

## REPORT

### AFRICAN HISTORY MATTERS: REPORT ON THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE *THE SOURCES FOR AFRICAN HISTORY* HELD AT THE TUNISIAN ACADEMY BEIT AL-HIKMA, 13 – 15 APRIL 2023

<https://doi.org/10.31577/aassav.2023.32.2.04>

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In the last two decades, the interest of historians in the history of Africa has grown significantly. On the other hand, academics around the world working on African history still face a major challenge: the difficult availability of sources and the absence of heuristic editions. Written sources and manuscripts, important for the reconstruction of African history, are scattered between state, religious or private archives and libraries over a wide geographical area, whether in Africa or Europe, Asia or North and South America.

The linguistic diversity of these sources also represents a great challenge for researchers. Moreover, oral sources constitute an important but very specific aspect of research on African history. These sources are especially important for those African regions where for a long time writing was not used or was very little used. However, the absence of transcriptions and translations for the use of historians on the international level still remains a significant issue.

It was these questions that were addressed and discussed by the international conference entitled *The sources for African history: rethinking methods, challenges and opportunities*, which was held on 13 – 15 March 2023 in the palace of the Tunisian Academy Beit al-Hikma in Carthage near Tunis.

The prime aim of the conference was to increase international cooperation and academic discussion by bringing together the various academies, institutions and scholars involved, or willing to become involved, in the publication of critical editions and translations of the sources for African history.

The meeting was organised within the framework of the international project *Fontes Historiae Africanae*, which is under the auspices of the International Union of Academies based in Brussels. It is a long-term project proposed in 1962 by the Czech Africanist Jan Hrbek. On the recommendation of UNESCO, it was adopted by the International Union of Academies in 1964 as its 22nd project.

The prime aim of the *Fontes Historiae Africanae* project is to publish critical editions of sources for African history with a special focus on sub-Saharan Africa. Currently, the project has two international directors, Silvester Trnovec from the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Slovak Academy of Sciences and Mohamed Diagayété from the Ahmed Baba Institute of Higher Learning and Islamic Research in Timbuktu, Mali.<sup>1</sup>

After preliminary discussion, Professor Mahmoud Ben Romdhane, president of the Tunisian Academy Beit al-Hikma, kindly agreed to host this international conference in the historic palace of the academy in Carthage. The venue was not chosen at random. One of the goals of the conference was to evaluate the current state and conditions of research in the field of manuscripts and archival sources in the private collections or public institutions of North Africa related to the early and the more recent history of the African continent.

Over two working days, more than 20 papers were delivered by academics and historians from countries such as Tunisia, Algeria, Mali, Guinea, Senegal, France, Belgium, Slovakia, Italy, Poland and Great Britain.

The event was opened by the president of Beit-el Hikma Academy, Professor Mahmoud Ben Romdhane, who also chaired the first panel. In his address, he highlighted the role of the territory of today's Tunisia as an important crossroads of history, cultures and civilizations, while also emphasizing the importance of Tunisia's historical heritage for the African continent. The next speaker was Professor Jean Luc De Paepe, the Deputy Secretary General of the International Union of Academies, which officially covered the entire event.

The importance of this meeting was enhanced by the presence of a high-ranking diplomat of the African Union, Maman Sambo Sidikou, the representative of the presidency of the African Union for Mali and the Sahel. In his address, he particularly praised the attention that the *Fontes Historiae Africanae* project pays to the sources of African history. He also focused on issues related to written heritage and manuscripts from the territory of the present-day state of Mali and emphasized the need for new approaches in writing the history of the African continent.

In the next contribution, Silvester Trnovec presented the history and development of the project *Fontes Historiae Africanae*, as well as its importance

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<sup>1</sup> More information on the project including its publications is available on the official website <http://www.fonteshistoriaeaficanae.sav.sk/>

for the production and writing of African history. Then, the director of the African part of the project, Mohamed Diagayété, presented his Ahmed Baba Institute in Timbuktu and the difficult work on the documentation of rare manuscripts from this ancient city. Another historian from Mali, Bassaro Touré, also from the Ahmed Baba Institute in Mali, addressed the particular importance of ancient manuscripts from Mali for the knowledge of pre-colonial African history.

Here it is important to emphasise that the Tunisian Beit al-Hikma Academy officially joined the *Fontes Historiae Africanae* project as a new member only a few months before the conference. Under the leadership of its president, Professor Mahmoud Ben Romdhane, a new Tunisian committee was formed and based at this prestigious institution. It brings together renowned Tunisian experts and scholars such as Moncef Ben Abdeljelil, professor of African studies at the University of Sousse, Abedlahmid Henia, professor of history at the University of Tunis, Professor Hedi Jallab, director of the Tunisian National Archives and Ramzi Ben Amara, an historian and africanist scholar from the University of Sousse.

