

HISTORY MATTERS

William A. Brown and the Assessment of a Scholarly Life

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It is something of an unusual task to put together a reflection on and assessment of a scholar whose formal academic publications totaled seventeen pages across an article, two research notes, a manuscript handlist, and a book review.¹ The career of Dr. William Allen Brown (1934–2007) illustrates, among other things, the limits of defining intellectual impact by the number of publications, or even PhD students trained or undergraduates taught. While Brown's core research, physically manifest in his 1969 Wisconsin PhD dissertation, long stood as a landmark for those in his subfield, he was, outside that small network, more admired than understood, and, tellingly, more ignored than admired. As deeply hostile to academic politics as he was unwavering in his personal ones, Brown was more likely to ghostwrite lectures for ivy league professors than to take the steps that would have brought his own work to a wider audience. That his scholarship nevertheless remains relevant is surely a testament to the seriousness of purpose with which he pursued it; but it is also only one facet of an academic life that has much to teach us in an era of decolonizing knowledge and institutional self-criticism.

Raised in North Carolina, Brooklyn, and the Bronx, Brown completed a stint in the US military before graduating from what was then Kentucky State College (now University), Kentucky's only public HBCU. At Kentucky State, Brown was president of his class, editor of the student newspaper, and earned a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship allowing him to pursue his PhD at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.² Completing his degree in 1969, Brown's professional career included short appointments at Ahmadu Bello University, Yale University, and Harvard University, before being hired back at his *alma mater* to replace his own graduate adviser, Philip D. Curtin. He long worked as an under-acknowledged member of a Madison team that included, first, Jan Vansina and Steven Feierman, and, then, Thomas Spear and Florence Bernault. He retired in 2006 and passed away the following year.³

¹'The Bakkā'iyya books of Timbuktu', *Research Bulletin (Centre of Arabic Documentation, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan)*, 3:1 (1967), 40–4; 'A new bibliographical aid: the Izālat al-raib of Aḥmad Abū 'l-A'raf al-Tinbukti', *Research Bulletin (Centre of Arabic Documentation, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan)*, 3:2 (1967), 135–6; 'A monument of legal scholarship: the *Nawāzil al-Takrūr* of al-Muṣṭafā b. Aḥmad al-Ghalāwī', *Research Bulletin (Centre of Arabic Documentation, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan)*, 3:2 (1967), 137–8; 'Toward a chronology for the caliphate of Hamdullahi (Māsina)', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 8:31 (1968), 428–34; 'Review: *Chiefs and Clerics: Abdul Bokar Kan and Futa Toro, 1853-1891*, by David Robinson', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 9:3 (1976), 530. Less well known are the children's textbook he coauthored, while still a graduate student, with Lavinia Dobler, *Great Rulers of the African Past* (Garden City, NY, 1965), and a play, 'They Came in Chains', based on the popular historical study by J. Saunders Redding and performed at Kentucky State in 1959 (*Louisville Defender*, 19 Feb. 1959, 11).

²'Ky. State: news of today's students – tomorrow's leaders', *Louisville Defender*, 30 Jan. 1958, 14; 'Woodrow Wilson Fellowship goes to W.A. Brown', *Louisville Defender*, 19 Mar. 1959, 14.

³Although they contain a couple of contradictions, the University of Wisconsin-Madison's obituary for Brown and the more detailed text written by Thomas Spear summarize his biography. See: <https://africa.wisc.edu/staff/brown-bill/> and

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In the 1950s and 1960s, Brown was active in the broader movement to link the study of Africa to the struggle for Black liberation in the United States. A 1958 article in the historical Black newspaper, *The Louisville Defender*, written when Brown was still an undergraduate, summarized two lectures that Horace Mann Bond gave at Kentucky State on the themes ‘Africa: The Emergence of New Black Nations’ and ‘Africa: Fourth Force in a New World’. In a foretaste of a lecture Brown himself would deliver fourteen years later, Bond told the assembled students that ‘the distorted picture of the continent painted by Hollywood and engraved on Western minds’ was responsible for the embarrassment many Black Americans felt about Africa. The coming independence of African states would, Bond argued, spread understanding about that continent’s past and that it might be that ‘the salvation of the American Negro should come through greater respect accorded blacks because of Africa’s place in the world’.⁴ Brown’s efforts to connect African politics with liberation in the US continued while a student at Madison. In May 1968, he organized a conference on ‘Afro-American Letters and Arts’ and co-organized a follow-up symposium that August on ‘Anger and Beyond: The Black Writer and a World in Revolution’. Throughout his career, he remained committed to an emancipatory politics and particularly to the role African history could (but rarely did, in his view) play in that project.

