

## HISTORY MATTERS

# The Caliphate, the Black Writer, and a World in Revolution, 1957–69

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[A good book] ... is the result of the circumstances of the age playing upon a mentality.<sup>1</sup>  
— C. L. R. James

I can only advise readers consumed by wanderlust to dive into the tales and sources on Hamdullahi.<sup>2</sup>  
— Yéro Arsoukoula

In 1965, William Allen Brown (1934–2007) landed in Mali, a young socialist republic and former French colony that had become independent just five years prior. Brown was a doctoral student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and had come to conduct fieldwork for his dissertation on the Caliphate of Hamdullahi, a nineteenth century theocratic state that had once stood in Mali's Mopti region. Born in North Carolina, Brown attended school in Manhattan and the Bronx. After a stint in the US Air Force, he enrolled at Kentucky State College, the state's oldest Historically Black College, and graduated in 1959 with a degree in History and Government, and French. He then attended the Sorbonne University in Paris on a Fulbright scholarship. In 1960, he started graduate school at UW-Madison, where he studied history and African Studies, and obtained his MA (1964) and PhD (1969).

What was it like to conduct fieldwork in mid-1960s Mali? Specifically, what could have been the experience of an African-American graduate student attuned to ongoing political struggles across the Black world? Which scholarly influences shaped Brown's approach to dissertation research? And, which broader debates were occurring in Brown's academic fields — African Studies, African history, and Black Studies — as he was crafting his dissertation? This essay provides preliminary thoughts on these questions through an exploration of the political and intellectual worlds that Brown inhabited during the years 1957–69, on both sides of the Atlantic.

The 1960s were a tumultuous decade, a time of momentous intensity to be a student and rising scholar. Following the threads of the civil rights movement in the United States, decolonization and Cold War in Mali, the study of Islam in precolonial West Africa, and the place of Black scholars in academic fields concerned with the study of Africa and Africans, one finds them tightly entangled in William Allen Brown's graduate experience. The circuits of knowledge Brown traveled through crisscrossed the Atlantic and the Sahel, as he made his way through Kentucky, Madison, Bamako, Mopti, and Timbuktu. He may have crossed paths with Martin Luther King, Jr., and he

<sup>1</sup>C. L. R. James, 'Lectures on the Black Jacobins', *Small Axe*, 8 (2000), 72.

<sup>2</sup>Y. Arsoukoula, *Notes de ma guitare: Sékou Amadou* (Bamako, n.d.), 1.



also met famed Malian writer Amadou Hampâté Bâ. He joined the Historical Society of Nigeria, and also organized conferences on Black artistic and literary production, and political thought, in Madison. Brown's study of Muslim West Africa's history, and interest in revolutionary struggles across the Black world, blossomed in close proximity to one another, with the political circumstances of his age, the global 1960s, acting as an incubator.

### 'Facing the challenge of a new age'

William Allen Brown was a twenty-three-year-old student at Kentucky State College when on 2 June 1957, Martin Luther King, Jr. came to the college to deliver the commencement speech.<sup>3</sup> The event took place in the midst of the civil rights movement, on the heels of the grueling Montgomery bus boycott, which had drawn international attention. As a rising junior, Brown, in principle, would not have been involved in commencement celebrations. However it is very much possible that he stood in the crowd that day, as the audience ended up far exceeding the 86 graduating students.<sup>4</sup> Kentucky's *Courier Journal* reported that King's speech drew 'perhaps the largest crowd of his race ever gathered' in the city of Frankfort where the college was located, prompting a change in venue to accommodate everyone.<sup>5</sup> King had recently returned from Ghana, where he attended the independence celebration in March 1957. His address, entitled 'Facing the Challenge of a New Age', connected domestic struggles in the US to global fights against 'colonialism and imperialism', and stressed that the students were living in 'one of the most momentous periods of human history...in which a new social order is being born'.<sup>6</sup> Whether or not Brown was in attendance that day, King's visit would have likely been a seminal event in his college experience, his speech debated and discussed for months. Within the next few years, Brown would graduate from the college as a valedictorian, continue studying African history, French, and Arabic, and eventually make his way to West Africa.

### Bamako, capital of the revolution

At the dawn of the 1960s, King had told the students that theirs was 'an exciting age filled with hope,' at the intersection of 'two worlds — the dying old and the emerging new'.<sup>7</sup> A few years later, one of the places where this emerging new world was most visible was Mali, where Brown touched down in 1965 to conduct research for his PhD dissertation. The Malian government was invested in bringing about a new world order and fostering transnational solidarities with anti-imperialist forces in Africa and the world. US anthropologist Nicholas S. Hopkins, who conducted

<sup>3</sup>Brown attended the college between 1955–9: W. A. Brown, 'The caliphate of Hamdullahi, ca. 1818–1864: a study in African history and tradition' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1969), 254. On King's speech, see 'King delivers "Facing the challenge of a new age" at Kentucky State College graduation ceremony', Stanford University, Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, accessed 28 Apr. 2023, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/king-delivers-facing-challenge-new-age-kentucky-state-college-graduation-ceremony>.

<sup>4</sup>'Eighty-six seniors to be awarded degrees', *The Kentucky Thoroughbred*—Commencement Edition, 24:5 (1957), <https://www.kysu.edu/news/2017/1/honor-dr-kings-spirit-of-service.php>.

