

INTRODUCTION

Editors' Introduction

In considering how to introduce the nine wide-ranging research articles of this issue of the JAH, the theme of “meaning-making” emerges as one way of connecting them. **Colin Bos** explicitly uses this concept to analyze how a colonial legal category — “antiquity” — engendered unintended meanings and outcomes after Nigerian independence, when officials sought to stop the theft of cultural patrimony. Bos’s attention to “statutory meaning-making” speaks to how colonial legal ideas have continued to shape African bureaucracies and politics well beyond independence. Bos argues that the 1953 Antiquities Ordinance “constituted an ontological project” that ended up constraining customs officials’ regulatory abilities, or willingness, to stop “expatriates” from leaving Nigeria “toting suitcases stuffed with cultural treasures.”

Morgan Robinson’s article on “bureaucratic knowledge production” in German East Africa also has meaning-making as a central concern. Using a Swahili phrasebook as her main primary source, Robinson shows that East Africans made meanings out of their everyday encounters with post office structures, interpreting these spaces and the bureaucratic practices that made them functional based on their relationships to the postal system as observers, customers, or employees. Robinson weaves a beautifully rendered portrait of how East Africans interpreted the invisible workings of telephones and telegraphs, the significance of handling pieces of mail, and the layers of bureaucratic practices (German and Swahili) that performed authority over a vast space in East Africa.

The linguistic meaning-making studied by **Joshua Castillo**’s article takes us to the Democratic Republic of Congo, where he analyzes how its peoples experienced the expansion of Lingala during Mobutu Sese Seko’s decades-long rule of Zaire, as it was then known. From its origins as one of four lingua francas used primarily by colonial agents and urban dwellers in the Belgian Congo, Mobutu centered the language in politics. Castillo argues that “Mobutu’s regime thus provided Zairians with greater proximity to power through language,” supplanting French as the language of everyday interactions with the state. “Learning Lingala,” writes Castillo, “allowed Zairians to negotiate with a predatory regime, and navigate the uncertainties of daily life in Zaire.” Since Zairian soldiers mainly spoke Lingala, ordinary folks benefited from their ability to communicate with them, whether to avoid violence or to gain access to economic opportunities. On the other hand, some Zairians used Lingala as a language of trade, or valued it for its cultural importance as the language of rumba music. As Lingala made inroads into different parts of the country, and new societal sectors, it also gave “non-elite Congolese” new ways to express “agency and creativity,” even under the most difficult circumstances.

Samuel Meyerson’s work on Karamojong uses of “state spaces” also foregrounds meaning-making alongside a fraught process of state-making in colonial and early postcolonial Uganda. “Karamojong,” Meyerson argues, “existed in a condition of exclusion from the state, partly by popular demand and partly by administrative design.” In towns, trading centers, and *barazas*, which Meyerson calls “state spaces,” state authorities, *ngitunga a ngireria* (“people of the homesteads”), and indigenous elites hashed out what it meant to belong to, or be separate from, the state. Meyerson’s sharp analysis of the complexity of Karamoja political epistemologies, and how they collided with colonial and postcolonial state authority, illuminates the value of questioning assumptions about state dominance

over marginalized peoples and polities. British colonizers and Ugandan leaders consistently characterized the Karamojong as backward and underdeveloped, and insisting on the use of force as “the best method for dealing with the region’s people.” But the Karamojong adeptly advanced their interests by using state spaces in ways that were meaningful to them, regardless of what state agents thought about it.

Michael Ehis Odijie’s article takes up meaning-making from the vantage point of Francis Fearon, a Gold Coast antislavery activist whose efforts brought him into connection with a network of African abolitionists in late nineteenth-century Accra. Through a careful reading of Fearon’s correspondence with the Aborigines’ Protection Society (APS), Odijie shows how Fearon directly confronted the colonial government’s “lack of commitment to implement the abolition of slavery and the broader acceptance of slavery” in the Gold Coast. Rather than focusing on enslaved peoples’ treatment as good or bad, mild or harsh, Fearon instead emphasized the “deplorable” effects of family separation on the enslaved and those who had to go on without them. By making original arguments against ongoing practices of domestic slavery in West Africa, and by networking with other Africans to build more intellectual and activist momentum around these arguments, Fearon sought to create new meanings that might bring an end to these practices.