As a graduate student at Wisconsin, Brown carried out significant archival research in Senegal, France, Morocco, and Nigeria, but his main terrain was Mali, where he collected oral traditions himself and reinterpreted those collected a decade earlier by Jacques Daget and Amadou Hampâté Bâ, photographed Arabic manuscripts, and navigated the shifting availability of government archives across both sides of the 1968 coup. Although the published outcome of that work is scant, Brown’s unpublished 1969 dissertation on the *Diina* or ‘Caliphate’ of Ḥamdullāhi, remained a core reference, used by everyone from the most influential archaeologists working in Africa, such as Roderick McIntosh, to historical anthropologists and historians of Islam, to geographers and development specialists working in the inland Niger delta up until today.⁵

While different scholars have undoubtedly found different things of value in that text, its lasting and broad relevance likely reflects the way that Brown approached his topic. The reform movements and their political offshoots that shook the West African Sahel from the late 1600s through the mid-1800s had attracted scholarly attention since the early colonial period. One state that emerged from that movement was the short-lived *Diina* of Māsina, founded in 1818 by the upstart scholar Shaykh Aḥmad aka Seeku Amadu Lobbo. In 1862 the *Diina*’s capital, Ḥamdullāhi, and Amadu’s grandson, Amadu III, both fell to al-Ḥājj ‘Umar Taal. Taal’s forces crushed a short-lived resistance mounted by Amadu III’s brother, Ba Lobbo, outside Bandiagara later that year. Remote from the economic hubs occupied by Islamic states in Senegambia and Nigeria — which had garnered significantly more attention — the *Diina* was the most *sui generis* of the group and, arguably, the most intellectually radical. Brown recognized that while immersing himself in the regional theological debates that had informed Lobbo and his advisers was crucial for understanding these leaders’ motivations, the actual causes, meanings, and implications of the movement that created Ḥamdullāhi had to be sought in oral traditions that could account for its distinctiveness.

Heavily influenced by Jan Vansina’s approach to oral traditions, Brown was also actively involved in the debates that swirled around Vansina’s methods in the mid- and late 1960s. Firmly committed to the idea that oral sources, like written ones, required careful scrutiny, Brown nonetheless broke

<https://lists.h-net.org/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-West-Africa&month=0709&week=b&msg=uN8MCCs2RVW882YYwXlaIQ&user=&pw=>.

⁴W. Brown, ‘Ky. State’, *The Louisville Defender*, 20 Feb. 1958. The first quote is Brown’s paraphrase, the second his direct quote of Bond.

⁵Roderick McIntosh personal communication. The dissertation and short articles have been cited in substantial works by, inter alia, Ralph Austen, Louis Brenner, David Conrad, Philip D. Curtin, Martin Klein, Paul Lovejoy, Wendell Marsh, Anne Mayor, Roderick and Susan McIntosh, Mauro Nobili, David Robinson, Bernard Salvaing, Benjamin Soares, Tal Tamari, Matthew Turner, Trond Vedeld, Holger Weiss, and John Ralph Willis, as well as by each of the current editors.

with what he saw as the dominant techniques for doing so. Convinced that most of the scholarship on Muslim West Africa was, if unconsciously, still beholden to the racist and (what we would now call) Orientalist assumptions of the colonial era, he saw those assumptions' pernicious influence in the attraction that functionalism and structuralism held for those who worked with both Mande oral performances and Arabic texts. What such analysts failed to respect, he believed, was that those Muslim intellectuals who transmitted knowledge in nineteenth-century West Africa believed that they could be eternally damned if they knowingly recited falsehoods or committed ones to paper, and that this instilled in them a commitment to empiricism and source criticism at least as profound as that of their European counterparts. Hardly blind to ideological forces or the partiality of a given observer, Brown nonetheless approached each bit of evidence in his dissertation from a place of respect, and he never tired of pointing out the irony that the task of taking religion seriously had fallen to him, a Marxist atheist, at a time when (he felt) many of his peers approached it with thinly veiled condescension.