<sup>5</sup>H. Gardner, 'A derby standoff, a statehouse rally and Louisville marches: MLK's legacy in Kentucky', *The Courier Journal*, 18 Jan. 2021, [https://www.courier-journal.com/in-depth/news/history/2021/01/18/martin-luther-king-jrs-legacy-in-kentucky-was-influential/6587678002/?utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=2022.01.12%20LEX&utm\\_term=LEXtoday%20Subscribers%20-%20MASTER](https://www.courier-journal.com/in-depth/news/history/2021/01/18/martin-luther-king-jrs-legacy-in-kentucky-was-influential/6587678002/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=2022.01.12%20LEX&utm_term=LEXtoday%20Subscribers%20-%20MASTER).

<sup>6</sup>King delivered his address 'Facing the challenge of a new age' to several audiences, including a commencement ceremony at the University of the West Indies, Mona, in Kingston, Jamaica. I am using the transcript from a version he delivered in Montgomery, AL, on 3 Dec. 1956: "'Facing the challenge of a new age", address delivered at the First Annual Institute on Nonviolence and Social Change', Stanford University, Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, accessed 28 Apr. 2023, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/facing-challenge-new-age-address-delivered-first-annual-institute-nonviolence>.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

research in Mali in the 1960s, felt that ‘especially in the early 1960s, Malians had a sense that they were in tune with the movement of history towards socialism and a radiant modern society based on rationalism and equality’.<sup>8</sup> Though by the mid-1960s some of the optimism had worn out due to increasing domestic issues, the year that Brown arrived, Mali’s capital city Bamako still remained a platform of pan-Africanism, trade unionism, and anti-imperialism.<sup>9</sup> Other African cities such as Accra, Algiers, Conakry, or Dar es Salaam, are more frequently cited as hubs of 1960s decolonial worldmaking.<sup>10</sup> But in Bamako too, the revolutionary effervescence of the era converged.

This would have colored Brown’s experience of the city. Already towards the end of the colonial era, Bamako had emerged as a pan-African metropolis. The city had hosted major meetings where thousands converged from various African territories, including the 1946 founding congress of the African Democratic Rally party and the 1959 West African Women’s Union meeting.<sup>11</sup> After independence, Bamako became a crossroads of the Algerian and South African liberation struggles, with Frantz Fanon traveling there in 1960, and Nelson Mandela in 1962, both seeking support for their movement.<sup>12</sup> In 1963, Ahmed Ben Bella of Algeria and Hassan II of Morocco agreed to meet in Bamako, where Modibo Keita and Haile Selassie brokered talks between them in hopes of putting an end to the Moroccan-Algerian conflict.<sup>13</sup> In October 1965, the year Brown arrived in Mali, Kwame Nkrumah came to town to meet with the presidents of the Council of Accord (a regional organization made up of Côte d’Ivoire, Upper Volta, Niger, and Dahomey) as part of efforts to curtail a growing divide between former French and British colonies.<sup>14</sup>

Lastly, making his way through the city in the mid-1960s, Brown would have experienced Bamako’s expansion and the development of large infrastructure projects, illustrative of the country’s thrust into a new era. Between 1963 and 1967 a colossal, Soviet-designed Olympic stadium was being erected at the foot of the Koulouba hill.<sup>15</sup> In the Bozola neighborhood, near the public radio office, an Egyptian-Malian team was completing a towering edifice overlooking the river, the aptly named Hôtel de l’Amitié (Friendship Hotel).<sup>16</sup> Bamako’s hotels were privileged sites where the country’s role on the international stage was palpable. During his visit in 1962, Nelson Mandela had stayed at Bamako’s Grand Hôtel, and a few years later, so did New York jazz musician Randy Weston. He was struck: ‘this place was like something out of a spy novel, with

<sup>8</sup>N. S. Hopkins, ‘Kita (Mali) in the time of Modibo Keita: globalization and local continuity’, *Mande Studies*, 5 (2003), 103.

<sup>9</sup>Notably there were rebellions, including a Tuareg rebellion in 1963–4 in the North, which the army crushed. See B. Lecocq, *Disputed Desert: Decolonization, Competing Nationalisms and Tuareg Rebellions in Mali* (Leiden, 2010) and G. Mann, ‘Violence, Dignity, and Mali’s New Model Army’, *Mande Studies*, 5 (2003), 65–82.

<sup>10</sup>J. J. Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization and the Third World Order* (Oxford, 2016); A. Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, 2019); G. Roberts, *Revolutionary State-Making in Dar es Salaam: African Liberation and the Global Cold War, 1961–1974* (Cambridge, 2022).

<sup>11</sup>R. De Jorio, ‘Of rumors and transfers: the short life of Western-educated women’s associations in French Sudan (1955–1960)’, *kritisk etnografi: Swedish Journal of Anthropology*, 3:1 (2020), 63–82; P. Kipré, *Le congrès de Bamako ou la naissance du RDA* (Paris, 1989).

<sup>12</sup>C. Keita, ‘Madiba and Mali’, *Africa is a country*, 5 Nov. 2022, <https://africasacountry.com/2022/05/madiba-and-mali>; G. Mann, *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality* (New York, 2014), 1.

