
**Anthropology, History, and Memory
in Sub-Saharan Africa.
*In Memoriam Michel Izard***

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INTRODUCTION

The present special issue explores the manifold relations between history, memory, and anthropological research. Explicitly or not, history has always been a particular reference for anthropological research (Willford and Tagliacozzo 2009). First of all, anthropologists most often deal with the past not only when attempting to reconstruct past events and conditions, but rather to look at social change, innovation, and transformation, enabling then to position their findings in larger theoretical perspectives: from (neo-)evolutionism, the Vienna School, (Neo-)Marxism to globalization theories (Barnard 2000). Evolutionists (from the classics of the nineteenth century to contemporary ‘neoevolutionists’) are, for example, enthusiastic about the prospects of amalgamation of the two disciplines and view anthropology actually as a study of cultural history. On the contrary, anthropologists of different relativistic schools are more or less skeptical in their views on the usefulness of history for anthropological research as a study of contemporary cultures. For example, such a powerful figure as Malinowski argued that what he called conjectural history can give very little to anthropology, if anything at all (see Tokarev 1978: 235–236; Carneiro 2002: 81–82).

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Postmodernist Anthropology, in fact, takes this postulate for granted (see Hobsbawm 1993: 63 [cited in Spiro 1996: 775]; Appleby, Hunt, and Jacobs 1994: 205).

Moreover, many anthropologists are primarily interested in the ways in which people perceive societal changes, experience and represent them and relate them to their various world-views at large. In these endeavors, the notion of history itself became the center of debate, which shifted the attention of many scholars away from an absolute or etic frame of reference to primarily an emic understanding of its meaning with regard to local issues and lifeworlds. Thus, the interaction between History and Anthropology was not simple in the past and is not so today. Whatever the particular interest or approach to history for anthropologists may be, history is therefore not just a neutral domain (Deutsch and Wirz 1997). From a social-constructivist perspective, history is a part of a distinct local cultural and symbolic universe and represents the result of social processes of selection, remembrance and oblivion (Tonkin *et al.* 1989). Accentuating particular aspects of these processes, for example, public rituals, symbols, and narratives of remembrance, shapes what Assmann (2005, 2008; *cf.* also Erll *et al.* 2008) has conceptualized as the communicative and cultural memory of a given society, which is, however, often ambivalent and contested, given the multiplicity of ways to remember and represent the past, consequently creating multiple histories. The 'memory boom' in anthropology (Berliner 2005) triggered many studies in Africanist scholarship as well, for example, on the way in which historical memories were used by both protagonists of colonialism and national-liberation movements (Werbner 1998); or as a means of state propaganda by postcolonial regimes. Competing historical narratives, of course, are often triggered by larger commemorative events, such as National Days or the recent wave of independence festivities across Africa (Lentz 2011, 2013).

Historical memory also plays an important part in the formation of the African diaspora's identities, modes of behavior, and positions in accepting societies. For example, in the USA a difference in the historical narratives of recent African migrants and African Americans contributes a lot to tension in the relations between the two communities. 'While the historical past of American slavery joins Africans and Blacks at the hip, their separate imagin-

ings of this event and its horrors result in a new type of divergence between them' (Abdullah 2010: 67). The African Americans sometimes see in Africans those whose ancestors sold theirs to slavery and were obedient to the colonialists, while newcomers argue that they are true Africans whose ancestors, contrary to Black Americans, have always been free (Agbemabiesi n.d.: 8; Stoller 2002: 153; Takougang 2002: 8; Wibault 2005: 154–158; Clark 2006; Abdullah 2010: 67–70; el-Malik 2011). At the same time, 'homecoming' (recent return movements of African Americans to Africa) and 'roots tourism' (becoming more and more popular pilgrimage of Black Americans to Africa for visiting the sites related to the European slave trade) clearly are attempts to bridge the gap between the historical narrations that divide African Americans and first-generation African migrants to the USA (Bruner 1996; Schramm 2004, 2008, 2009, 2010; Ciarcia 2008; Ciarcia and Noret 2008; Benton and Shabazz 2009; Boone *et al.* 2013).

