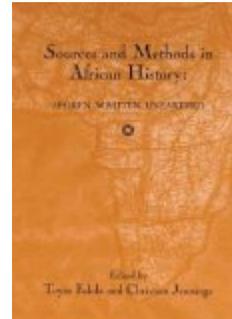
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Toyin Falola, Christian Jennings, eds. *Sources and Methods in African History: Spoken, Written, Unearthed*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003. xxi + 409 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58046-134-4.

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More Pathways to Africa's Past

It is almost impossible to do this collection justice since each one of its twenty-three essays is worthy of in-depth engagement. The plain title and staccato subtitle give it a rather severe facade that Jan Jansen, in his essay *Narratives on Pilgrimage to Mecca: Beauty versus History and Mande Oral Tradition*, might, through his strict distinction between aesthetic appeal and evidential integrity, appear to reiterate. In fact, the book, including Jansen's essay, opens into a veritable treasure trove of rich stories and methodological gems. There is barely a trace of the didactic exposition of sources and methods appropriate to African history that the title appears to anticipate. Readers are much more likely to experience the exhilaration that is communicated by the authors as they arrive fresh from the field than virtuous boredom.

This review would become unwieldy if every author were to be mentioned specifically by name, and it is proposed, in what follows, merely to suggest the range and variety of the collection. The book is a product of a conference entitled *Pathways to Africa's Past*, held at the University of Texas in early 2001, and the essays published speak very well of the process of selection. Each section is prefaced by a distinguished scholar in the relevant field who offers editorial comment and draws the essays together around the central themes. The authors, including the editors, represent a mix of established scholars, among them Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, Dennis D. Cordell, Christopher R. DeCorse, Paul E. Lovejoy, Thomas Spear, and Edwin Wilmsen, as well as a hand-

ful of obviously talented doctoral students. Despite its wide reach, the book is organized, and generally satisfactorily so, into five sections: "Archaeological," "Methodology through the Ethnic Lens," "Documentary Sources," "Oral Tradition," and then a last miscellaneous, but not inaccurately labeled, category called "Innovative Sources and Methods." This last section includes essays on anthropological data, economic sources, a dance subculture in Ghana, and the genre of sample surveys.

While this book is a surprisingly riveting read, it should not be inferred that it lacks scholarly weight. The venerable shadow of Jan Vansina is to be seen behind many of the essays, perhaps most obviously in the section in which archaeologists and historians are called to recognize the deeper levels of their frequently trivialized "sibling" relationship to use Vansina's own provocative nomenclature, and in the oral tradition essays, which do, as the editor suggests, reflect admirably on their intellectual ancestry.

In support of their argument for a more collaborative and generous relationship between archaeologists and historians, the authors in this section of the book, show how almost two millennia, as in the case of Akinwumi Ogundiran's essay on the Yoruba-Edo region, can be pieced together more easily and substantially by drawing on both disciplines. New narratives, it is argued, are not simply the prerogative of the historian, which the archaeologist is then required to corroborate through the

production of appropriate artifacts. Chronologies can be deepened and new meanings may be ascribed to objects through time if the estranged “siblings” set about learning each other’s languages properly. Laura Mitchell argues for an integrated approach to the landscape, which is all too often marked off into separate disciplinary zones, for a fuller appreciation of the colonial encounter in her “Material Culture and Cadastral Data: Documenting the Cedarberg Frontier, South Africa, 1725-1740.” Wilmsen does what appears to be a thorough demolition job on the stereotype of the “foraging Bushman” through a scientific dissection of documentary and archaeological evidence relating to commodity trade and inter-community relations in Namibia-Ngamiland over several hundred years.

The chapters which probe the meanings of ethnicity do so as a way of demonstrating how much ethnic self-identification can tell us, particularly in the case of slaves exported to the Americas, their resilience and survival strategies, as well as about various readings and mis-readings of group identities. The work of these authors depends, to some extent, on the huge databases that have become available on slave transportation. The writers here extract out of all that seething, compressed humanity, some individual voices, as well as collective endeavors that were to impress themselves on the alien environments in which slaves found themselves, as in Kevin Roberts’s “Africa in Louisiana: In Search of *Bambara* and Creole Identities in Literary and Statistical Sources.”