<sup>13</sup>J. Lacouture, ‘Hassan II et M. Ben Bella ont abordé la conférence de Bamako sur des “positions de force” très différentes: militaire pour les Marocains, diplomatique pour les Algériens. Quatre hommes et deux dossiers’, *Le Monde*, 30 Oct. 1963, [https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1963/10/30/hassan-ii-et-m-ben-bella-ont-aborde-la-conference-de-bamako-sur-des-positions-de-force-tres-differentes-militaire-pour-les-marocains-diplomatique-pour-les-algeriens-quatre-hommes-e\\_3092943\\_1819218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1963/10/30/hassan-ii-et-m-ben-bella-ont-aborde-la-conference-de-bamako-sur-des-positions-de-force-tres-differentes-militaire-pour-les-marocains-diplomatique-pour-les-algeriens-quatre-hommes-e_3092943_1819218.html).

<sup>14</sup>D. Diakité and B. Sanankoua, *Bamako, Fleur des Savanes (la ville hier et aujourd’hui)* (Bamako, 1987), 32.

<sup>15</sup>On Soviet investment in infrastructure projects in West Africa, see A. Iandolo, *Arrested Development: The Soviet Union in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali, 1955–1968* (Ithaca, NY, 2022).

<sup>16</sup>Construction was completed in 1965–6. M. Elshahed, ‘A hotel in Mali: Egypt’s flirtation with architecture as foreign policy’, *Cairo Observer*, 11 Dec. 2014, <https://cairoobserver.com/post/104880644219/a-hotel-in-mali-egypts-flirtation-with-ZFEteuzMIkU>.

Vietnamese on one floor, Chinese on another, and East Germans on another; it seemed to be a hotel of tremendous intrigue'.<sup>17</sup>

Brown stayed at another key hotel, the Buffet Hôtel de la Gare (the Railway Hotel) located by the Bamako station of the Dakar-Niger railway linking Senegal's Atlantic coast to Mali's southwest. The hotel was a high traffic location, in part due to the overnight express train from Dakar to Bamako.<sup>18</sup> It was a bustling place where travelers ate and rested, and monied city dwellers sought entertainment.<sup>19</sup> In this hotel, Brown and Malian scholar Almamy Maliki Yattara, would spend hours transcribing and translating interviews that ended up forming the backbone of Brown's dissertation.<sup>20</sup> Yattara was a teacher, researcher, and translator, who collaborated with several French and American academics and guided them in their research trips from the 1960s onwards. In his memoirs, he dedicated an entire chapter to the time he spent with Brown. They had met through Mali's National Humanities Institute in Bamako, where the administration entrusted Brown to Yattara's care. Travel authorizations in hand, they set out to work. They journeyed east and north, towards the cities of Segou, Jenne, Mopti, Bandiagara, and Timbuktu, and towns and villages in between, following the geographies of nineteenth century Islamic revolutions and state-building in and around the inland delta region of Mali.

### 'A neglected theme of West African history'

In 1818, a Fulani Muslim scholar of humble origins named Seeku Amadu, and his followers, rose up against regional political rulers and scholarly elites in the inland delta (central Mali).<sup>21</sup> The insurgents created the *laamu diina* (theocratic state), a caliphate centered around a new capital city they erected, named Ḥamdullāhi. The caliphate was short-lived: it fell in 1862, invaded by troops led by al-Ḥājj 'Umar Taal of Fuuta Tooro (northern Senegal).<sup>22</sup> In its four decades of existence, the caliphate brought under its dominion the old cities of Jenne and Timbuktu, rivaled the powerful Bamanan kingdom of Segou, and established diplomatic relations with Sokoto. An important body of Fulani orature and sung poetry narrates the events that led to the caliphate's rise and demise, through stories and legends featuring Ḥamdullāhi's strongmen. One of the main virtuosos of this genre was the bard, scholar, and *hoddu* player Yéro Arsoukoula, who in the 1960s-70s, traveled across his native delta region to collect oral traditions and manuscripts on the caliphate, and composed his own oral rendition of its history.<sup>23</sup> He later transcribed it into a short, French-language booklet; in the preface, he urged those 'consumed by wanderlust, to dive into the tales and sources on Hamdallahi'.<sup>24</sup>

Why did Brown choose to dedicate his PhD research to the Caliphate of Ḥamdullāhi? One possible influence may be found in an article that came out just one year into Brown's doctoral studies. In December 1961, H. F. C. (later Abdullahi) Smith published a call to action in the *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*. He pleaded for academic historians of West Africa to turn their

<sup>17</sup>R. Weston and W. Jenkins, *African Rhythms: The Autobiography of Randy Weston* (Durham, NC, 2010), 119.

<sup>18</sup>P. D. Curtin, *On the Fringes of History: a Memoir* (Athens, OH, 2005), 157.

<sup>19</sup>A few years later, singer Salif Keita would launch his career by joining the Super Rail Band, which played every night at the hotel.

<sup>20</sup>A. M. Yattara and B. Salvaing, *Almamy: L'âge d'homme d'un lettré malien*, Vol. 2 (Brinon-sur-Sauldre, 2003), 181.

