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« Peuples, Lieux, Échanges et Circulation »

Le Comité français des « Fontes Historiae Africanae » ASOM

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The 'Fontes Historiae Africanae' is a programme to publish sources relating to Africa south of the Sahara. It consists of publishing scientific editions of unpublished indigenous historical manuscripts in vernacular languages and Arabic characters. It is one of a number of international programmes run by the International Academic Union (IAU). The Académie des sciences d'outre-mer (ASOM) has been chosen to implement this programme for France.

The French committee was set up by the programme's president, the late Viera Pawlikov Vilhanova (2016). It is made up of members of the Academy, which has no shortage of specialists in Africa, the Middle East and Arabic. Some hold eminent positions in major conservation institutions (Bibliothèque nationale de France, BnF) and research institutions (Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes, IRHT and specialist university departments).

All of the UAI's other programmes, of which there are more than a hundred, concern the major areas of ancient archaeology in Europe and Asia, and the major areas of the Middle Ages and the modern era. They are based on knowledge of the disciplines of these periods, which have long been taught in Europe and for which specialists can be recruited. The field of African sources, on the other hand, involves very few specialists, especially in African languages. This disciplinary gap is all the more marked because of the colonial origin of certain sources and the diversity of these sources. Until independence, the history of Africa was underdeveloped in the European metropolises and was based on the accounts of travellers and explorers, missionaries and merchants, then on the collections of customs and oral traditions

(recorded) by administrators and on ethnographic and cultural studies, and the history of colonisation itself. As for African universities, at the time (second half of the twentieth century) they were very rare and recent (Dakar and Antananarivo). As a result, until recently, Africans themselves were unable to study part of the history of Africa, either because of a lack of specialists or because indigenous sources were inaccessible.

In response to this situation after African independence, Unesco launched the long-term undertaking of a General History of Africa by Ki Zerbo (1964-1999, 8 vols.) with African specialists. In the meantime, African historians have tended to reject the written sources available and to overemphasise oral sources, which are considered to be more truthful and immediately accessible than the written sources of the colonisers. However, as Bernard Salvaing has shown, Africa south of the Sahara had an immense mass of manuscripts written in Arabic long before the colonial conquest, a mass that was illegible and inaccessible. It is this gap that the *Fontes Historiae Africanæ* is intended to help fill.

This is a critical edition of unpublished documents, including the reproduction, transcription, translation, annotations and commentary of the text. The French Committee has focused on a geographical area that it knows well, French-speaking Africa, with two categories of manuscripts in Arabic script and vernacular languages: for the Sahel region the so-called Ajami script and for Madagascar the Sorabe script in Arabic characters but different from that of the Sahel.



Sorabe script Académie des sciences d'outre-mer, manuscrit HB)

The unpublished Malagasy manuscripts represent an original situation. They are a kind of anomaly among African manuscripts: they concern a relatively limited area of Madagascar, a particular population, the Antémoro, living on the central-eastern coast, around the Matatàña river. They had early access to Arabic script thanks to its importation by Arab merchants who blended in with the population. They established their power based on writing. These manuscripts are not easily accessible, as they still fulfil a social and political function today. They are sacred and secret, and kept by the families concerned (aristocrats and scribes). As well as magic and religious texts, these manuscripts contain historical chronicles dating back to the late Middle Ages.

Many of these manuscripts are still unknown. Apart from these, there are a few originals and facsimile copies; in total, few hundred are known to exist in Madagascar, as well as around two hundred copies in public or private hands. Very few of them are known abroad (mainly France, Norway, England and the Vatican), and very few have been studied. The Académie has a relatively large collection (14), mainly assembled by Hubert Bertier (1869-1958), a former administrator and member of the Académie.

The Sahel is not an island, and there are manuscripts relating to the history of this area, scattered among families, concentrated in ancient cities (Timbuktu, Chinguetti,

etc.) and also on its margins, particularly in the Maghreb: these sources are also scattered in a great many countries. Finally, there are still very few African and Western researchers who can publish these manuscripts.

The French committee therefore has two very different projects in its programme for the publication of African sources: Madagascar and the immense Sahel, for which it is sometimes necessary to bring together specialists (philologists and historians in particular) to produce a scientific edition. Two working groups have been set up for these two types of source.

Achievements

Under the name 'Sources africaines', the Académie has created a collection with Geuthner Editions, a recognised specialist in scientific editions relating to the Muslim world for both types of manuscript.

Malagasy manuscripts

Volume 1, (2019) *Traditions historiques du sud-est de Madagascar (le manuscrit arabico-malgache HB2)*. It is edited by Philippe Beaujard. In addition to this antemoro chronicle, the editor has added a translation of another manuscript from the Malagasy Academy (ms.16) and a synoptic table with three other manuscripts, providing a view of history by comparing these five sources from the same tradition.

Volume 4, (2023) *Traces d'histoire dans la tradition arabico-malgache (XVe-XIXe siècles) à propos du manuscrit arabico-malgache HB6*. Edited by Silvia Neposteri. It concerns another tradition and another province of the previously published manuscript from the same region and publishes extracts from inaccessible manuscripts.

Volume 6, in preparation for 2025, is Silvester Trnovec's edition of a selection of correspondence relating to a famous Slovak adventurer, Count Béliowski, who served France for a time. He attempted to create a kingdom in Madagascar in the 18th century, despite the reluctance of the Secretary of State for the Navy in Versailles.

Planned for 2027 volume 8 is devoted to editing the Hassani manuscript held by the Académie des sciences d'outre-mer. It has already been the subject of a partial study

in the first volumes of the *Annales de l'Académie des sciences d'outre-mer*. But it needs to be republished, because it was partially transcribed by scholars who did not know the Sorabé script, and it contains the oldest chronicles on Madagascar. This edition will be prepared by Philippe Beaujard and Narivelo Rajaonarimanana.

Sahelian manuscripts

Volume 2 (2019), *Barth à Tombouctou, Lettre d'Ahmad al-Bakkay al-Kunti à Ahmad b. Ahmad, émir du Masina (1854)*, edited by Mohamed Diagayété: the text is the work of the spiritual leader of the qādiriyya path. It provides an insight into the analyses of the politico-religious elite in Timbuktu at a time when European pressure was beginning to be felt in central Africa (1854).

Volume 3 (2023) *Écrire la guerre au Fouta-Djalon, Récits en vers arabes d'expéditions militaires au XIXe siècle*, is an anthology of eight Fulani war poems relating to wars between Fulani principalities that took place in Fouta-Djalon between the end of the eighteenth century and the middle of the nineteenth century before the arrival of the French, by a team led by Bernard Salvaing.

Volume 5, (2024), bilingual edition in French and English of the Catalogue of the manuscripts of the Harar Municipal Museum by Anne Regourd. This library of Arabic manuscripts is the largest in Ethiopia. It is a private collection that is accessible to the public and concerns Korans and the study of their colophons dating from the 17th to 20th centuries. They bear witness to religious practice in Harar. A study of the illuminations highlights the successive influences of India, Egypt and the Ottoman Empire.

Planned for 2026 is volume 7, an edition by Ali Diakité of Yerkoï Talfi's 'Tabkât al Bakkay', a well-known but unpublished and untranslated manuscript on the history of the Macina Empire.

This collection of 'African Sources' provides African researchers and the international community with unpublished annotated and translated texts relating to the history of the interior life of Africa before the colonial presence.