It was this, then, that motivated him to locate the goals and strategies of Lobbo, his allies, and his opponents within a field of social and material forces as well as within a longer tradition of theological debate. In particular, Brown revealed how the political economy of Māsina required Seeku Amadu to make common cause with the intellectual heritage of one of the oldest, most prestigious, and most established hubs of Islamic scholarship in the region: the merchant towns of the inland Niger delta, particularly Timbuktu and Jenne. Whereas other reformist states tended to speak with the clear voice of their venerable founders, the multiple modes of religious argumentation that obtained in Māsina left traces that allowed Brown to reveal the tensions within the Diina, the complex alliance Lobbo's inner circle had made with the wealthy and *realpolitik*-minded scholars of the towns, and their reluctance to be drawn into the kind of regional conflicts that more celebrated reformers to the east and west had set off. Above all, Brown provided a glimpse at the social consequences of the messianic fervor that Seeku Amadu strove to build up around him, particularly the ways in which long-established forms of hierarchy may have appeared to be up for grabs, at least until political pragmatism forced Lobbo and his advisers to give up some of their more utopian plans.

Yet despite the discussions that his dissertation opened up, Brown's own public voice largely went silent in the 1970s. Instead, he turned his attention to those who were physically around to hear him. The selection of essays gathered here thus seeks to attend both to the ongoing effects of Brown's work on the two generations of specialists who followed him and to his interpersonal legacy.

Madina Thiam's contribution to this selection of essays places Brown's early career in the wider contexts of the civil rights movement in the US and decolonization in West Africa. Thiam imagines Brown's own experiences of these intersecting struggles, emblemized by the presence of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at Ghana's independence celebration in March of 1957 and, two months later, on the stage giving the commencement address at Brown's Kentucky State. Thiam highlights the revolutionary, modernist, and pan-Africanist energy still present in Bamako during the last few years of Modibo Keita's government (whose overthrow Brown witnessed firsthand). A new generation of scholars in the Global North, inspired by both movements, were busy innovating new approaches to African history, ones that, Thiam points out, themselves paralleled and drew on the work of West African Muslim intellectuals.

The contribution from Mauro Nobili and Said Bousbina in this issue also details the important work Brown undertook to make rare manuscripts more readily available to other researchers. Brown's interest in the links between Seeku Amadu's circle and the scholars of Timbuktu led him to become one of the first non-Malian researchers to consult these materials, particularly the rich collections of Aḥmad Būla'rāf and Mūlay Aḥmad Bābir. While the oral traditions that Brown collected about Māsina are glimpsed only in the fragments that appear as quotes in his dissertation, he made microfilm of the Arabic manuscripts he photographed available to other

researchers via Yale University's Malian Arabic Manuscript Microfilming Project. Nobili and Bousbina survey this collection, highlighting both the texts that shaped Brown's understanding of the Diina as well as the uses that future scholars can make of the materials.

Bernard Salvaing, David Anthony III, and Ousman Kobo offer more personal accounts, both direct and indirect. Salvaing's contribution explores the way that Brown and his political and ethical commitments were viewed by those he worked with in Mali. His close professional relationship with Almamy Maliki Yattara shaped his own views about Mali's history and the two scholars supported one another both intellectually and personally. Salvaing draws on Brown's brief notes about Yattara in his dissertation and on the more extensive discussion of Brown found in Yattara's memoirs to illuminate their friendship. The result is a rare, enlightening look at how a foreign researcher in the 1960s was perceived by a West African collaborator.

The results of the research described by Nobili, Bousbina, and Salvaing led to Brown's various academic positions in the US, including his post at Madison where he would remain for the rest of his life. Brown continued to refine his work on Māsina with an eye to eventual publication. But it was also during this time that Brown's profound disaffection with the field and the profession gradually grew. It remained his belief that a profound war for human equality was being waged within historical scholarship about Africa and that the wrong side was winning. By the 1990s, those who knew him knew how alienated Brown had become from the Department of History, the African Studies Program, and the practice of African history in the US generally. As a result, for many, Brown's impact was felt less via his published scholarship than through his role as a teacher and trainer. Yet such an impact is also much harder to trace than the impact of scholarship, particularly since Brown spent much of his energy mentoring undergraduates and members of the Madison community (many of whom affectionately knew him as 'Doc Brown') and his network of academic mentees thus remained modest. But as the pieces by Anthony, Kobo, and Sean Hanretta detail, those whom he did influence felt it profoundly.