<sup>21</sup>See B. Sanankoua, *Un empire peul au XIXe siècle: la Diina du Maasina* (Paris, 1990); and M. Nobili, *Sultan, Caliph, and the Renewer of the Faith. Ahmad Lobbo, the Tārīkh al-fattāsh and the Making of an Islamic State in West Africa* (New York, 2020).

<sup>22</sup>See: D. Robinson, *The Holy War of Umar Tal* (Oxford, 1985); M. Ly-Tall, *Un islam militant en Afrique de l'Ouest au XIXe siècle: la Tijaniyya de Saïku Umar Futiyyu contre les pouvoirs traditionnels et la puissance coloniale* (Paris, 1991); A. Syed, 'Political theology in nineteenth-century West Africa: al-Ḥājj 'Umar, the Bayān mā waqa'a, and the conquest of the caliphate of Ḥamdallāhi', *The Journal of African History*, 62:3 (2021), 358–76.

<sup>23</sup>C. Seydou, *Les Guerres du Massina: récits épiques peuls du Mali* (Paris, 2014), 12–3; and Y. Arsoukoula, 'Garan Maajaga e Seeku Aamadū', audio recording by C. Seydou, Centre de Recherche en Ethnomusicologie, 1970, [https://archives.crem-cnrs.fr/archives/items/CNRSMH\\_I\\_1998\\_007\\_001\\_01/](https://archives.crem-cnrs.fr/archives/items/CNRSMH_I_1998_007_001_01/).

<sup>24</sup>Arsoukoula, 'Notes de ma guitare', 1. The *hoddu* is the Fulani name of a West African string instrument.

attention to a ‘neglected theme’ in the historiography: the Islamic revolutions that had rocked the region in the nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Smith pointed out two challenges that undertaking such research would present: first, ‘work with oral tradition in a variety of languages’, and second, ‘the recovery of a large stock of written documents which are mostly in Arabic, and also are widely dispersed throughout the region, often in private hands’.<sup>26</sup> Smith outlined the current state of research on three such revolutionary movements, devoting several pages to Usman dan Fodio and Umar Taal, but only a few paragraphs to Seeku Amadu. On the latter, more work needed to be done.

Multiple other factors likely influenced Brown’s choice — in fact it may not have been his choice, but his advisor’s. That said, it is notable that besides the two UW-Madison African history professors who supervised his dissertation, Smith is the only person Brown thanks by name in his succinct acknowledgements, hinting at a relationship and intellectual connection between the two men.<sup>27</sup> What’s more, Smith’s call to action did resonate in the field: for instance, Guyanese scholar Walter Rodney explicitly referenced Smith’s piece in the first line of a 1968 article he wrote on Futa Jallon to frame the gap he argued his contribution would help fill.<sup>28</sup> Lastly, the blueprint Smith laid out in his article — twofold research into oral traditions and private manuscript collections — matches the research agenda Brown ended up following in the 1960s. That also marks the strength of his body of published work: his ability to move between the oral histories he assiduously collected on tape recorders, and the Arabic-language manuscripts he sought out, to craft his scholarship.

### **Magnétophones and manuscripts**

‘Oral traditions, as of now’, Brown wrote in the introduction to his study on the caliphate, ‘afford the overwhelming body of evidence’.<sup>29</sup> A significant part of the research Brown conducted in 1965–6 in Mali indeed consisted in oral interviews with people he called ‘traditionists’: scholars, custodians of oral histories, and descendants from various lineages associated with Ḥamdullāhi. In doing so, he was very attentive to cut across class, geographical, and ethnolinguistic boundaries, so as to not get a uniform account. He juxtaposed testimonies of traditionists from urban and non-urban backgrounds, bearing *riimaybe* (Fulani, slave) and *rimbe* (Fulani, freeborn) status, from scholarly and chiefly lineages, various ethnolinguistic groups, and so on.<sup>30</sup> In total, Brown listed 45 traditionists he interviewed in Bandiagara, Sansanding, Segu, Mopti, Sevaré, Bamako, Tenenkou, Timbuktu, and other cities.<sup>31</sup>

Using oral history research as the main methodological feature of his dissertation makes sense, given the doctoral program Brown was being trained in. He had joined Madison at a time of great expansion in the study of African history. Philip Curtin, a historian of Africa and the Atlantic world, had launched a program in tropical and comparative history at the university in 1959. By the summer of 1960, six new graduate students were admitted to study African history, Brown one of them.<sup>32</sup> That fall, a few days after Thanksgiving, Belgian historian Jan Vansina arrived in Madison to join the department.<sup>33</sup> Vansina was about to publish *De la tradition orale. Essai de méthode historique*, which argued for the use of oral traditions as legitimate sources in the academic

<sup>25</sup>A. Smith, ‘A neglected theme of West African history: the Islamic revolutions of the 19th century’, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 2:2 (1961), 170.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 170–1.

<sup>27</sup>Brown, ‘The caliphate’, iv.

<sup>28</sup>W. Rodney, ‘Jihad and social revolution in Futa Djallon in the eighteenth century’, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 4:2 (1968). Joseph Earl Harris, who would later become best known as a scholar of the African Diaspora, also published a thesis on Futa Djallon in 1965. See J. Harris, ‘The kingdom of Fouta Diallon’, (unpublished PhD thesis, Northwestern University, 1965).