Generally, we may thus distinguish three approaches or avenues of interest pertinent to contemporary anthropological research on history. First, a historicist perspective, that tries to discuss actual courses of events and momentums with regard to their consequential structural changes in the respective societies. To this domain, we may generally assign the large field of Historical Anthropology (*cf.* Kalb 1996; Mitchell 1997; Axel 2002; Murphy *et al.* 2011; *cf.* also Reid 2011).

The second approach is primarily interested in revealing the modes in which historical changes are culturally represented and transmitted, in forms of narratives and codes, mnemotechnical devices, memory cultures, and notions of time (Loimeier 2012). Both attempts entail, however, a number of methodological problems, for example, in the study of oral tradition (Henige 1982; Vansina 1985), but also rituals, art and their potentials and limits to enlighten the reconstruction of historical events as well as their semantic resonance (see, *e.g.*, Heusch 1972; Ben-Amos 1999). Not ignored should be historians' advances towards anthropology such as those exemplified by the work by Michał Tymowski (2009).

The third approach could be labeled a presentist approach, where scholars are primarily interested in the role of historical references in contemporary debates on African societies. Here, a variety of studies point at the relevance of those debates for the con-

struction or revival of collective identities (Lentz 2006b), heritage (Jong and Rowlands 2007), with regard to social movements, for example, of workers, war veterans (Reinwald 2005) or political conflicts. Such conflicts may refer, for example, to land claims, where the idea of 'autochthony' may contribute to the discursive construction of 'first-coming' settlers prerogatives towards 'late-comers' (Geschiere 2005; Chauveau 2006; Kuba and Lentz 2006). Disputes about 'correct' interpretations of 'historical traditions' and events may also arise between opposing power groups, for example, in election campaigns, boundary disputes (Lentz 2006a), struggles over mineral resources (Grätz 2009) or succession disputes of traditional authorities (Ladouceur 1972; Staniland 1973; Habig 1996; Lentz 2000; Tonah 2005, 2006; Weiss 2005; Skalník and Sicilia in this issue).

Purely academic disputes about historical traditions can, apparently, also be a part of struggle for power and resources between ethnic elites in post-colonial states. Such debates often splash out on the pages of non-academic press – newspapers and magazines, and traditions are often consciously modified and even falsified to justify, for example, claims for the 'historical' priority of one ethnic group (and hence its elite) over another (Bondarenko 2001), or, by way of selecting oral narratives, genealogies, chronicles or toponyms, emphasizing a continuity of present-day inhabitants of a particular region in time and space. In some regions, we detect a kind of struggle over interpretative authority, not only between opposing local interest groups, but also between the growing number of 'amateur' historians (such as school teachers, journalists, retired public servants or pastors, pursuing their own research agenda, most often based on oral history, to retrace the history of their community, or in relation to important events and commemorations) and 'professionals', on the one hand, and 'local' historians and 'foreign' ('Western') scholars, on the other hand. Local historiographies that are driven by contemporary cultural revivalist movements either at the national or regional level, are most often informed by moral and ethical discourses (O'Brien and Roseberry 1991; White 2005) and attempts to 'correct' previous or outsiders versions of historical accounts.

Local historiographies are, however, more than an element of counter-movements to write alternatives histories 'from below'.

These writings are, nevertheless, often valuable sources with regard to local representations of historical events (Jewsiewicki and Newbury 1986; Harneit-Sievers 2002). Furthermore, we detect changing modalities of historical consciousness in globally connected (Trans-)African knowledge societies, for example, in the way the Diaspora communities demonstrate a particular interest in reconstructing their traditions, or the Afro-Americans discover their ancestral 'roots' as well as the traumas of slavery (Schramm 2004, 2008), or when renowned artists and scholars debate the particularity and contribution of an African heritage to plural modern and open societies on the continent (see, *e.g.*, the concept of Afropolitanism coined by Mbembe 2006). Finally, the detachment of globally circulating concepts such as World Heritage, Indigenous rights or Cultural Authenticity triggered not only legal debates, but also various forms of (self-)marketing of local 'traditions' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). The contributions to this special issue refer to different aspects of these contexts.

Earlier versions of all the contributions but one to this special issue were presented as papers at the Africanist Network workshop at the 12th European Association of Social Anthropologists Biennial Conference in Paris in June 2012. The exception is the article about Michel Izard, to whose memory that workshop was, and this issue of SEH is, dedicated.