In their articles, **George Bob-Milliar** and **Edem Adotey** both engage institutional histories of knowledge production in the Gold Coast/Ghana in the twentieth century. Thus meaning-making also offers a helpful lens on their work. Bob-Milliar investigates the history of learned societies in Ghana from their initial appearance in the 1930s until 1990. He shows that intellectuals “with distinct but overlapping educational trajectories and interests coalesced around shared intellectual projects,” and that their work provided a foundation for institutions of higher learning after the Second World War. In addition, he points out the importance of interdisciplinarity within the learned societies as a factor that “contribute[d] knowledge to the developmental state that the political leaders were constructing” after independence. This in turn shaped how the study of African history and politics unfolded elsewhere, especially in the US and the UK. His work charts a genealogy of African scholars and scholarship, tracing how their central concerns with dissemination of research, recognition of excellence, and attentiveness to Ghanaian political change and the needs of the state and Ghana’s peoples, demonstrated the critical value of learned societies in advancing African knowledge. His focus on the Ghana National Academy traces its “relevance... in national development” from its founding by Kwame Nkrumah to the November 1992 presidential elections, in which noted historian Albert Adu Boahen ran unsuccessfully against Jerry Rawlings.

Adotey’s article is a powerful complement to Bob-Milliar’s. Focusing on the Institute of African Studies (IAS) at the University of Ghana, it argues that the project of “decolonizing university education in Africa... is not a new phenomenon.” Adotey reconstructs the history of the IAS from its roots in the short-lived African Studies department at the University College of the Gold Coast (UCGC, later University of Ghana, UG) from 1948–50, to its founding as an institute with an acting director in 1960, to its overhaul and realization as a full-fledged institute with a director and graduate and diploma programs from 1960–63, when Nkrumah formally opened it. Through these phases, internal debates about what constituted African Studies shaped the IAS’s intellectual trajectory. “Nkrumah waded into this debate,” argues Adotey, “by repurposing African Studies.” He wanted it to move away from older colonial models, and towards a Pan-Africanist vision, with a wide-ranging interdisciplinary curriculum, that would “decolonize access to knowledge by democratizing knowledge dissemination to make it available to others outside the academy.” Adotey thus argues that this “Afroepistemic” approach, and Nkrumah’s centering of the IAS within the university, was a “major leap to free African Studies from colonial thinking.”

On the other hand, colonial thinking was another form of meaning-making for the subject of **Sishuwa Sishuwa** and **Duncan Money’s** article, the Zambian political figure Godwin Mbikusita-Lewanika. Lewanika underwent a “puzzling transformation” from trade unionist and founder of Zambia’s first nationalist party in 1946, to becoming a “staunch defender of the colonial order and

determined opponent of the movement he helped establish” less than a decade later. The son of a Lozi king (*litunga*), Lewanika benefited from a missionary education at Lovedale in South Africa, and in 1936, he accompanied his father to London to attend the coronation of King Edward VIII, where he “mingle[d] with elites from across the British Empire.” After a succession struggle back in Barotseland led to his exile from the kingdom, he turned his attention to the series of work and political organizational leadership roles described above, which shaped the next three decades of his life. With Zambian independence in 1964, Lewanika quickly lost the status he had built up as a colonial loyalist. Reinventing himself yet again, he became a Lozi ethnic nationalist. This ultimately bore fruit for him when, following the death of Litunga Mwanawina, Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda appointed him the new *litunga* of Barotseland. Sishuwa and Money aptly describe him as a “political chameleon” and “a master at political and social entrepreneurship” — a man who made meanings for himself as he navigated the twists and turns of the road to independence.

Finally, **Muoki Mbunga’s** article on the moral logic of Mau Mau killings in Kenya reveals the transformative power of making new meanings for “longstanding Kikuyu ethics of violence” under the “harsh realities of waging an asymmetrical anticolonial war.” Carving out a fresh dimension in Mau Mau’s vast historiography, Mbunga’s deep and incisive reading of captured Mau Mau documents reveals that its combatants consciously chose which civilians to kill based on “three broad categories of Mau Mau opponents: government informers, employees, and loyalists.” Of particular importance was their decision to permit the killing of women and children, which departed substantially from Kikuyu ethics of violence that did not permit such killing because they were the “store and measure” of men’s *wĩathi*, or moral agency. Mbunga argues that the practice of oathing also “sacralized the Mau Mau struggle by transforming commitment to the movement into a sacred communal duty.” In this way, the killing of those who fell into the three broad categories targeted by Mau Mau could include women and children because they stood in the way of Kikuyu men’s ability to restore *ithaka na wĩathi* (land and moral agency), leaving them, in the words of Field Marshal Dedan Kimathi, a “country of boys” who would never achieve adulthood. They made new meaning out of the ethical foundations their forebears had known since the nineteenth century.