<sup>29</sup>Brown, ‘The caliphate’, 1.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 4–5.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 238–43.

<sup>32</sup>Curtin, *On the Fringes of History*, 130–3.

<sup>33</sup>J. Vansina, *Living with Africa* (Madison, 1994), 89.

study of African history, and proposed a method for collecting and interpreting them.<sup>34</sup> Brown's advisor Curtin was also interested in oral history. In 1966–70, he served as chairman of the US-based African Studies Associations' Oral Data Committee, and urged fellow historians to take advantage of the 'magnetophonic revolution' introduced by tape recorders to more systematically collect oral traditions.<sup>35</sup> Curtin felt adamant that 'as a teacher and an advisor of graduate students', he should hone in his own oral history skills, which prompted him to work with oral data in Senegambia in 1965 — while Brown was in Bamako.<sup>36</sup> The collection and interpretation of oral sources thus loomed large in Brown's training, and in the minds of those in charge of assessing his work.

That said, unlike his Madison professors, Brown was fully literate in Arabic, and a specialist in the study of Arabic-language West African manuscripts. He relied on these materials in his work: in addition to oral interviews, Brown lists over seventy Arabic manuscripts consulted in the course of his dissertation research and writing. These came from libraries and archives in Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, and France. Thus, West African oral histories and Arabic manuscripts went hand in hand in Brown's work, and he systematically sought out both types of sources during fieldwork. For instance, in the old city of Ja, Yattara and Brown 'recorded a good amount of oral information, but harvested very few Arabic manuscripts, as Ja's inhabitants are not open to it', Yattara later remembered. In Timbuktu, they asked a local scholar for a manuscript on the city's history, 'if he had one; if not, [they] would welcome oral information as well'.<sup>37</sup>

Outside of his dissertation, Brown's other publications primarily exploit Arabic sources. Two short notices he published planted seeds for future work by other researchers by informing them of available manuscript sources. The first one discusses an expansive bio-bibliography of 476 West African Arabic-language authors composed by Timbuktu book collector Aḥmad Būla'rāf, and made available to Brown by Būla'rāf's son Sidi Muhammad Abdoulaye in Timbuktu.<sup>38</sup> The document, Brown argued, 'should prove a useful aid in the task of preparing bibliographical tools for researchers and students'.<sup>39</sup> The second publication discussed a compilation of legal opinions from West African and Sahelian scholars ranging from 'modern Mauritania to modern Nigeria', amounting to about 2,400 manuscript pages, assembled by al-Muṣṭafā b. Aḥmad al-Ghalāwī in the nineteenth century, along with a 200-page index composed by Būla'rāf. Brown was enthusiastic about this source, which he thought would benefit 'researchers and students concerned with the intellectual and social history of the Western Sudan'.<sup>40</sup>

In focusing both on the work of magnétophones — that is, the recording of oral histories and traditions — and of manuscripts, Brown indeed followed the blueprint laid out by Smith in his 1961 article. However, most importantly, he followed an intellectual tradition that Malian scholars, whom he learned from first hand, had long been engaged in: the interweaving of oral and written knowledge.

<sup>34</sup>The book came out in 1961. It was later published in English as J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition. A Study in Historical Methodology*, trans. H. M. Wright, (London, 1965).

<sup>35</sup>Curtin, *On the Fringes of History*, 154–5.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 156. This would later result in the publication of P. Curtin, 'Field techniques for collecting and processing oral data', *The Journal of African History*, 9:3 (1968), 367–85.

<sup>37</sup>Yattara and Salvaing, *Almamy*, Vol. 2, 179 and 182.

<sup>38</sup>On Būla'rāf's life and career, see: G. Lydon, 'A thirst for knowledge: Arabic literacy, writing paper and Saharan bibliophiles in the southwestern Sahara', in G. Krätli and G. Lydon (eds.), *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade: Manuscript Culture, Arabic Literacy and Intellectual History in Muslim Africa* (Leiden, 2011), 35–72; and S. Jeppie, 'A Timbuktu bibliophile between the Mediterranean and the Sahel: Ahmad Bul'rāf and the circulation of books in the first half of the twentieth century', *The Journal of North African Studies*, 20:1 (2015), 65–77.

<sup>39</sup>W. A. Brown, 'A new bio-bibliographical aid: the Izālat al-Rayb of Aḥmad Abū 'l-A'rāf al Tinbukti', *Research Bulletin Center of Arabic Documentation, University of Ibadan*, 3:2 (1967), 136. According to Lydon, this bibliography of West African and Saharan authors was Būla'rāf's 'most cited and copied work' ('A thirst for knowledge', 69–70).

<sup>40</sup>W. A. Brown, 'A monument of legal scholarship: the nawāzil 'ulama al-Takrūr of author al-Muṣṭafā b. Aḥmad al-Ghalāwī', *Research Bulletin Center of Arabic Documentation Research Bulletin Center of Arabic Documentation, University of Ibadan*, 3:2 (1967), 138.



### Malian scholars and intellectuals

The cluster of Malian intellectuals Brown met in 1965–6 in Mali, or whose work he engaged, significantly influenced his work. These intellectuals were at the forefront of methods blending Fulani oral histories, French ethnographic studies, and the study of Arabic manuscripts, to reconstruct the region's precolonial history, rendering the distinction between oral and written history methods somewhat moot.