Anthony's piece shows us Brown at the height of his powers and enthusiasm as a teacher, early in his tenure at Wisconsin, when his courses were 'electrifying' and 'inspirational'. The eloquence Anthony describes would continue to be familiar to anyone who worked with Brown for the rest of his career.⁶ But another aspect of Brown that Anthony describes, the passionate evangelism with which he pulled his students into his intellectual world, would, in later decades, become something glimpsed only rarely and only by his most ardent disciples. Anthony's reminiscence helps us measure just how much was lost as Brown became disillusioned with the role of higher education in changing American perceptions of Africa. But Anthony also captures an aspect of Brown's personality that is perhaps less well known. Brown was a master at teaching through anecdotes and the story of his encounter with Malcolm X that Anthony relays touched upon one of his classic themes: the need for humility when interacting with someone who knows more about a subject than you do. While Brown was infamous for his scathing criticisms of others (criticisms that tended to become ever more pointed the more he liked you), he was among the least self-aggrandizing of academics; he almost always ended his withering assessment of a student's work by revealing that if he could identify difficulties or weaknesses so easily it was because they were ones he himself struggled with.

Indeed, the experiences Kobo recounts in his contribution here were, it seems, more typical of interactions with Brown during the last two decades of his career. Brown remained a mentor, but one who built formidable (if usually affable) tests into his interactions with students. These served to an extent as a way of filtering out those who were not serious; even more, they sent a signal to those whom he did agree to work with about the level to which they would need to raise themselves. Brown openly discussed the ways in which his own pedagogy was influenced by the teaching

⁶In 1956, Brown was the state champion of the Kentucky Oratorical Association and came in second in the National Collegian Oratorical Contest, held at Northwestern University. See *Louisville Defender*, 'News of today's students' and 'Woodrow Wilson Fellowship'.

techniques of West African Muslim scholars, particularly those who had embraced some of the ideas of Sufi theorists of knowledge. Working with him thus provided insights into that system both in content and form. There is little doubt, though, that this approach also drove away some who, had they benefited from Brown's guidance, could have contributed much to the field.

As Brown pulled farther away from active participation in the community of researchers working in West Africa, he devoted increasing time to exploring both the roots of global inequities — which led him deeper into social theory — and ways to bring African history and liberatory politics into closer cooperation. It was this latter project that led him to devote nearly two decades to the study of Ancient Egypt and to think carefully about how to engage the ways that Egypt's history was mobilized by those competing for control over the past. Hanretta's contribution uses an undergraduate seminar that Brown offered at Wisconsin as a window into this aspect of Brown's intellectual development, highlighting the ways his ideas about Egypt grew out of the same political concerns that had brought him to the study of West African Islam.

One persistent problem in the subfield of West African Islamic history, already well known to many who work in it, is how unbalanced it was, and to a significant degree still is, in terms of the gender distribution of scholars carrying out this research. The contributions to this issue reflect this, and perhaps also some aspects of Brown's personal circle as well (although his one official PhD advisee at Wisconsin was Janet Ewald). This is a limitation that not only creates further barriers to equality within academic spaces, it also yields a distorted picture of the societies involved.⁷

Brown himself remained committed throughout his life to a politics of equality and liberation that grew out of, but extended beyond, the experiences of white supremacy in the United States, embracing the struggle for gender equality, the denunciation of heteronormativity, and, above all, a critique of global capitalism. His research and teaching on early African history were intended to produce and promote a picture of the continent free of racist (and Islamophobic) projections, which in turn would, he believed, contribute to the overthrowing of oppressive structures in general. The best tribute to Dr. William Allen Brown would be the furthering of that project.

⁷Note, for instance, that all five of those who gave the William Allen Brown Memorial Lectures at UW-Madison, held between 2009 and 2014, were men.