Against the Grain

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Collecting to the Core — Primary Sources in African History

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Column Editor's Note: The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the *Resources for College Libraries* bibliography (online at <http://www.rclweb.net>). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

The **Students and Faculty in the Archives (SAFA)** project by the **Brooklyn Historical Society** reported that undergraduate students became more engaged and interested in coursework, with improved academic skills and course outcomes, when archives-based primary source research is integrated into the curriculum.¹ Primary sources are evidence created at the time of an event or after by participants or observers. Examples include text — memoirs, letters, and manuscripts; images — photographs and posters; audio or video recordings — oral histories and speeches; artifacts — furniture, pottery, and cultural objects. These are the raw materials historians use to meaningfully reconstruct the past. Often used by graduate students and faculty researchers, increasingly they are being integrated into undergraduate teaching and research. Undergraduate history course outcomes frequently stress historical thinking, making primary source literacy an important component. Typically housed in archives, libraries, museums, or obscure locations, digital technologies have enabled the digitization of collections and made primary resources more accessible and easier to include in teaching.

Until the 19th and early 20th centuries, many African societies did not have writing systems and therefore written sources, contributing to a prevailing belief that Africa had no civilization or history. Even by 1965, notable **Oxford University** history professor **Hugh Trevor-Roper** expressed skepticism on the existence of African history.² World events and decolonization in Africa in the late 1950s and early 1960s heightened interest in the study of Africa. As a result, African history became an established academic discipline and Africanist scholars challenged Eurocentric views of Africa. They questioned traditional methods of historical inquiry, adopting innovative approaches to sources by recognizing non-written sources from archaeology, linguistics, physical and cultural anthropology, botany, and art history as legitimate evidence. These methods and sources have now been utilized successfully to reconstruct the African past to antiquity. This

essay discusses six notable texts on historical sources appropriate for studying the African past. The works, many authored by pioneers of African history, provide an understanding of the sources and methods used to interpret and reconstruct Africa's history. Also discussed are selected digital repositories and databases containing primary sources related to Africa.

Daniel McCall's pioneering work *Africa in Time-Perspective: A Discussion of Historical Reconstruction from Unwritten Sources* was the first to explore the validity of unwritten sources in writing African history.³ Based on a lecture series at the **University of Ghana, Legon** in 1961, **McCall** explores various written sources available and their limitations for an authentic history of Africa. He presents reasoned arguments for an interdisciplinary approach to obtaining historical evidence by recognizing data from archaeology, oral traditions, linguistics, ethnology, plant and animal development, and art. He advises researchers to complement documentary sources with data from unwritten sources. **McCall's** text is still considered an important contribution and essential for introductory courses in African history.

Another introductory work on the distinctive features of the sources of African history is *Africa Discovers Her Past*, edited by **J. D. Fage**.⁴ Originating from a 1967 **BBC Africa Service** series on the current state of African history, it examines both written and unwritten sources. The collection of twelve short essays by distinguished Africanist historians presents the state of African historiographical traditions and sources. **John Hunwick, Thurstan Shaw, Alan Ryder, P. L. Shinnie, and Ivor Wilks** discuss the various methods of research and the contributions of other disciplines to African history. Also examined are the limitations and advantages of unwritten sources like oral traditions and European and Arabic primary written sources. Other chapters discuss regional historiography by notable experts from West Africa, North Africa, Central Africa, East Africa, and Southern Africa. *Kenya's Past: An Introduction to Historical Method in Africa* by **Thomas Spear** is an introductory work often used as an undergraduate African history textbook.⁵ The author provides an overview of the sources of African history using Kenya as a case study. The examined sources include archaeological, linguistic, and oral traditions, along with documentary sources.