Paul Stoller in his introductory essay 'The Odyssey of Michel Izard: An Appreciation' teases out his memories of his friend Michel Izard. He reminds the reader that Izard's doctoral thesis was a reconstruction of history of Mossi Kingdoms from oral and written sources (Izard 1970). Actually Izard's all major works ever since were a combination of historical and anthropological research methods (Izard 1985a, 1985b, 1992, 2003). Perhaps, we should remind the reader that Izard was a pupil of Lévi-Strauss and that by definition meant to master the methods of structuralism (Izard 2004).

Lorenzo D'Angelo studies the ways in which historical memories in Sierra Leone shape contemporary mining landscapes. In Sierra Leone, the environmental and economic impacts of extractive activities are a source of great concern for the local communities. Through the idiom of the occult, they express dissatisfaction with unfulfilled promises of modernity. The hypothesis underlying his article is that references to the occult action of invisible spirits are a possible expression of an indirect subterranean popular discon-

tent, which opens up spaces for negotiation with those holding and exercising power. The effectiveness of these narratives stems from the ability to employ collective images and active symbols largely shared by both dominating and subordinate groups. The basic argument in this paper is that the memory is not necessarily expressed through public monuments or explicit verbal forms. It, therefore, follows the line of socio-anthropological studies which focuses on the interweaving of history, ritual practices, and processes incorporating social experience (see Bourdieu 1990; Conner-ton 1989; Shaw 2002). It is worth underlining that the metaphor of the 'past as a prism' (Shaw 2002) implicit in D'Angelo's analysis must not be associated with a 'presentist' historical approach. Here the present does not necessarily dominate the past, imposing its keys for interpretation.

Petr Skalník discusses local debates on autochthony and pre-colonial independence with regard to the history of the Nanumba of the chiefdom of Nanuŋ in Northern Ghana, vis-à-vis their Konkomba neighbors. These contests between different versions of history are primarily a concern of the educated ethnic elites. Starting from this case study, Skalník draws parallels to early political centralization processes in Central Europe.

Anna Arnone focuses on the role of diaspora actors with regard to the ritual construction of collective identities. Her case study portrays the narratives and identity practices of Eritreans in Milan, and the role of a festival in particular. She points at the changing nature of the intellectual and political discourses in the post-liberation decades and shifts in self-definitions which include redefinitions of who may become the enemies and allies depending on the temporal and spatial point of view. One needs to look at the use of memories by the diaspora to understand the global dimension of African identities.

Dmitri Bondarenko's chapter is based on a survey among Zambian and Tanzanian students of their attitudes towards the non-African minorities that formed due to and in the time of colonialism (European and South Asian). He argues that Tanzanian students are less tolerant than Zambian because of the existence since pre-colonial time of the Swahili culture in Tanzania and lack of such a background for national unity in Zambia. The author discusses the ways the memory of these facts, as well as its use, abuse, exploitation, and dissection in the two states' governmental

ideologies and practices shape the differences in how the students see the colonial past, envision the present-day nations, and tend to include or exclude the minorities.

The contribution by **Olga Sicilia** discusses the quarrels around succession among traditional authorities, namely, the election of chiefs in the mid-Zambezi Valley, Zimbabwe. She shows how the different layers of history and ‘traditional’ histories concerning this political practice interrelate but are also contested throughout the succession dispute and the final election. Sicilia’s ethnographic account shows, firstly, how the ancestral past of local lineages was used and adapted in the present day to meet the needs of the various social actors, and secondly, how significant this ancestral past can still be for the rural administration to legitimize its decisions.

Ana Margarida Sousa Santos’ contribution explores memories and counter-memories of the liberation struggle (1964–1974) in northern Mozambique, and the ways in which these become locally relevant at times of political and social tension. These events left strong memories and became a part of the imagination and the reconstruction of the country. Consequently, recreating the struggle has become an important part of remembering, re-telling and passing on of national and local history to the younger generation. The representation of the past is often appropriated by the state, and has excluded/silenced alternative perspectives and experiences of those who, while living in the province, did not take part in the struggle.

All contributions combine the authors’ first-hand field work data with historical sources, published or archival. The individual chapters demonstrate the relevance of historical references as an important part of local cultural and semantic inventories, giving meaning both to past experiences and contemporary changes in Africa, yet often constituting fields of debate and contestation.

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