The impact of two of them particularly shaped Brown's dissertation. Almamy Maliki Yattara guided and facilitated much of his research in Mali. Yattara was a scholar versed in the Fulani, Arabic, and French languages, and moved easily between oral history interviews and manuscript copying. Yattara and Brown traveled and lived together, and maintained a very close professional and personal relationship. Sidi Muhammad Abdoulaye Boul Araf of Timbuktu, a retired Arabic teacher and son of the famed bibliophile, was probably the main purveyor of manuscripts concerning local and regional history during Brown's time in Mali.<sup>41</sup> Brown spent extensive time in his library, cataloging and copying manuscripts, and also interviewed him.<sup>42</sup> In the Sahara, scholars such as Boul Araf weaved in and out of oral and written transmission of knowledge. For instance, Saharan scholars condensed and memorized written texts in oral verses, to facilitate their preservation in contexts of mobility, and also learned oral tradition in verse.<sup>43</sup>

Three other Malian scholars from the inland delta region influenced Brown's work, their knowledge production operating across the French, Arabic, and Fulani languages, and various epistemologies. Before Brown's, only one major academic work had been published on the caliphate's history, in 1955. *L'Empire Peul du Macina (1818-1853)*, Volume 1, was based entirely on over one thousand testimonies that famed Malian intellectual Amadou Hampâté Bâ, along with his collaborator Jacques Daget, had collected over the course of fifteen years of research. Bâ was a staunch advocate for the preservation of African oral traditions; in a December 1960 speech at the UNESCO, he had declared: 'a traditionist dying, is akin to an untapped cultural heritage repository being reduced to ashes'.<sup>44</sup> Brown relied on Bâ's 'splendid book' for his dissertation and also likely interviewed him, as he mentions 'personal communications' and 'information obtained directly from Bâ' in the course of his research.<sup>45</sup> Brown also engaged the work of another author, Ibrahima-Mamadou Ouane, who had studied Arabic and Muslim theology and law in the French educational system in Mali, and published a novel in 1952, *L'Énigme du Macina*, relying on oral traditions. Brown states that 'it is known in Mali that Ouane possessed a substantial library of Arabic materials', and that he made use of these, as well as oral traditions he would have learned from his family, in his work.<sup>46</sup> Lastly, Brown was able to access writer and anthropologist Mamby Sidibé's unpublished notes on oral traditions in the region.<sup>47</sup> Brown's scholarship thus reflected the rich influence and range of scholarly approaches of 1960s Malian intellectuals.

'The greatest debt of gratitude', he ultimately wrote in his acknowledgements, 'is owed to the government and people of the Republic of Mali, whose generosity and intelligence are unexcelled

<sup>41</sup>I use the spellings Būla'rāf for the father, and Boul Araf for the son, to reflect the shift in dominant orthographic convention in the region from the period before colonial rule, when the former was born, to the period during colonial rule, when the latter was born.

<sup>42</sup>According to Jeppie, Boul Araf's library is 'remembered as an inspiration for other archival ventures and as an example of an indigenous initiative when the UNESCO General history of Africa experts visited Timbuktu in the late 1960s'. Jeppie, 'A Timbuktu bibliophile', 74.

<sup>43</sup>Lydon, 'A thirst for knowledge', 41–2.

<sup>44</sup>This excerpt from Bâ's speech frequently gets misquoted as an old African proverb stating 'when an old man dies, a library burns'. A. H. Bâ, 'Discours à la commission Afrique de l'UNESCO', audio recording, Paris, 1 Dec. 1960, <https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclair-actu/audio/phd86073514/discours-de-hamadou-hampate-ba-a-la-commission-afrique-de-l-unesco>.

<sup>45</sup>Brown, 'The caliphate', 1, 80, and 231.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 2–3.

<sup>47</sup>On Sidibé's life and career, see N. S. Hopkins, 'Mamby Sidibé (1891-1977) Malian anthropologist and militant', *Mande Studies*, 15 (2013), 5–41.

anywhere in the world'.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Brown's time in Mali in the mid-1960s would have been an intense political, intellectual, and likely emotional experience.<sup>49</sup> He lived in Bamako, then an internationalist, pan-African hub. He traveled all over the country to learn directly from a significant cohort of intellectuals and scholars. Finally, he set foot and met people in places he had long read, written, and thought about, getting an actual feel for the histories and geographies of Islam in the nineteenth century inland Niger delta.<sup>50</sup> By 1968, Brown was back in the United States, writing his dissertation, at a key juncture where the politics of knowledge production by, and for, people from Africa and the African Diaspora, were being hotly contested.

### The militant Black writer in Africa and the United States

In May and August 1968, Brown organized two conferences on his Madison campus. He put together the first one, on Afro-American letters and arts, 'brilliantly and almost single handedly,' and was the main driving force behind the second one, a two-day symposium on militant Black writers in the contemporary world, which the university put together 'upon his urging'. One of his two faculty co-organizers noted that 'had a [conference committee] chairman been necessary, it should have been William Brown, who worked at his share of the task with impressive imagination and energy while at the same time calmly carrying on research for his doctoral dissertation in African Studies'.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Brown, then in the final stage of his PhD, was in the midst of what would have been a busy and stressful period: what was the impetus behind this organizing?