Toyin Falola and Christian Jennings's edited work *Sources and Methods in African History: Spoken, Written, Unearthed* explores the challenges of both unwritten and written

sources.⁶ A **Choice Outstanding Academic Title**, it is a selection of revised papers from the "Pathways to Africa's Past" conference held at the **University of Texas at Austin** in 2001. Contributions are from notable Africanist historians including **Paul Lovejoy, Thomas Spear, David Henige, Dennis Cordell, and Akinwumi Ogundiran**. It provides an overview of current sources and methods used to understand African history. Essays are grouped into five sections: the contributions of archaeological research to history; history of Africans in the diaspora; new approaches to historical evidence; innovative methods of examining oral sources; and innovative sources and methods applied to historical study including nutrition studies, electricity networks, youth culture, and surveys for social histories.

Writing African History, edited by **John Edward Philips**, expands **Daniel McCall's** earlier arguments focusing on the types of sources and methodologies available to historians of Africa.⁷ An introduction by **McCall** is followed by **Philips's** chapter addressing the question "What is African history?" His concluding chapter "Writing African history" provides practical advice on historical practice, including how to organize and frame research questions; collect, evaluate, and interpret data; and write about historical research. Contributors, all experts in their respective areas, focus on archaeology, physical anthropology, linguistics, oral traditions, oral history, botanical data, and various Arabic and European sources. Like **Falola** and **Jennings**, they discuss both the possibilities and challenges of the sources. An example is the chapter by **John Hunwick** discussing not only the value of Arabic sources to West African history, but their linguistic challenges and access difficulties. An appendix lists the contents of Arabic collections in Nigeria, Khartoum, Zanzibar, and Timbuktu. The work is an excellent introduction to African history for people new to the field such as undergraduate students.

Many African societies value knowledge and information about the past passed on from generation to generation through storytelling and ceremonial oral traditions. Issues with transmission and reliability might impact authenticity, however, oral traditions are still important sources of historical data for African history. **Jan Vansina** is highly regarded as the pioneer of using oral tradition as historical evidence. His seminal work, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, serves as a guide book on oral tradition as a historical

continued on page 28

source.⁸ Originally published in French in 1961, it discusses how to use oral tradition to obtain historical data, defines and categorizes oral evidence as a source, offers guidelines on how to determine reliability, and provides justification for its use in reconstructing the past. In the concluding chapter, **Vansina** includes how to supplement and verify oral tradition with cultural history, linguistics, anthropology, and written documents by members of that society. An extensive appendix provides practical advice on how to choose informants and obtain usable oral traditional material. **Vansina** has utilized these methods to produce other historical texts — including *The Tio Kingdom of the Middle Congo, 1880-1892* — proving the validity of oral tradition as a source.⁹

The recent growth of digital primary sources related to Africa available via subscription databases and open access repositories has increased access to African primary sources, making it easier to introduce undergraduate students to historical research on Africa. A 2008 study by **Doris J. Malkmus** surveying history faculty on the use of print, online, and archival primary sources in teaching undergraduates found that while printed sources are still in use, trends point towards an increased use of online primary sources.¹⁰ Faculty also indicated that while they have access to online primary sources, they needed help with finding sources relevant to their courses. Highlighting these online repositories and databases in academic bibliographic tools like *Resources for College Libraries* enhances awareness for both faculty and students. The following are a few noteworthy examples.

African Online Digital Library is an open access digital repository of multimedia collections on Africa based at **Michigan State University**.¹¹ It contains a wealth of primary source materials related to Africa. Amongst the many notable collections are these three: “African Activist Archive” contains records of activists in the United States who supported Africans during their struggles for independence and against apartheid from the 1950s through the 1990s. Digital records include personal remembrances and activist interviews, leaflets, buttons, posters, T-shirts, photographs, and audio/video recordings. “South Africa: Overcoming Apartheid, Building Democracy,” contains first-hand accounts of the struggle for freedom and democracy in South Africa, including interviews with South African activists, video footage documenting mass resistance and police repression, and rare photographs. “African Oral Narratives” contains six collections of oral and life histories, folklore, and songs from Ethiopia, Ghana, and South Africa. Students using these primary materials will be exposed to a wide array of African cultures and languages from the audio and video testimonies of ordinary Africans in various African languages.

