

BLOCK**1**

Sources in African History

Introduction

In order to understand the history of Africa, it is necessary to begin with examining the prejudices which it had to bear for a long time and the sources which contributed to its writing. This block thus intends to show that the writing of this history is recent and has often used foreign written sources and attempts, as far as possible, to use oral traditions and to privilege some complementary sources, such as anthropology, archaeology and linguistics.

What is in this block?

There are 4 sections in this block:

Section 1: Does Africa have a history?

Section 2: Written sources

Section 3: Oral traditions

Section 4: Complementary sources

Estimated study time

We think that you will need 7 or 8 hours to do all the activities of this block.

Learning objectives

By the end of this block, you should be able to:

- enumerate the major prejudices which African history has been subject to
- name written sources which have largely contributed to the writing of the African history
- show how oral traditions are used
- discuss the main sources complementary to the history of Africa

How will I assess my learning in this block?

This block contains 4 activities. They are designed to help you to evaluate your progress in the study of the contents of the block.

After having studied each section of this module, do the activities, which are proposed to you.

Compare your answers with those, which are suggested at the end of the block.

If you encountered difficulties, please review the section.

If difficulties persist, it is absolutely necessary to ask for assistance from a colleague or your tutor in the centre.

Section 1: Does Africa have a history?

Why did the Europeans say that Africa has no history?

Write your answer in the space provided below.

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For a very long time, the history of Africa has been subject to several prejudices and has come up against many difficulties, because of several reasons. Firstly, because the quasi totality of the sources on the African history came from foreign observers (explorers, missionaries, colonial administrators). Secondly, because the latter yielded to easy temptation to write history by privileging the colonial period, when the African people did not live in their authentic and secular ways of life. The history of Africa thus is presented as the history of Europeans in Africa and not that of the Africans themselves. Therefore, what has been written is not in the perspective of what could be the past of the African people, but of what it was thought to be.

Keywords

Prejudices

Foreign observers

Lower race

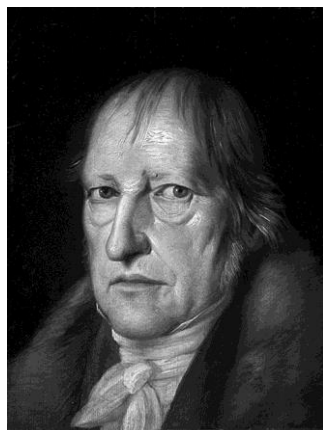
General History of Africa



Amadou Mahtar M'Bow

Thirdly, as underlined well by the former Director General of UNESCO Amadou Mahtar M'Bow in his foreword to the first volume of the *General History of Africa*, the European Middle Age was always presented as the reference point of the evolution of political institutions, modes of productions and social relations with other peoples. The African was then not taken as the creator of the original cultures that spread out and perpetuated through centuries in ways which are proper to them.

This attitude tremendously distorted the objective study of Africa in general and of Black Africa in particular. Fourthly, during black trade and colonisation, the appearance of racial stereotypes that generated contempt and incomprehension still distorted the vision of the history of contemporary Africa. Regarded as goods among others, dedicated to forced labour, the African was considered by the colonisers to belong to a lower race.



rich Hegel

George Wilhelm Freidrich Hegel (1770/1831), a German philosopher who had a very great influence on the West, regarded the non-European societies as not having a history worthy to be studied, pretending that the history of European civilisation was the key to any knowledge and that therefore, the history of other societies had no value.

The situation developed a great deal since the end of the Second World War.

Indeed, there have been many historians who endeavoured to study Africa with more rigour, objectivity and broadmindedness by using specifically African sources with customary precautions, especially as regards historical criticism. On their own initiative, Africans felt the need to restore the historicity of their societies on solid foundations. Anxious to illustrate and revalorize the past of their people through a process combining oral documentation to oral sources, they undertook to rewrite the history of Africa, which had been distorted by ignorance as well as by lack of interest. It is in that perspective that UNESCO undertook to rewrite the *General History of Africa* in eight volumes.

As can be seen from above, the history of Africa has been subject to numerous prejudices. This is why, in order to reinforce their independence, ensure their development and to strengthen their cultural identities, African people need first to regain historical conscience, unceasingly renovate, intensely live and assume it from generation to generation.

Activity 1



1. Why has the history of Africa been subject to several prejudices?
2. Why has the history of Africa encountered many difficulties?
3. What did the German philosopher Hegel say in connection with no European societies?
4. What prompted UNESCO to undertaking the rewriting of the general History of Africa?