In 1968, on university campuses across the United States, an 'epistemic revolution' was underway.<sup>52</sup> Calls were spreading for the development of Black Studies departments and curricula. Black Studies was an interdisciplinary project, rooted in the struggle against inequalities and exploitations based on racial, class, and gender hierarchies. Black Studies also emphasized the ways Black people had historically sought to dismantle those hierarchies, and imagined just ways of organizing society. On Brown's campus in Madison, by May, just a month after MLK's assassination, pressure was growing from the Black student body.<sup>53</sup>

It is in this context that Brown organized the conferences. As Robin D. G. Kelley noted, Black Studies was never defined as a strictly domestic endeavor. In fact, 'the demand for Black Studies came largely from students who cut their teeth in movements to democratize, revolutionize, and decolonize the United States and the Third World'.<sup>54</sup> As such, Black Studies would have fit Brown's approach to scholarship, as he had long connected the development of the Black community in the United States to a better understanding of African history. Before leaving for Mali, he had coauthored a children's book, *Great Rulers of the African Past*, which was published by Zenith Books in 1965. The books in this series aimed to 'increase the awareness of minority

<sup>48</sup>Brown, 'The caliphate', iv.

<sup>49</sup>Yattara recalls fondly an episode where a crowd in the village of Nene, near Tenenkou, assembled as they had heard a Black American was visiting. Struck by his features, they concluded that Brown was not American, but a long lost relative originally from the inland delta region. Yattara and Salvaing, *Almamy*, Vol. 2, 178.

<sup>50</sup>By 'feel', I refer to the kind of sensory history Moses Ochonu argues emerges from directly experiencing the places historians study: M. Ochonu, 'Elusive history: fractured archives, politicized orality, and sensing the postcolonial past', *History in Africa*, 42 (2015), 287–98. Brown had been studying Islam and Fulani communities in the Niger delta region for years, and wrote his MA thesis on this topic: W. A. Brown, 'The growth of Islam among the Fulbe of Masina' (unpublished MA thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1964).

<sup>51</sup>W. B. Rideout, 'Foreword', in M. Cook and S. E. Henderson, *The Black Militant Writer in Africa and the United States* (Madison, 1969), v.

<sup>52</sup>R. D. G. Kelley, "'Western civilization is neither': Black Studies' epistemic revolution', *The Black Scholar*, 50:3 (2020), 4–10.

<sup>53</sup>E. Frame, 'The rise and fall of "Ethnic Centers" at UW–Madison (1968–1974)', blog, Public History Project, UW–Madison, 12 May 2020, <https://publichistoryproject.wisc.edu/the-rise-and-fall-of-ethnic-centers-at-uw-madison-1968-1974/>.

<sup>54</sup>Kelley, "'Western civilization is neither'", 5.



group members [in the United States] of their own heritage and at the same time develop among all people an understanding and appreciation of that heritage'.<sup>55</sup>

Likewise, the title of the August conference at Madison was a nod to a volume that had come out two years prior. Edited by Herbert Hill of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the collection of essays was entitled *Anger, and Beyond: The Negro Writer in the United States*. Brown's conference widened the scope of Black struggles from the domestic to the global: the two-day symposium was entitled "'Anger and Beyond": the Black Writer and a World in Revolution', and the proceedings that resulted from it, two long essays by Mercer Cook and Stephen Henderson, were entitled *The Militant Black Writer in Africa and the United States*.

Brown was the one who had picked both scholars as the symposium's speakers, reflective of his emphasis on thinking about the role of Black writers globally. Henderson, a towering scholar of African-American literature and aesthetics, was then the Chair of the English Department at Morehouse College, and would within a few months become a research scholar at Atlanta's Institute of the Black World, one of the non-university affiliated institutions that had emerged out of the Black Studies protests.<sup>56</sup> Cook, on the other hand, had lived in Cuba, Haiti, Niger, and Senegal, and collaborated with the Paris-based pan-African journal *Présence Africaine*. He had also translated several works by Black writers and politicians from French to English, including the Haitian Jacques Roumain, and the Senegalese Mamadou Dia, Cheikh Anta Diop, and Léopold Sédar Senghor.<sup>57</sup>

Importantly, by the late 1960s in the United States, while Black Studies was borne out of grassroots demands and student militancy, African Studies was growing increasingly tethered to US hegemony and Cold War needs for fostering better diplomacy and relationships with emerging African nations. This had not always been the case. Scholars such as Pearl Robinson or Paul Tiyambe Zeleza have pointed out that US-based African Studies initially emerged at the turn of the twentieth century out of HBCUs.<sup>58</sup> A number of African-American intellectuals produced scholarship that sought to improve the conditions of African peoples worldwide, and cut across nation-state borders.<sup>59</sup> In contrast, white, mainstream institutions, shunned the study of Africa and Africans.