The subscription database *Confidential Print: Africa 1834-1966* is part of the British government’s “Confidential Print” series.¹² It

contains important files of the British foreign office and its colonial administrations in Africa spanning the period 1820-1970. It is a valuable resource to scholars and students researching the political, social, and economic history of colonial Africa based on the British government’s sources. Files include diplomatic dispatches, letters, and investigative reports, first-hand accounts of events, and texts of treatises. The documents provide insights into the coastal trading system in the 19th century, the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 and the Scramble for Africa, tropical disease outbreaks, various wars, apartheid in South Africa, and the advance towards an independent and postcolonial Africa. It is part of **Adam Matthew’s Archives Direct** platform of sources from **The National Archives, UK**. Files can be viewed in original or thumbnail images and can be zoomed in and out for clarity.

Northwestern University Library’s Humphrey Winterton Collection of East African Photographs is an openly-available digitized collection of over 7,000 historical photographs from East Africa.¹³ The online photographs offer a comprehensive story of the life of Africans and Europeans in East Africa from the colonial period to the dawn of independence in 1960. They depict Africans in urban and rural settings, slaves and slave traders, the daily life of European colonial officials and businessmen, and economic activities such as the construction of East African railroads and growth of urban centers. The interface is user-friendly and easy to use. The navigation pane allows users to customize searches by adding and removing search criteria. Images are also discoverable with a hierarchical browser that allows images to be viewed in groups or individually.

The African Newspapers: Series 1 and 2, 1800-1925 is a subscription database containing newspapers published in several African countries from 1800-1925.¹⁴ Series 1 provides online access to more than sixty newspapers published from 1800-1922 and Series 2 has forty newspapers published from 1835-1925. Newspaper origins include Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, and others. Languages include English, German, French, Portuguese, Afrikaans, and Xhosa. Present are notable newspapers at the time: *Africa’s Luminary* (Liberia), *Al-Moghreb Al-Aksa* (Morocco), *O Moçambique* (Mozambique), *Voortrekker* (Namibia), *Nigerian Times* (Nigeria), *Black Man* (South Africa), and *Munno* (Uganda). The archival content includes eyewitness reporting, editorials, legislative information, advertisements, photographs, letters, and opinion columns, providing insights into the contemporaneous issues and events concerning Africans. Database features include keyword searching, browse, image preview, and full text. Some texts are illegible, likely due to poor quality source microfilm.

The texts described here guide students in recognizing, finding, and using African primary sources. They provide valuable insights into the advantages and challenges of sources, practical advice on how to use sources (including guidelines on combining both written and unwritten sources), and how to question their

reliability. Though some of these texts are dated, they remain foundational and should be in the core collection of any academic library supporting programs in African history. Online archival repositories and databases provide access to both written and unwritten primary sources and offer broad insights into African culture, history, and society. Their scholarly use often enriches research and enlivens classroom discussions. In addition to serving curricular and research needs, primary sources are important pedagogical tools used to engage undergraduate students in practicing historical analysis, applying evidence-based reasoning to examine the past, and contextualizing Africa in history. 🌿

Endnotes

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11. **Michigan State University.** *African Online Digital Library*. <http://www.aodl.org/> *
12. **Adam Matthew.** *Confidential Print: Africa, 1834-1966*. <https://www.amdigital.co.uk/primary-sources/confidential-print-africa-1834-1966> *
13. **Northwestern University Library.** *The Humphrey Winterton Collection of East African Photographs: 1860-1960*. <http://winterton.library.northwestern.edu/> *
14. **Readex.** *African Newspapers, Series 1 and 2, 1800-1925*. <https://www.readex.com/content/african-newspapers-series-1-2-1800-1925> *

Editor’s note: An asterisk () denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries*.