The “Documentary Sources” editor, Thomas Spear, urges us to be no less vigilant in evaluating written sources for Africa than we would be in other historical fields, while not succumbing to the temptation to simply dismiss such sources as irredeemably tainted by evangelical or colonizing impulses. Christian Jennings’s essay, entitled “They Called Themselves Iloikop: Rethinking Pastoralist History in Nineteenth-Century East Africa,” vindicates the accounts of the much-maligned missionaries, who probably had a more accurate understanding of what was going on and who the Masaai really were than did their later detractors.

Jennings’s revisionary approach to missionary sources currently has echoes elsewhere in African historiography, and the theme reappears in this book in Meredith McKittrick’s essay on pre-colonial Northern Namibia in which the missionaries’ florid prose is testimony, not to outraged Christian sensibilities alone but, McKittrick argues, also to the deep level of engagement on which these missionaries were operating with their

informants who had recruited them to express particular perspectives. Kristin Mann, taking her lead from Max Gluckman’s belief that legal conflict should be understood as a moment in an ongoing relationship, provides a fascinating study of client-patron relationships in early colonial Lagos based on documentary sources.

The pace probably moves most quickly and most contentiously in the area of oral tradition and oral history methodologies, but the authors represented here, demonstrably influenced by a Vansina brand of ruthless interrogation of the sources, are hardly to be left behind. Jansen refuses to be seduced by the fake medieval trappings of the stories of Nfa Jigin that appear in Mande oral tradition, and James Giblin shows how some oral historians have resolutely avoided losing their local conflict to the grand narrative of Maji Maji. Jamie Monson’s “Maisha: Life History and the History of Livelihood along the TAZARA Railway in Tanzania” is less about oral tradition as is implied by the title of this section, and more about how historians might go about adopting a less intimidating approach to eliciting information. Monson’s essay could serve as a miniature illustrated manual to the life-history approach so often advocated by African historians as a panacea where there are gaps in the story or where the dominant voices have drowned out the subordinate ones.

The final section is deservedly called “innovative” in terms both of the sources to which it turns, and to the way in which some apparently either quite dry, or on the other hand, frivolous sources are reinterpreted. Steven J. Salm’s essay on Ghanaian youth music and dance is entertaining and persuasive in its argument that the rock ’n’ roll clubs may be seen as “an act of revolt against class, gender and generational divides,” as well as the creation of a new hybrid form of identity (p. 374). Salm’s account certainly throws a spanner in the works of the Kwame Nkrumah icon-making machine. But his charge that youth subcultures have been neglected may be overstated, and perhaps there is a case to be made here for looking further, beyond Ghana, for other scholarly literature on the subject. Coquery-Vidrovitch uses her command of both English and French sources to excellent effect to suggest that we should pursue the story of the distribution and development of electricity in Africa as an area of economic history, and study its relationship with social history, including its impact on what she initially calls “mentality,” but subsequently kindly translates into common English as “a way of thinking.” Her central image of a group of children clustered under a street lamp in Dakar or Lome, doing their homework in

public because they do not have electric light at home, is a vivid invitation to consider the social ramifications of electricity delivery in Africa. What happens to those children, she asks, as gas and then electricity come into their homes? Coquery-Vidrovitch leaves us with another image, this time of deep continental darkness in the spaces between the big cities of Africa from the point of view of the airplane traveler. Her imagery is evocative, not simply of a continent whose darkness is symptomatic of colonial neglect and discrimination, but of the

great swathes of African landscape which remain to be illuminated by historical enquiry.

This book would serve as an excellent way of involving students at tertiary-level institutions in thinking about what kinds of knowledge we derive from particular kinds of sources when we study history in Africa. I used McKittrick's essay with first-year university students to challenge the complacent dichotomy they tend to make between lying missionaries and truthful Africans. It engendered a fierce debate, which I took to be productive.

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