Feedback

Read carefully this section before giving answers to this activity.

Section 2: Written sources



What do you understand by written sources?

Write the answer in the space below.

Periodisation

The first problem of the written sources is that one is in connection with periodisation. We generally distinguish written sources prior to the 15th century (when the Portuguese landed on the African coasts) from those posterior to this date. While the former are mainly of Arab origin, the latter are European and more abundant, especially with regard to Black Africa.

Ethno cultural regions

Supplementary to the classification of sources per periods it is necessary to take into account ethno cultural regions. There is a great tendency to divide Africa into two: white Africa in the north of the Sahara, Arabised and Islamised, having links with the Mediterranean world and black Africa in the south of the Sahara, with very few written sources. This would be to ignore that, for a long time, Senegal or Niger had relations with the Arabo-Berber Maghreb and that from the point of view of written sources; these two countries are closer to the Arab influences than the Bantu world. Another tendency is to contrast Mediterranean and desert Africa (the Maghreb, Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Horn of Africa) with another equatorial and tropical Africa (Guinean coast, Congo Basin, Zambezi Region, interlacustrine region, Southern Africa). Taking into consideration the availability of written sources, Arab ones in particular, we can thus have two Africas: northern Africa, which is very rich and southern Africa, which is very poor.

Keywords

White Africa
Black Africa
Narratives sources
Archival sources

Typology of written sources

Classification by languages

Written sources have been found in several languages which are different in value. The languages which provided the most information are: old Egyptian, Berber, Ethiopian languages, the Coptic, Swahili, Hausa, and Fulfulde. Those which were the most used are not of African origin: Greek, Latin, and Arabic. A classification which takes into account the quantity and the quality of the documents gives the following order: Arabic, Greek, and Latin, old Egyptian, the Coptic, Hebrew, Ethiopic, Swahili, Persian, Chinese.

Classification by genre

We can distinguish two major genres:

- Narrative sources (chronicles and annals, geographical works, journey accounts, legal and religious works, specifically literary works) which account for human every day life. They represent almost the totality of the documents written until the 12th century.
- Archival sources (private documents such as letters or business correspondences, official documents, etc.) which became more important in the 17th century in the Maghreb and in Egypt, but remain completely absent in the rest of Africa.

Activity 2

1. Which are the main ethno cultural regions of Africa?
2. Name two narratives sources.

Feedback

Compare your answers with those, which are at the end of the block

Section 3: Oral traditions



Who are the main traditionalists of the history of Rwanda?

Write the answer in the space below.

Keywords

Verbal/ Ocular
Testimony

Chronology

Oral text

Many African societies in the sub-Saharan region were societies of oral tradition, because they had no writing system. However, it would be an error to believe that they were "inferior" in any case. Oral tradition is a testimony transmitted verbally from one generation to another. But all verbal data are not traditions. Thus it is necessary to distinguish a *verbal testimony* based on oral accounts from an *ocular testimony* which has a great value, because information was not distorted

In order to understand an oral tradition, it should be placed in its social context in which it took place. Some societies and some States attached greater importance to oral tradition. They have dynastic stories, genealogies, which can be regarded as true not written constitutions. We can distinguish two kinds of traditions: official traditions which refer to an entire society or State and private or family traditions which account for the evolution of a restricted group.

Oral traditions have several functions: they can be religious, liturgical (in connection with rites), didactic, and historical. They are either exoteric, i.e. known to the general public, or esoteric secret, i.e. held by a small group. For example, the origin of the royal family of Ashanti had two versions: one public and another one kept secret by the members of this family. In Rwanda, only the *biiru* knew kingship ritual, but each group of the *biiru* held only one part of it. All over the interlacustrine Africa, the enthronement of kings was a prerogative of specialists who held their traditions. In the savannah region of sub-Saharan Africa, there were traditionalists, great guardians of oral traditions. Called *doma* in Bambara, *silatigi* in Peul, these initiators had very extensive knowledge, in the sciences of the soil, water, etc. The traditional jobs such as those of weaving, hunting, forging, leatherwork, woodwork etc. were great vectors of oral tradition. Specialists who remember the text to be learned by way of songs transmit oral traditions. They can be living or not living at the court, like royal tombs guardians, tambourine players, genealogists, and priests of national worships.

In African societies, there always were individuals who socially occupied a higher position. In Burundi for instance, notable known as *bashingantahe* were regulators of the social life at the grassroots level. Not only were they holders of traditions, but also settled disagreements between neighbours and authenticated different social contracts: marriages, gifts, feasts, etc.