However by the time Brown came of age as a graduate student in Wisconsin, a shift had occurred. Indeed, around the Second World War, African Studies became institutionalized, with federal support and funding, in major universities such as the University of Wisconsin-Madison, UCLA, or Northwestern. Melville Herskovitz, a leading anthropologist in the field, believed that scholarly inquiry should be detached from political struggles for racial equality. In the 1940s, he 'deliberately sought to exclude' from African Studies 'the leading African American scholar-activists of the time', including Carter G. Woodson and W.E.B. DuBois, and discredited their scholarship.<sup>60</sup> Recognizing these dynamics, and the overwhelmingly white make-up of the US-based African Studies Association (ASA), in the Fall of 1968 at the ASA's Annual Meeting in Los Angeles, a group of scholars named the Black Caucus would call upon the ASA to change its racial politics.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>55</sup>L. Dobler and W. A. Brown, *Great Rulers of the African Past* (New York, 1965), front matter.

<sup>56</sup>Kelley, "'Western Civilization is Neither'", 5.

<sup>57</sup>M. Lubin, 'In memoriam: Dr Mercer Cook', *Présence Africaine*, 144 (1987), 157–8.

<sup>58</sup>P. T. Robinson, 'Local/global linkages and the future of African Studies', *Africa Today*, 44:2 (1997), 169–77; P. T. Zeleza, 'The pasts and futures of African Studies and Area Studies', *Ufahamu: a Journal of African Studies*, 25:2 (1997), 5–41.

<sup>59</sup>R. D. G. Kelley, "'But a local phase of a world problem": Black history's global vision, 1883–1950', *The Journal of American History*, 56:3 (1997), 1045–77.

<sup>60</sup>P. T. Zeleza, 'Building intellectual bridges: from African studies and African American studies to Africana studies in the United States', *Afrika Focus*, 24:2 (2011), 12. On Melville Herskovitz and African Studies, see J. Allman, '#HerskovitsMustFall? A Meditation on Whiteness, African Studies, and the Unfinished Business of 1968', *African Studies Review*, 62:3 (2019), 6–39. On the enduring schism between African Studies and African Diaspora Studies, and its impact on the study of race, and of modern Africa, see J. Pierre, *The Predicament of Blackness: Postcolonial Ghana and the Politics of Race* (Chicago, 2012), 185–216.

<sup>61</sup>E. P. Skinner, 'African Studies, 1955–1975: an Afro-American perspective', *Africanist Studies*, 6:2–3 (1976), 57–67.

It's unclear whether Brown took part in the Black Caucus' protest, or whether he was a member of the ASA altogether. As Cassandra Mark-Thiesen recently noted in this journal, in the postindependence decades, politicians and scholars, including Kwame Nkrumah and Kenneth Dike, stressed that African-centered knowledge should be produced out of African universities and centers, and published in African journals.<sup>62</sup> Brown may have heeded that call. In his dissertation, the only professional association he lists himself as being a member of is the Historical Society of Nigeria. What's more, his journal publications — the two notices on new sources — both appeared in the *Research Bulletin, Center of Arabic Documentation, University of Ibadan*. And upon finishing his PhD in August 1969, he went on to join the faculty at Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria, then a leading institution in the use of Arabic sources for writing African history.<sup>63</sup>

In the 1970s, Brown would return to the United States, and eventually end up at Madison: for the next several decades, he did not publish any more scholarly writing — his dissertation was never turned into a book — and it is in the classroom that his impact would be most felt. Almamy Malicki Yattara mentions that from Madison, Brown kept writing to him 'for a long time', but stopped sometime during the 1980s.<sup>64</sup>

## Conclusion

Today, the historiographical field of Islamic Africa is no longer 'neglected'. However as Wendell Marsh points out regarding Brown and other African-American scholars, 'in many of the narrations of the field today, these names are often not remembered, particularly in comparison to figures like John Hunwick and Nehemia Levtzion'.<sup>65</sup> Yet, an exploration of William Allen Brown's time as a doctoral student — through his dissertation, articles, and conference organizing — yields a fascinating picture of him as an early figure in the field in the 1960s, the key decade that formed the fulcrum of his scholarship. He was an HBCU graduate and rising scholar of African history whose coming of age straddled the civil rights and decolonization struggles — in other words, a Black writer in a world of revolutions. His work on the Caliphate of Ḥamdullāhi was at the forefront of academic scholarship combining the study of Arabic manuscripts and Fulani oral traditions. He was invested in working with colleagues, institutions and journals on the continent.

In assessing Brown's legacy, several questions thus emerge. His work as a doctoral student showed great promise, yet, his scholarly production did not continue despite him becoming a university professor, a loss for the multiple fields of scholarship Brown's work would have enriched. What were the factors that hindered the maturation of the intellectual project Brown carried? What conditions would have been required for it to flourish? Revisiting Brown's legacy gives us a glimpse into the promises and challenges of doing African history in the 1960s, an age when the intertwined nature of knowledge production about Africa, and global Black political struggles, was laid bare.

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<sup>62</sup>C. Mark-Thiesen, 'Neglected historiography from Africa: the case for postindependence journals', *The Journal of African History*, 64:1 (2023), 5–12.

<sup>63</sup>W. H. Marsh, 'Compositions of sainthood: the biography of Ḥājī 'Umar Tāl by Shaykh Mūsā Kamara' (unpublished PhD thesis, Columbia University, 2018), 57.

<sup>64</sup>Yattara and Salvaing, *Almamy*, Vol. 2, 187.

<sup>65</sup>Marsh, 'Compositions of sainthood', 57.