In many ways, the History Matters think piece of this volume is also about meaning-making, especially within the framework of public history and the dilemmas/challenges that historians face when they engage in uncovering colonial atrocities. Tapping the experiential knowledge and expertise gained from his involvement in a public-facing historical work and pressure campaign that shed light on the 1972 Portuguese massacre in Wiriyamu (Mozambique) — a campaign that contributed to Portugal’s formal apology in 2022 — **Mustafah Dhada** offers insight into, and practical advice on, how the establishment of an “independent ‘truth and reconciliation commission’” on Belgian colonialism in the Congo might benefit from a comparative look at the Mozambican case. Thus, continuing the conversation begun in Volume 64, Issue 3 (November 2023) on the role of historians in commissions on colonial violence, Dhada reminds us of the need to privilege evidence-based and publicly engaged “social history of the victims and survivors over the anatomy of death.” Not only does such an approach require a different politics of knowledge production and dissemination, it also has a higher potential of fostering fuller accountability regarding past wrongs.

The featured reviews of this volume come in the form of a tightly written essay by **Madina Thiam** wherein she engages with the respective works of the late **Moussa Sow** and **Richard Roberts**. Reading the latest monographs of these two seasoned scholars alongside one another allows Thiam to map out the “evolution of key components of statecraft and governmentality” in the Middle Niger valley from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries until the first decades of French rule in the region. The two books are complementary not only in terms of the period that they cover, but also through the methodologies — political anthropology for Sow and microhistory for Roberts — that each scholar uses to understand territorial domination, political rule, and their eventual dislocation. In that, Sow critically deploys oral sources to shed light on the multiple registers of governmentality in Segou, and, in the process, brings nuance to some of the familiar themes of the historiography of the Middle

Niger. For his part, Roberts's focus on the trajectory of Mademba Sèye, a civil servant who became a French-made king, provides a window to appreciate the workings of colonial intermediation, the shifts and twists in the structure of colonialism, as well as the logic of its mutations in the French Soudan. Ultimately, the close reading of these two books reiterates the fluidity and contingent nature of power.

The book reviews in this volume cover a wide range of themes and periods. Dealing with the issue of slavery in the ethnic-state of Gajaaga in West Africa's upper Senegal River in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, **Mary Afolabi's** review of **Makhroufi Ousmane Traoré's** book reveals the dynamic nature of identity formation in early modern West Africa. Significantly, it shows that there is a need to revise many popular beliefs about the active role of Africans in both the trans-Saharan and trans-Atlantic slave trades. In her review of **Peter Wekesa's** book, on the other hand, **Julie MacArthur** highlights the challenges and benefits of doing historical research that decenters the state. This is particularly insightful in the multifaceted histories of the relations between the Basigu and the Bakusu across the (post)colonial border that separates Kenya and Uganda. In many ways, **Paul Nugent's** book on the history of the wine industry in South Africa is about border crossing as well. In **Sarah Ives's** assessment, by shifting the focus from domestic labor issues to discussion of markets and consumption, Nugent succeeds in offering a "more globally situated" history of the industry in South Africa. This, to be sure, brings the country back from the margins of wine historiography.

The last two reviews zoom onto Africa's international relations in the late colonial and postcolonial eras. **Mark Deets's** piece offers a critical yet candid assessment of **Herman Cohen's** latest history of U.S. foreign policy-making vis-à-vis Africa. After underscoring what he sees as the limitations of the book, Deets concludes that if we approach Cohen's opus more as a memoir than an academic history, the book might prove useful as a (re)source for both teaching and research. In contrast to Cohen's work that seemingly sidelines African agency in international statecraft, **Frank Gerits's** work reviewed by **James Brennan** in this issue showcases the "measurable impacts" that African leaders and statesmen such as Nkrumah had not only African states in the wake of decolonization, but also upon the larger international order. Brennan predicts that despite its limitations, Gerits's book is likely to foster productive debates.

This issue marks a milestone in JAH publishing. From its founding in 1960 through the present, the journal has existed in a physical form, made up of issues within volumes. This will change moving forward, with continuous publication replacing issues and all content moving to online only. While some readers will certainly miss the material experience of reading journal issues, the electronic format affords many advantages. More readers will be able to easily engage with JAH, with open access for all articles, Featured Reviews, and History Matters. And authors will no longer have to wait for their accepted articles to be included in an issue.

We would also like to gratefully acknowledge Marissa Moorman's recent departure as an editor, having completed her five-year term. We will miss her keen editorial voice, her important role in shaping the journal's transition to online only, and her efforts to create History Matters as a new journal feature. We are fortunate that Thulasizwe Simpson agreed to step into the role as editor for Southern Africa, and we are delighted to welcome him to the team.