Oral traditions are finally influenced by collective representations related to time and space. Each society has its way of dividing time based on human activities: day is generally opposed to night; meals as well as the position of the sun in the sky often serve as reference marks in dividing time. Exceptional events such as famines, epizooties, invasion of grasshoppers, and death of a famous king are also used as chronological reference marks.

It is commonly admitted by all historians that without chronology, there is no history. Yet, oral traditions often do not provide exact dates;

they are expressed in terms of lists of names or genealogies. The historian is then confronted with the problem of distortion; since some lengthen the real time span and that others shorten it.

Before making correct use of oral traditions, it is necessary to compare them with other independent sources or other traditions. Obviously, two independent sources which agree on a great number of points are more convincing. Some African authors who wrote during the colonial period "solidified" some traditions to make them official. The books of Apollo Kaggwa on Buganda and Johnston on the kingdom of Oyo in Nigeria are the most quoted in this instance.

Oral traditions can be combined with written or archaeological sources. For example, the excavations of Kumbi Saleh (Mauritania) showed that archaeology could provide evidence of their validity.

In order to carry out a good survey on the oral traditions, it is advisable to have good knowledge of the civilisation and the language of the society in question. This requires a long stay in the field. As everything cannot be collected, it is necessary to use a sample, provided that it is representative. The investigator will absolutely have to first study the way in which the traditions were transmitted. The first problem which he is prone to meet is that some informers may have drawn their knowledge from printed works (schoolbooks, newspapers, etc.) in a given region. They may have had access to scientific or broadcast conferences. It will be advisable to check if the reported traditions are right. It is also noted that reports of colonial administration are considered traditions. It will absolutely be necessary to check if they were well written during the collection by colonial authorities. The publication of "oral texts" is the final stage in the investigations into the oral traditions. It is the single means of placing at the disposal of other researchers the fruit of the efforts often expended during several years.

During these last years oral traditions have become a significant source of the African history, especially in the countries where written sources are scarce. Several theses have been defended and a number of books published using almost exclusively this kind of sources.



In 1962 for example, Amadou Hampate Ba wrote *'L'empire Peul du Macina au 18^e siècle'* starting from the data gathered exclusively from oral traditions.

Amadou Hampate Ba

Activity 3

1. What do you understand by oral tradition?
2. Why is it important to place each tradition in its context?
3. Name a famous African author who used oral traditions to write his thesis
What is the title of his work?

Feedback

Compare your answers with those proposed at the end of this block.

Section 4: Complementary sources



Why is geography important for an historian?

Write the answer in the space below.

Keywords

Anthropology

Paleontology

Geography

Archeology

Linguistics

History uses several complementary sources:

- anthropology which studies various human societies, their beliefs, habits and traditions; physical and physiological characteristics of people, their rites and myths, forms of production and the distribution of wealth;
- paleontology which is the science of living beings having
- populated the earth during geological times and which is founded on the study of fossils;
- geography which shows that people's history developed within a well-defined physical and ecological framework.
- In addition to that, the African history resorts in particular to two disciplines: archaeology and linguistics. Africa is a continent where archaeological sources have a great importance. The scientific techniques that are used in that area are the same as those applied to Europe, America and Asia. Linguistics is the study of language and speech. Onomastics, which is a branch of linguistics, interests a historian on several accounts. It studies proper names (anthroponymy), names of places (toponymy), of rivers (hydronymy).

Activity 4

1. What is anthropology?
2. What is paleontology?
3. How can linguistics be useful to an historian?

Feedback

Compare your answers with those which are at the end of the block.

Block Summary

This first block pinned down some prejudices which marked Europeans who took up writing on the history of Africa. It has also explored written sources through their periodisation, ethno-cultural regions and their typology. Finally it has to be mentioned that oral traditions constitute a tool that cannot be neglected and which is advisable to combine with other sources, such as geography, archaeology and linguistics.



Answers to activities in this block

Activity 1

1. The history of Africa was subject to numerous prejudices because: no value was given to African tradition, the vision of the history of contemporary Africa was distorted, some European thinkers claimed that the history of other societies had no importance.
2. The history of Africa encountered many difficulties, because:
 - the majority of sources which contributed to the writing of this history are of foreign origin,
 - Europeans privileged history of the colonial period,
 - Black trade and colonisation contributed to the depreciation of Africans' image.
3. Hegel said that the history of non European societies was not worth studying.
4. UNESCO undertook the rewriting of *the General History of Africa* in order to reassert the value of the past about the continent.