The organization of the conference at the Beit al-Hikma Academy in Carthage was a great opportunity to officially introduce this new working team. The conference reserved a special panel where individual members of this new committee presented their expertise as well as their ideas related to work on the project. The panel reaffirmed to all participants that the involvement of the Tunisian Beit al-Hikma Academy will be of great benefit not only to the *Fontes Historiae Africanae* project, but also to the entire academic community dealing with African history.

Among other contributions, the conference was significantly enriched by those of Professor Abbou Tahar from the Ahmed Draia University of Adrar, Algeria. Professor Tahar is a member of the project “The Platform of Algerian Manuscripts in Africa”, whose goal is the identification, research, and digitization of rare manuscripts stored in private libraries of the Sahara region of Adrar in Algeria. His presentation of the entire project was impressive and met with a very positive response. The project “The Platform of Algerian Manuscript in Africa” shares the same goals as the project *Fontes Historiae Africanae* and Professor Tahar’s participation in this conference promises a very fruitful collaboration in the future.

Another very valuable contribution was made by the Guinean historian Alfa Mamadou Diallo Lélouma. Based on his own long-term experience, he pointed out the very important methodological challenges associated with publishing critical editions of sources for African history in the African context. Equally, the researcher Ndeye Faty Wane, originally from Senegal, gave a very interesting presentation about the contribution of Ceerno Souleymaan Baal, a Fulani thinker from the 18th century, to political history.

The second day of the conference belonged primarily to European researchers. It was opened by Professor Bruno Delmas from the Académie des sciences d'outre-mer in Paris. Professor Delmas is the head of the French committee of the *Fontes Historiae Africanae* project and in his presentation he summarised the latest publications as well as the future intentions of the French committee.

Another French historian, Muriel Rioland, also from the Académie des sciences d'outre-mer, presented her outstanding work on mapping Arabic manuscripts, most of them of north African origin, preserved in municipal libraries in France.

The Italian historian Sylvia Neposteri from the University of Pavia and an associate of the Académie des sciences d'outre-mer, presented her challenging and impressive research on Sorabe – the Arabo-Malagasy manuscripts from Madagascar.

The Belgian committee of the *Fontes Historiae Africanae* project was represented by an expert on colonial history, Professor Jan Vandersmissen from the University of Ghent. He summarized the work and current results of the Belgian committee, and presented the potential of Belgian archives for future research.

The British Academy was represented by the historian Jose Lingna Nafefe, originally from Guinea Bissau, who currently works at Bristol University. The British committee of the project is one of the most productive and important in the entire project. At the conference Jose Lingna Nafefe presented his outstanding work on various written sources in different languages, which he used for his brilliant book “Lourenço da Silva Mendonça, and the Black Atlantic Abolitionist Movement in the Seventeenth Century”, published in 2022.

At the very end of the conference, Professor Joanna Bar from the Jagiellonian University in Cracow, Poland, presented the work of the Polish committee. This committee brings together Africanist scholars under the leadership of Professor Timowski, who work on editing and publishing Jan Czekanowski's “Journal of field research in Central Africa in 1907 – 1909 with records of oral traditions and legends in Swahili and Kinyarwanda”. The journal was published in 2023 and represents an important contribution to the research on East African history and culture.

The whole event was accompanied by a rich discussion. The conference took place at a time of lively debate in Tunisian society regarding the “African identity” of the Tunisian population. This is why, in addition to its active participants, the event was also attended by a wider public and the event also resonated in the local media.

The final day of the conference was dedicated to a working visit to the Tunisian National Archives in Tunis, organized by the director, Mr. Hedi Jallab. He personally guided the participants through its rich historical collections and

presented the work of conservation and digitization of rare documents collected from all over Tunisia. Furthermore, in the entrance hall, his team had prepared an excellent exhibition called “History of Africa in the Tunisian National Archives”, that shows the great importance of the Tunisian national archives for the history of the African continent. All of this was an exceptional experience for all participants and only goes to confirm the international reputation of the Tunisian National Archives as a quality and professionally-managed institution.

The conference in Tunis was also significant because it was the first major meeting of the *Fontes Historiae Africanae* project at the international level since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants unanimously agreed that the interest in African history at the global level is growing but despite the best efforts of generations of historians, the availability of sources for African history, both written and non-written, remains a major challenge for historians even in the 21st century. It will therefore be crucial to build on the previous tradition of international cooperation and establish new networks that will enable the necessary work on fundamental methodological problems regarding the identification, publication and digitization of sources for the history of Africa.

To sum up, it is important to thank the president of the Tunisian Beit el-Hikma Academy, Professor Mahmoud Ben Romdhane, for enabling and organizing this important meeting. Likewise, to express gratitude to the entire team of the academy for their professional work in ensuring the smooth running of the conference, including the use of information technology.

Finally, it must be mentioned that the International Union of Academies in Brussels, as well as the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava, also made significant contributions to the organization of this conference.

The whole event left a deep impression on all the participants, and the organizers are firmly convinced that this conference at the Tunisian Beit al-Hikma Academy represents the beginning of a new collaboration in the field of making sources of African history accessible. Because African history matters.

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