

Sources and Methods in African History: Spoken, Written, Unearthed

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Sources and methods have been an ongoing concern in African history since the early years of its development as a field of academic specialization. Pioneering Africanist scholars developed the first rigorous methodologies for the use of oral tradition as history, despite prevailing doubt and scepticism from many of their colleagues. Oral tradition was soon complemented as a source by the development of methodologies for carbon dating, allowing new archaeological evidence to be used in reconstructing African history, and glottochronology, which opened new lines of inquiry for historical linguists. Africanist historians also pioneered methodologies for the study of religious, environmental, ecological, military and gender history. Spurred in part by the ongoing re-evaluation of sources and methods in research, African historiography in the past two decades has been characterized by the continued branching and increasing sophistication of methodologies and areas of specialization. The rate of incorporation of new sources and methods into African historical research shows no signs of slowing.

This book is both a snapshot of current academic practice and an attempt to sort through some of the problems scholars face within this unfolding web of sources and methods. The book is divided into five sections, each of which begins with a short introduction by a distinguished Africanist scholar. The first section deals with archaeological contributions to historical research. The second section examines the methodologies involved in deciphering historically accurate African ethnic identities from the records of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The third section mines old documentary sources for new historical perspectives. The fourth section deals with the method most often associated with African historians, that of drawing historical data from oral tradition. The fifth section is devoted to essays that present innovative sources and methods for African historical research. Together, the essays in this cutting-edge volume represent the current state of the art in African historical research.