Activity 2

1. The main ethno-cultural regions of Africa are:
 - a. Egypt, Sudan and Libya
 - b. The Maghreb
 - c. Western and Saharan Africa
 - d. Ethiopia, Erythrea, the Horn of Africa and the Eastern coast
 - e. The gulf of Guinea, central, southern Africa and the Great Lakes regions
2. Geographical works, legal and religious works

Activity 3

1. Oral tradition is a testimony transmitted verbally from a generation to another.
2. It is important to place each oral tradition in its context because each society has its way of attaching importance to their tradition.
3. It is Amadou Hambaté Ba His work is entitled *L'Empire Peul du Macina au 18e siècle*.

Activity 4

1. Anthropology is a science which studies people's habits, physical characteristics, forms of production and wealth distribution;
2. Paleontology is a science of the living beings having populated the Earth during geological times and which is founded on the study of fossils.
3. Linguistics is useful for a historian insofar as onomastics, through anthroponymy, toponymy and hydronymy enable them to explain people's migrations.

Glossary

Allied forces:	Military alliance of European and American countries which fought together against Germany during both the two World Wars
Almohads:	Berber Muslim dynasty established in Northern Africa and Portugal/ Spain since 1120
Almoravids:	Berber dynasty of Morocco who founded the capital in Marakkech and controlled Northern Africa. They are the successors of the Almohads. They destroyed the Ghana Empire
Apartheid:	Political system based on racial segregation in South Africa
Assimilation:	French colonial policy which aimed at considering the colonised peoples as French citizens if they have adopted their culture and customs
Bantu:	Many ethnic groups in Central, Eastern and Southern Africa who speak bantu languages
Boers:	Farmers who were the descendants of the Dutch; they left during the 19 th century the Colony of Cape to settle in the Orange Free State and the Transvaal
Caliph:	Head of a Caliphate, a state ruled by a successor/ descendant of Muhammad
Cushitic:	Ancient people of Northeastern Africa, ancestors of Danaki, Afar, Borana, etc.
Coup d'Etat:	An illegal deposition of a government democratically elected
Democratisation:	Process which conducts a political system to become governed by the people throughout regular elections
Dependency:	The state of being controlled by someone else or something else
Ethiopian:	A racial classification of people currently in Ethiopia, Northern and Eastern Africa
Ethnicity:	Fact of belonging to a social group that has a common origin, culture and tradition
Explorer:	A person who travels into unknown regions for discovering purpose
Fracture:	A great crack on the earth surface
Gondwana:	Name of a continent which broke up into India; Australia, Africa, South America and Antarctica

Hominisation:	Phenomenon of evolution during which a sort of primates (hominids) was gradually transformed into human beings (homo)
Indirect Rule:	British colonial policy aiming at leaving the power in the hands of traditional chiefs and institutions
Jihad:	Holy Muslem war/ struggle against non Muslims
Land alienation:	The fact of colonists took the land away from the original inhabitants
Mansa :	Manding word meaning “king of kings”
Migration:	Movement of a people from one place to another
Military regime:	Regime controlled by a military dictatorship
Monrho Naba:	Title of the king of the Mossi people
Nationalist:	A member of a political group devoted to fight for the rights of a given nation
Neolithic Era:	Period when human beings started to domesticate plants and animals
Obelisk:	Tall monolithic monument built by he inhabitants of Axum
Pan Africanism:	Movement that wants the unity of African people
Pharaon:	Title of an ancient Egyptian king
Political party:	An organisation to gain and to maintain on political power
Prehistory:	Period of time before the history, when man started to write
Prejudice:	Preconceived opinion not supported by reason
Punic Wars:	Three wars fought between Rome and Carthage
Pygmies:	Short people living mainly in Central Africa
Pyramid:	Monument built by ancient Egyptians
Rebellion:	Insurrection to refuse order from the political power and to fight for its rights
Secession:	Act of withdrawing from an organisation, a country, etc.
Slavery:	Practice or system where some people are subjected to servitude by others
Stone Age:	Prehistoric period during which stone was the main tool used by man
Swahili:	A language, a people and a civilisation of various ethnic groups on tne Coast of Indian Ocean
Trade union:	An organisation of workers to defend and to promote their common interests
Triangular tade:	Trade involving goods (and slaves) from three ontinents: Europe, Africa and America
Under development:	State of having a low level of economic development
Vazimba:	The first inhabitants of Madagascar

Zimbabwe: Shona word meaning “large houses of stone” built for important traditional chiefs